**Mortified**

by **Marsalias**

**Summary**

Danny had actually been looking forward to Casper High's ghost safety assembly, but, between a ghost attack and his parents' newest weapon, things go wrong very quickly. Now Danny will have to fight not only ghosts and hunters, but his own instincts to get everyone back home safely. If at all.

Updates every Friday and the occasional Sunday.
Chapter 1: An Assembly

It was supposed to be a safety assembly. One that Danny had actually approved of. Even looked forward to, a little bit. Casper High desperately needed a plan for when ghosts attacked, and it certainly would have been nice if the staff and students had actually learned how to handle the weaker ghosts. As it was the 'plan' was run around screaming until Phantom showed up, and apart from Sam, Tucker, Jazz, Valerie, and, of course, Danny himself, the only one who had shown anything akin to competence when faced with a ghost was Mr Lancer.

So, yeah. Danny had been looking forward to the assembly. Anything that took some of the pressure off of him, right?

It had started off well enough for a school assembly. Principal Ishiyama had gone over ghost attack evacuation and lock down procedures. They weren't overwhelmingly brilliant, but they were pretty straightforward, and far better than nothing. The school had bought a ghost shield, and had installed it in the gym. It wasn't nearly large enough to cover the whole school, but Danny was cautiously optimistic about its ability to deter ghosts and protect the student body.

But this was Danny's life. Nothing in it ever went well for long.

And of course the school had decided to invite Amity Park's premier (only) official ghost hunters.

Danny had known that his parents were going to come. How could he not? He lived with them. He had just hoped that they would be reasonable about the whole thing. More than hoped. He had asked his mother what they had planned. So he knew that right now, they were supposed to be demonstrating safe use of Fenton Wrist-Rays, inviting students down to take shots at targets set up across the gym, passing out fliers for lessons, talking about how to hide from or otherwise avoid ghosts.

They were doing none of those things.

Instead of doing what they had planned, instead of doing what Danny would have liked them to do, they were rambling on about their ghost weapons. All of which they had apparently brought with them. To school. They had already gone through all the ones that Danny was comfortable using in battle, and now he and his friends were amusing themselves by classing the weapons as 'disturbing,' and 'vaguely horrifying.'

"Horrifying," said Danny without hesitation as his mother pulled out something that looked like a three neon-pink didgeridoos taped together.

"I'd call it that just for the color," said Sam.

"What does it do?" asked Tucker.

"Mom's saying," said Danny.

"Yeah, but even I can't parse her technobable." He paused. "I can barely hear her technobable. Doesn't she realize that no one is listening anymore?" He gestured to the chattering students seated on the bleachers below them. The three of them were seated at the very top.

Danny shrugged. "It screws with strand communication and plasmic ectosignature reception."
Basically paralyzes everything downstream from where it hits," he explained. "Like if there was something that'd temporarily sever your nerves."

"That doesn't sound too bad, unless it hit your head, or something."

"Yeah, until you remember that the those two things are typically what determines what a ghost's body looks like and whether or not it sticks together. Slowly disintegrating a person? Horrifying."

"Sounds like something you should get rid of," said Sam, darkly.

"I would," muttered Danny, "but I already get rid of so much other stuff."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I've got seven categories for FentonWorks stuff. Actually useful, useless, useful for ghost fighting, disturbing, vaguely horrifying, avoid at all costs, and destroy immediately. Oh, and the bonus ones that can apply to anything, 'unnecessarily painful,' and 'unnecessarily dangerous.' Jazz and I only mess with stuff from the last two categories. Because, honestly? Most of the stuff they make is disturbing or worse."

"Harsh," said Tucker.

"But true. I love them, but Ancients, if they'd at least safety check half of this stuff- hold it."

"What?"

"I don't recognize that one," he said, pointing at the third to last weapon on the cart. It was awfully sleek for something new, and the hairs on the back of Danny's neck were standing up just looking at it. "Hey, Jazz." He poked his sister, who looked up, annoyed, from her book. "Do you recognize that?"

"No," said Jazz, slowly. "I don't. It must be new. Or maybe really old?"

"Looking like that?"

"Is it really that weird that you don't know what it is? I mean, its like, one, out of fifty," asked Sam.

"Remember that time your parents took you shopping and made you try on all the floral dresses in the store? And then bought them? So they could threaten to make you wear them?"

"Okay, okay. Burned into my memory. I get it."

"But they brought it to school, how bad could it be?"

"Tucker, for real, man?"

"Last week we sabotaged something that was supposed to cause ghosts to spontaneously combust," said Jazz. "Before that it was the addictive light bulb."

"I'm so glad that was theoretically unsound to begin with."

"And the thing that made ghosts think their obsessions were under attack. Why they keep trying to make that, I can't even begin to understand."

"Don't forget the whole 'let's plant blood blossoms in the garden this year' debacle."
"That was last month, though."

"I'm so glad I had an allergic reaction to the seed oil."

"Shhh, they're about take it out now."

The group of four turned their attention back to the adult Fentons. Jack was taking the sleek, silver gun from its place on the cart. It looked rather small in his hands, but they all knew that Jack Fenton's massive frame tended to warp perspective.

"And now!" said the large man in his booming voice. "For the moment you've all been waiting for! The grand finale!"

This had the effect of drawing the attention of the other students, and bringing the noise level down to a dull roar. Jack grinned widely.

"This here is the best thing we've made since the Fenton Portal!"

Well. Danny certainly hoped that it wasn't going to be as painful as the portal. Mutters around the gym showed that other people weren't too sure how to feel about a thing that was being compared to something that many blamed for the preponderance of ghosts in Amity Park.

"It's been a special project of ours," added Maddie cheerily. "A top secret project." This attracted the attention of the high schoolers once again.

"Yeah! So that those pesky ghosts don't sabotage it!"

Danny cringed internally.

"We've been working on it for months, so now I'd like to present to you the-"

"Fenton Mortifier!"

Like they needed a machine to do that.

"Jack, honey, I thought we had agreed that we can't call it that."

"But, sweetheart..."

Maddie gave in to Jack's puppy dog eyes and waved her husband on.

This is of course when Danny's ghost sense went off. He sighed, heavily. Of course a ghost would come and bother this assembly. "Hey, guys, I just got a chill."

"Want backup?" asked Jazz.

"Nah, just cover for me," said Danny even as he dropped down to the lower, in-between section of the bleachers, and crawled into the gap between that and the seat in front of them.

"Hey, ten bucks says it's Technus," he heard Tucker say above him as he climbed down the metal bars behind the bleachers.

His parents were still talking, but he was having trouble hearing them now that he was back here. Something about how ghosts were monsters who couldn't feel pain, or joy or anything. He tuned them out. It was more important to find somewhere inconspicuous to change, and get whatever ghost it was to leave. He'd thought about changing behind the bleacher, but with the way that the bleachers
were constructed, everyone would see the light from his rings, and he really was trying to be better about that.

He got to the gym floor, went out the maintenance door, and looked up and down the hallway, listening carefully for anyone who might be watching. Then he changed, turned invisible and floated up and back though the wall into the gym.

He had just passed the intercom speaker when the thing made an awful, squawking sound. He whirled, ready to fight, but it was still just a speaker.

"Wazzup that's going down my home bros!"

Danny slapped himself in the face. Oh my gosh, he was even worse than before.

"I, Technus, master of all things electronic and beeping, am in the housy-house!"

Fine. So Technus was either in the intercom, or in the PA room. The first was harder to check, harder to deal with overall, actually, although Danny didn't know why Technus would want to posses the school's intercom system, so Danny decided to check the PA room first. So he flew in that direction-

-Only to run face first into the brand new ghost shield.

He was so surprised that he lost his hold on his invisibility. Of course someone had turned on the shield- … Or not? No one was standing anywhere near the generator.

Instinctively, he dropped several feet to avoid getting hit by an ectoblast. Technus? No. His parents.

"Hahahahahaha! I have you trapped in with the humans now, ghost child! The hunters! As you would say, you're all tied up! Hahahaha! You shouldn't have connected the master on-off switch to the principal's room! Now I will be free to-!" Another ectoblast hit the speaker. Danny could have groaned at the poor timing. Technus's propensity towards shouting out his plans is what made him an easy fight. If he didn't know what Technus was doing, this would be very tedious even after he got out.

Danny dodged another blast. At least they hadn't used the new gun yet. "Look, can you guys stop? I only came here to- Ouch!" He scowled and flickered out of visibility. He didn't want to power down the ghost shield- it would keep Technus out of the gym- so he had to find a place to change back to human and then sneak out.

"Quick, Jack, get the Fenton Revealer!"

Heck, that was the one that expunged invisibility. Maybe the locker rooms? Yeah, that would work. Assuming that nobody was making out, or hiding in there. Like they usually did during an assembly. But he didn't really have time to think of a better spot. His mom's finger was on the trigger of the new gun, and he really didn't want to find out what it did. He rocketed towards the boy's locker room.

And smacked into the ghost shield again.

(He didn't understand why his parents had made it so hard to see! The ones that glowed green worked just fine!)

He didn't lose invisibility this time, but he was shocked. Figuratively speaking. The shield wasn't supposed to be here, at least according to Principal Ishiyama's presentation. He quickly estimated the
curve of the shield. If it was here, then most of the student body was outside of it.

This had Technus written all over it.

Jack hit the button on the Fenton Revealer, and Danny immediately took evasive action. His mother was too good a shot for him to do anything else. He really, really did not want to get hit by that new gun, especially when he discovered that the blasts it fired were an awful shade of puce.

Except note that most of the school had run off, taking shelter in the locker rooms or behind the bleachers. Most. Not all. For reasons he could not quite comprehend, a certain subset of the school population (aka Danny's class and a few other idiots) had chosen to run towards the people firing guns. The Fenton's weapons were designed not to hurt humans, but everyone in Amity Park knew how often their prototypes malfunctioned.

Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were nearby, too, but they were his team. Also, they were doing something productive: trying to get close enough to the shield generator to shut it off. Unlike the others, who were just giving him extra anxiety.

Then it happened. Danny had been bobbing up and down to avoid the blasts, trying to stay away from the students, but he lingered in one spot a moment too long. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye - a person, although he had no idea who - when at the same time, on the opposite side, Maddie fired.

He couldn't move. If he did whoever was behind him would get hit. As much as Danny didn't want to find out what it would do to him, he didn't want to take the risk that his parents hadn't quite 'human-proofed' the new weapon.

The sickly red bolt hit him dead on.
Chapter 2

At first it didn't feel like anything at all.

But.

-he could feel-

Then.

-heart beat against his ribs-

What?

Why had he let Sam and Tucker talk him into this?

This wasn't.

Sure, the portal was cool and all, but it was also really creepy-

No, stop! He didn't want-

Why had he let Sam and Tucker talk him into this? How had he let them talk him into this? Sure, the portal was cool and all, but it was also really creepy, and he could feel his heart beat against his ribs in protest of the whole thing.

Oh, yeah. Because they wanted to go in, and he wasn't going to let them do that without making sure his parents hadn't left one of their goo-shooting guns in here first. Or a 'Fenton Firework.' Or... Honestly, the list was too long. He was talking (thinking) about the people who had once sucked the house into an alternate dimension, after all.

Why did they want to look at it in the first place? Because Sam thought portals to the underworld were 'super Gothic,' and Tucker wanted to check out all the 'killer tech.' Maybe Danny was just jaded, but, honestly, he'd rather be upstairs, playing a game, or talking about the movie they were going to see later (Dead Teacher III: Death-tention!).

Well, this hadn't been too bad so far. He had actually kind of gotten used to the weird, electric chill in the tunnel. Maybe they'd actually spot whatever was wrong with the thing in the first place, too, and cheer his parents up. Tucker was really good with electronics, Sam had sharp eyes, and Danny knew FentonWorks technology pretty well, so together they might be able to see something. Not that they'd do anything. Danny didn't want to accidentally screw anything else up. Or give anyone a shock. Or cover them with goo. He'd made sure that the portal was firmly off and unplugged before going in, but you never knew with these things. Also, he knew that his parents had mentioned something about capacitors, and although he wasn't 100% sure what the difference between those and batteries were, he knew that they stored charge and could be dangerous.

The tunnel was narrowing, and Danny was almost to the back wall, when he tripped. He dropped his flashlight and caught himself on a protrusion on the left hand wall. This would have been fine, except that part of the protrusion depressed and clicked ominously under his fingers.
Danny stumbled back to the center of the portal walkway, staring at the little box. He wasn't horrified. Not yet. Not even when he saw the words 'on' and 'off' staring at him in green and red. Actually, for a split second he was relieved. He had only hit a stupid button. He might have even hit the 'off' button.

Then he started to hear the portal waking up around him. Activating. Turning on. He heard his friends shouting at him Run, Danny run! and he tried to do just that.

But then there was a flash of light and Danny was burning and there was green everywhere and it hurt so, so much.

I screwed up. I screwed up bad.

He could hear himself screaming. Wow. He didn't know he could get that loud.

At least I didn't let Sam and Tuck come in here with me. That was good.

It was cold now, unbelievably cold. And still somehow hot. He felt like his bones were melting.

Mom and Dad are fine, too. Knowing Dad, he would have hit the button without even thinking about it. Heh. Talk about 'killer' tech.

He could see, but also not see. Hear, but also not hear. He didn't like it, but the sensation was nothing next to the crisping of his skin, the seizing of whatever was left of his muscles.

I'm the only one that's feeling this.

He was, bizarrely enough, thankful for that. No one else should have to through this kind of pain. No one else should die like this.

Everyone else is safe.

But... 

Were they?

He could hear screaming.

Surely that couldn't all be him. Right?

(He would have thought that his vocal cords would be dust by now.)

He could hear screaming-

Nearby?

He knew those voices.

Who?

Were they hurt? Were they hurting like he was?

No, no, no, no. No!

He had to-

Do what?
Help them!

How?

It hurt so much and he was scared-

(His thoughts were no longer anything even approaching coherent, but he wrenched himself away from the fear and back to the problem at hand.)

He needed to help them!

And then, thought became impossible. Danny became impossible. A passive observer to two worlds being filtered through his soul and extruded into one another. He saw everything. Remembered nothing. Because it was too big, and too beautiful, and there was pain everywhere, and people everywhere on both sides.

He needed to help.

An almost passive observer.

(There was a distant sensation of approval and regret.)

The two sides suddenly crashed together, and Danny was back, and the pain was back, although it had never really been gone in the first place. It was worse now, though. He wasn't even screaming anymore, and this was agony, and he was still dying. Still transfixed by electricity and whatever the heck the portal was doing.

There was something new now. Something in him that hurt, but hurt differently, in the center of his chest, right below his heart.

Then whatever was holding him in place stopped, and he dropped to the portal floor, too exhausted to even whimper. Still in too much pain to even contemplate moving.

(He was a little shocked that he still existed.)

But something tickled the edge of his jumbled mind. The screaming- Had there been others? He had to know. They might need help.

(He didn't even remember his own name at the moment. Could barely comprehend that not being in pain was an option.)

He crawled at first, but that was too slow, and he wouldn't be much help like that. He needed to be lighter, and suddenly he was, and now he was stumbling out of the portal, leaning against one wall for support.

Out of the portal, everything was so not-green. Was that normal? Then he blinked and faces, people, came into focus. He had no idea what they were saying, but they looked okay. Much more okay than he felt, anyway. That was good.

He shut his eyes, and stopped fighting the pain.
As soon as Danny was hit, Sam knew that it was going to be bad. She knew, because, unlike Danny, she knew what the Fenton Mortifier was supposed to do.

It was designed to force ghosts to relive their deaths.

According to Mr and Mrs Fenton (or Dr and Dr Fenton, if they were feeling annoyed with you) a ghost's death was the only thing that they could really feel, the only thing that could scare them. According to them, it would be enough of a deterrent to drive any specter comprised of ectoplasm and post-human consciousness out of Amity Park for good.

Beyond the obvious ethical concerns, Sam was dubious. Also, she was considering making her own 'destroy immediately' list.

Beside her, Tucker was still working on turning off the shield generator. She would have thought that unplugging it would do the job, but the cable apparently came up from underneath the gym floor, so that had been a no-go, and Technus had somehow disabled the on-off switch. Sam, and, she saw out of the corner of her eye, Jazz, were more concerned with watching Danny.

Danny had been hit a full minute ago, and so far, he had just been hanging in the air where he had been hit, staring blankly ahead. The other students from their class (sans Valerie, who looked like she was trying to find an ectogun in her backpack) were cautiously approaching Danny. Mr Lancer was trying to get his students to get away, back to the relative safety provided by the bleachers. Mr and Mrs Fenton were running around, trying to find out where their latest containment unit had gotten kicked during the fight.

(Could one even call it a fight when it was so one-sided?)

Sam had begun to hope that the 'reliving' part was all happening inside Danny's head. That was bad enough, sure. It was horrible, and, once she had gotten the time to think about it a bit more, Sam would probably never forgive Mr and Mrs Fenton. (Just like she had never forgiven herself). But, if Danny had been forced to act out his death, it would have been worse. Not much worse, but worse. If it was inside his head... Well, he had survived it once, hadn't he? And all the nightmares, too.

Then Danny twitched, his face contorting, lightning leaping off of his fingers, and he began to scream. And scream. And scream.

And Wail.

(Every time Sam heard Danny's Ghostly Wail, she hoped it would be the last. Every time, she remembered her friend dying. Screaming. In pain. Because of her.)

The people who were still standing were knocked to the floor. It was a good thing that Danny wasn't aiming at anything or anyone in particular. It was a good thing that Tucker hadn't gotten the ghost shield down yet, because otherwise the roof would be coming down.

The screams died abruptly, without warning. Sam uncurled herself from the floor, raising her head, pulling slightly-bloody hands from her ears. Danny was still floating there, still staring, but now he
looked limp, exhausted. Was it done now? Sam knew it had taken longer between the end of the screaming and Danny dragging himself out of the portal, but, surely, the screaming had stopped because he had died, right? Because he had become Phantom? Not because he just couldn't scream any more?

(For all the jokes Danny told about his death, he had given his friends very few details about it.)

Then Sam saw it. A swirl of green in front of Danny's chest. That couldn't be what she thought it was, could it?

There was a flash of green as the portal expanded outwards.
Jazz woke up slowly.

This was a bit strange. She usually woke up quite quickly in the morning. Danny made fun of her for it. Called her an early bird, and all that. But she was so comfortable, even if she was a little cold. It felt like one of Danny's hugs. Speaking of cold, though, she felt like she was developing one. Her ears hurt.

Maybe she should get up. Find some medicine. She sat up, still not opening her eyes. She rubbed them, frowning. This didn't feel like her bed. Had she fallen asleep on the couch? The floor? Was that carpeting?

She finally got her eyes open, and the sight in front of her jolted her into full awareness. She wasn't on the couch or on the floor. She wasn't at home. She wasn't even inside. There were stars above her, hundreds and hundreds of them, with no trace of light pollution. What she had first taken as carpet was grass. She was, as far as she could tell, on a hillside, surrounded by dark lumps. She glared at one of the closer ones, willing it to resolve into something she could interpret, but she, unlike her brother, did not have supernaturally good night vision.

With great reluctance- she didn't want to make herself a target for whatever had brought her here- she retrieved her keys from her pocket and turned on her key chain flashlight.

The lumps, as it turned out, were actually people. Well, mostly people. There were also a few backpacks strewn around here and there. Jazz knew them all by sight, if not by name. They were students from Casper High.

She stared at them, frowning. This whole situation was wrong. Why in the world was she on a hill, surrounded by sleeping Casper High students? Most of them weren't even from her class! She watched the nearest ones for long enough to make sure that they were breathing, but after that she was at a loss.

Maybe if she looked around she could find Danny? Or maybe Sam or Tucker? She didn't have any better ideas at the moment.

She started to get up, but paused. Had that flower been there before? She was certain that it hadn't. It didn't look like anything she had ever seen before. Not that that was saying much. Sam was the one who was into flowers, not Jazz. Still.

It reminded her a little of a poppy. Except that it had layers of petals that alternated between sky blue, ice blue, and cobalt. So. Yeah. Okay, maybe it wasn't like a poppy at all.

What it was doing, though, was bobbing against her leg like it wanted attention.

There was no wind.

"Um," said Jazz. "Hi?"

The flower stopped moving, except to tilt so that it was more directly pointed at Jazz.
Now she was having a conversation with a plant. Here's to hoping that this wasn't Undergrowth or anyone like him. "You're very pretty?"

The flower brightened to the point where Jazz would almost say that it was glowing. Actually... She turned off her flashlight. It was glowing. There was a ripple in the grass, and similar flowers began to pop up all over the hillside.

This was good, because their faint blue-white light clearly outlined all the people lying on the hill. Bad, because it meant that wherever they were, it was not normal and potentially dangerous.

She scanned her surroundings again, hoping to recognize a silhouette. She did, but not the one she had been hoping for. That huge, orange-tinted shadow could only be her father. She scowled, then did a double take. Why was she unhappy about finding her parents? Jazz scowled again. This had better not be another one of Ember's stunts. She and Danny were supposed to have a truce!

She turned her flashlight back on so that she could get to Jack without tripping over anyone or anything, and carefully picked her way over to him. Finally, she was close enough to actually turn her flashlight towards Jack. She stopped dead.

Her mother, Maddie, was there, too, lying next to Jack. Her teal jumpsuit wasn't quite as visible as his orange one, and she was much smaller, so she was easier to overlook. But that isn't what shocked Jazz.

No, what surprised Jazz was that there were a bunch of vines picking her parents' pockets. Pulling weapons from their jumpsuits and placing them on the ground, which quickly swallowed each weapon, then quickly smooth itself out, as if the unnatural action had never occurred.

One weapon, though, was held too tightly in Maddie's hands for the vines to steal. It was an odd looking gun, sleek and silver, and a little smaller than what her parents usually made. Jazz didn't recognize it. She felt like she should, but she didn't.

"What," said Jazz, flatly. She was entirely unsure how to react.

The vines seemed to share that sentiment, because they froze for a split second, before returning to their work. Then, as Jazz stepped forward to wake her parents, more vines shot out of the ground, blocking her path. Jazz's hand went to an ectoweapon of her own, a lipstick laser, which, oddly enough considering how thoroughly the vines were searching her parents, was still in her pocket.

Luckily, it didn't seem as if she needed to use it. The vines weren't attacking. Instead, they were each holding an ectoweapon, offering them to Jazz handle first.

Jazz gingerly took hold of a Fenton Peeler. "Thank you," she said, uncertainly.

The other vines crowded together eagerly, and soon Jazz had another Lipstick Laser, two Wrist-Rays, a pocket ghost containment device (nonfunctional), and a 'water-pistol' type blaster. She donned the Wrist-Rays, put the second Laser in her other pocket, and clipped the Peeler and the blaster to her belt. The vines retracted, giving her a clear view of her parents again.

This was weird. Not the part where she was dealing with a ghost (or something) that could control plants, she'd dealt with those before, nor the part where she was waking up in a strange place with a hole in her memory, that was far more common than she'd like. No, the weird part was that the ghost in question was taking weapons from her parents, and giving at least some of them to her.

Also weird: that gun. The one she didn't recognize. She stared at it. There was something written on the side, but she could barely make it out in this light. The first part was definitely 'Fenton,' but

Jazz’s memory of the ghost safety assembly returned in a flash. She had to clap her hands to her mouth to keep herself from doing something unproductive. Like screaming. Or vomiting. She couldn't believe— No. She could, and that made it worse.

She had to find Danny. Now.

But, how?

It was a bit of a long shot, but the plants had responded to her earlier. They had helped her. She turned away from her parents. Whatever ghost was taking the weapons, they couldn't be any more dangerous to Danny than her parents had already proven themselves to be. At the very least that thing they had hit Danny with would be taboo to them.

"Excuse me," she said, politely, clearly. It was always good to be polite, especially when face with an unknown quality. "Could you please help me find my brother, Danny?"

Nothing happened for a moment, but then the blue flowers began to close themselves. After about a minute, Jazz was left with a glowing, sapphire path.

"Thank you," said Jazz.

She walked beside the path, hesitant to crush the flowers underfoot. They led her more or less uphill, winding a little to avoid other people. The path ended in a puddle of blue light. Jazz spent a moment staring at it, confused. She was doing a lot of that, recently. She didn't see Danny. There was no dark lump of a body in that neat little circle. Then she noticed some of the flowers shaking, and she realized that Danny was underneath them.

She rushed forward at once, and the flowers withdrew. Yes, that was Danny, in human form. He was in a fetal position, trembling, and biting down hard enough on his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, but it was Danny, and he looked reasonably intact, considering what he had just been through.

Jazz gently, cautiously, touched him on the shoulder, and said his name. Waking Danny from a nightmare could be a risky proposal. Not that he had hurt anyone, but there had been some close calls. Not getting a response, she shook him a little.

When he still didn't wake up, Jazz started to reassess her initial impression that Danny was 'reasonably intact,' and began to examine him more closely. On second glance, Danny looked quite a bit more ghostly than he usually did in human form.

The reason that his lip was bleeding was because his canines were sharp, not because he was biting down particularly hard. His hair was even inkier than it usually was, and it would periodically ruffle, as if in a breeze, despite the lack of one. Almost hidden beneath his hair were his ears, which were ever-so-slightly tapered. His skin was milky, almost paper white, and that was a problem, because it made one other, inconvenient ghostly feature stand out all the more. There was a Lichtenberg figure, a lightning scar, licking up the left side of his face and neck.

Jazz located Danny's left hand, where it was curled up against his chest, and pulled back the sleeve of his hoodie. Yes, the scaring was there, too, disappearing up the sleeve. Jazz frowned. That scar usually only showed up when Danny was Phantom. Even if Danny did turn out to be fine otherwise, that could prove to be problematic. Although, most people only ever saw the part of the scar that was on his cheek. They didn't know that it branched out over not only his face, but his left arm and hand,
his torso, and his right leg and foot. The jumpsuit covered all of that. They also only saw it from a
distance. She filed that problem away, and considered the psychological one. Danny really didn't like
looking at the scar. Jazz herself had only seen the full extent of it a few times; one of those times was
right after the accident had happened, when Danny had just come back from his checkup at the
hospital, another, when Danny had gotten severely injured in a fight.

But despite finding that, and a host of other, slightly disturbing things, she couldn't find what could
be keeping him from waking up. There were no 'new' injuries, unless she counted the hole in his lip,
the scar notwithstanding. Still, he trembled, and twitched, and made tiny, pathetic noises of distress.
Jazz wanted nothing more than to hug him, but since many of his nightmares included being trapped,
constricted, or restrained in some way, she wasn't sure that that would be a good idea.

Instead she settled for rubbing his shoulder. He was cold, too. Not that he wasn't always, but this
seemed a little extreme. She added that to her list of potential problems. "Oh, Danny, what should I
do? What would you do?" She turned that problem over in her head. "You'd probably try to fly up to
see where we are. I can't do that though. Um. You'd find Tucker and Sam, and make sure that
everyone really was alright. That no one was hurt. You'd try to wake people up. I don't want to leave
you alone like this, though." She sighed. She couldn't just sit here. No matter how much she wanted
to. "Sam and Tucker first, then."

Jazz started to stand, but was brought up short when an icy hand seized her wrist. Startled, she
looked back down, to meet her brother's wide, blue eyes. They were, she noticed, the same color as
some of the flowers' petals. She also noted, after a taking a second to get her hammering heart under
control, that his eyes were twinkling with green and ice-blue stars.

"Danny?" she asked softly, kneeling once more.

Danny practically dragged himself into her lap, and then latched on, embracing her as if his life
depended on it, still trembling and weeping. Jazz did the only thing she could do. She hugged him,
and patted his back, and made soothing noises.

"Th-they-" stuttered Danny at last. His voice was broken, tiny, raw and hoarse. If his mouth wasn't
pressed so close to her ear, Jazz never would have heard it. "I-" He choked, then tried again, "I- I
was- I saw- felt," he cut off again. "I-it was the portal- I- They-" He stopped once more, just
breathing. Then, in one breath, he said, "They did it on purpose."

Those words chilled Jazz to the bone. He was right of course. "I know," she said, simply. She could
barely process it either. "I know, little brother. Are you- Are you in pain, anywhere?" He shook his
head. "Danny," said Jazz sternly. She was getting back into familiar territory now.

"Throat," he said, finally, "head." Then, more softly, "Core."

"I- I have some aspirin," Jazz said. "My first aid kit was in my backpack. I don't know where that is,
right now."

Danny pulled back, and Jazz got the impression that he was only now taking in their surroundings.
After looking up to the stars, down to the flowers, and left and right, he gazed, bewildered, back at
Jazz. 'How?' he mouthed.

"I... I have a theory," said Jazz, "but... But it isn't important right now," she finished rapidly, abruptly
deciding that in his current mental state, her theory wouldn't be helpful to Danny. "I think we're in
the Ghost Zone. M-Mom and Dad are here. So is most of your class, I think. I haven't seen Sam or
Tucker yet, though. Um. And the plants might be sentient? And helpful? They kind of showed me
where you were when I asked."
"Oh," whispered Danny.

"I didn't notice that anyone was hurt," Jazz added. "But they're all asleep. I think that we should try and find Sam and Tucker."

Danny nodded slowly, and let go of Jazz for long enough for her to get back up. As soon as she was on her own two feet again, however, he grabbed onto the hem of her coat, leaning into her side. Jazz put an arm around him. He wasn't behaving at all normally, but that was to be expected, wasn't it? He had just gone through something incredibly traumatic.

With luck, though, he'd- Well, not bounce back, but recover. He'd recovered from this once before, right? Jazz hoped he would again, and soon. (A large and uncomfortable part of her felt guilty and resentful for this hope. Her brother deserved time after all he'd been through.). If they were in the Ghost Zone, Danny was probably the only one who could lead them all out safely.
Danny had never, to the best of his knowledge, been in this part of the Zone. He had never seen a
landscape quite like the one he was seeing now, nor had he ever seen flowers like the ones that lit the
hillside an eerie blue. Looking down the hill, Danny could see a little woods, dark, and full of trees.
Beyond that, there was what looked like a beach; pale sand, and dark water lapping at the shore. The
stars- the stars were the same as the ones over Amity, at least at first glance, but there was a barely
visible wash of green over all of them.

Nevertheless, he knew exactly where he was.

Or at least, he knew what this place was, if not where this place was with respect to other things.
Except that it was in the Ghost Zone, but not the Ghost Zone proper. It was behind a door. But with
the landscape, that was kind of obvious. (He'd usually have a little more detail than that, like how far
away they were from the Fenton Portal, but his powers, including what Tucker dubbed his 'Ghost
Homing Instinct,' weren't exactly cooperating with him at the moment.)

He didn't know how he knew, so he was disinclined to trust the knowledge. But, he was just so sure.
He suspected that it was some kind of ghost instinct, but it could just as easily be that this place was
some kind of pitcher-plant type deal. A trap. Or, maybe, more like the island of the lotus-eaters in the
Odyssey. (And Mr Lancer thought he didn't pay any attention in class! Ha!)

On the other hand... It kind of made sense. He still didn't know how they had gotten here. Jazz had
been talking about what happened after she woke up, but not what happened after he got hit by
that thing. So, coupled with her reluctance to share her theory about how they had all gotten here,
Danny had to conclude that it was somehow his fault, or some side effect of the weapon. It made
sense, then that they would wind up in a place that was connected to Danny. Then there were the
plants, which were helping Jazz, removing dangerous items from his parents, and, most importantly,
not hurting anyone. Finally, there was the relative normality of the surroundings. The stars, despite
not being real, were an excellent facsimile. If it wasn't for that green wash, and a few other subtle
cues, Danny might have been fooled. The grass looked like grass, despite the way it waved in the
still air. The hill was shaped naturally, unevenly. The air was cool, but not frigid. Just the right
temperature for Danny. Actually, everything about the surroundings, sans all the unconscious people,
was just right for Danny. All in all, a person could be forgiven for thinking that they were still on
Earth. Which was odd. Ghost Zone landscapes, even those behind doors, usually had something
explicitly and obviously unnatural about them. (The flowers didn't count in Danny's mind. They had
only shown up in earnest after Jazz had complemented the first one.)

So.

Conclusion?

Yeah. They were where he thought he was.

They were in his lair. (He was home (and he was safe) and he could rest now.)

Danny wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not. He didn't know a lot about lairs, but between
Clockwork, Pandora, Frostbite, and, surprisingly, the Ghost Writer (something about a work-release
program), he was getting an education in ghost culture. So he knew that lairs were connected to their ghost's mind, mirroring their personalities and powers, and typically controlled by their ghost's subconscious. This usually meant that if the ghost wanted or needed something, the lair would provide it, or that the lair would react as the ghost would (if the ghost was, you know, a physical location) but with less restraint, and more emotion. But there were cases of a lair turning on its ghost, like with Sydney Poindexter and his shadows (although Danny had heard that that had been resolved), as well as cases of lairs developing their own personalities, like with Ghost Writer and his library, or even becoming full-blown genii locorum.

The thing was that Danny knew that he had a lot of problems. Maybe not the same problems that had caused Sydney to essentially torture himself for fifty years, but problems. If his nightmares were any indication, his subconscious was a dark, dark place. Every fiber of his ghostly being was singing at him to rest, to relax, that everything was fine, and that everyone was safe, that he was safe, but he really couldn't believe it. Even if his lair did behave normally (and wow, nothing in his life was normal) there were ghosts that got so wrapped up in their lairs, and the illusions and comforts that their lairs could provide, that they never left.

Danny was reasonably certain that wouldn't happen to him. That it couldn't happen to him. But not wanting to risk it was one of the reasons that he had never tried to seek out his lair. Well, that and the fact that he thought that the idea of some place having a permanent backdoor into his mind was kind of creepy.

He was forced to pay attention to his surroundings again when he tripped over nothing. Literally nothing. He had inadvertently rendered his foot intangible, and it had gone through the ground. Jazz had caught him. He knew that Jazz was becoming concerned. That she had been concerned. He knew that he was acting strangely, but he couldn't help it. He felt like he had right after the Accident. Weak. Shivery. Out of control.

That wasn't what Danny wanted to think about, though. Those thoughts lead Danny down a road of inquiry that he wanted nothing to do with. Not yet.

(They had done it on purpose.)

So let's do something constructive, okay? There were two dozen people lying on the hill. He could recognize his parents and Mr Lancer by their silhouettes. (He carefully ignored the movement happening on the ground near his parents). The others were harder to identify from a distance, so he and Jazz were going around and checking everyone. So far, most people were from his class, which he thought was weird. There had been a lot of other people in the gym. So far they had passed Paulina, Dash, Star, Elliot, Kwan, Ashley, Mikey, Nathan, Lester, Rebecca, Mia, Hannah, Dale, Sarah, Tiffanie, and Ricky. There were only three people left.

Danny had mixed feelings about this. On one hand, he really wanted Tucker and Sam to be there. On the other hand, he wanted them to be safe, home in Amity Park.

Except...

"Jazz," croaked Danny. Gosh, his voice sounded awful. "What happened to Technus?"

"Um," said Jazz, clearly not wanting to talk about it. "Well..."

"Jazz."

"I don't know. As far as I know, he was still in the school's system when the portal opened."
"So he's still in Amity Park?!" squeaked Danny. He seized his hair with his hands and groaned. Maybe Valerie could take him? No, he had made her suit. She was at even more risk that the average person. The Guys in White were just this side of utterly useless, and honestly Danny wouldn't wish those monsters on any ghost. Sam and Tucker could probably handle Technus, given time, but, well, he still wanted them to be here, so that he could make sure they were safe. There weren't any other local ghost hunters. Danny moaned again. This was all his fault. He should have worked harder on making peace with the other ghosts.

"Danny," said Jazz, lightly gripping his shoulders. "Danny, listen to me. This isn't your fault. We'll figure it out. We always do. And there isn't anything we can do about Technus from here. We have to figure out how to get home first. Then we can worry about Technus."

"Okay," said Danny.

"Okay," repeated Jazz. She gently untangled his fingers from his hair. "Three more people, then we'll know if Sam and Tucker are here."

The next person they looked at was Valerie. So worrying about her confronting Technus had been premature. Good to know. Of course, her being here was another complication. She wasn't as bad as his parents when it came to ghosts, she had worked with him in the past, and Danielle visited her now and again, but she did tend to shoot first and ask questions later. Depending on where in the Ghost Zone they were, that could seriously limit their options to get home. Also...

"So why aren't the plants picking her pockets?" asked Danny.

"I don't know," said Jazz.

"Thought you were supposed to know everything."

"I'm not Clockwork. Maybe she doesn't have her weapons?"

"I can see one right there," said Danny, pointing towards where Valerie's open backpack, which she clenched tightly in her hands, even in sleep, was spilling out onto the ground.

"Huh. Yeah. I didn't spot that. That's weird. Do you think we should try and take them?"

Danny considered it for a moment, but shook his head. "We don't know what we're dealing with here. It might be better to have someone else armed."

They moved on. The next two people were, to Danny's great relief, Sam and Tucker. They looked unharmed, as far as Danny could tell. He could neither smell nor see any blood, and their limbs were all in the proper positions. Tucker even still had his beret.

Danny sat on the ground between the two of them. He was so tired. Exhausted. Part of him wanted to sleep, to forget about all of this, but he knew he couldn't. So he poked Tucker (waking Sam was a risky proposal, he wanted more backup). When Tucker didn't stir, he poked him again, harder. Then he shook his friend's shoulder.

"Why aren't they waking up?" asked Danny plaintively.

"Check his eyes," said Jazz, who was trying to wake up Sam (his sister was braver than he gave her credit for, sometimes). "Maybe they have concussions?"

"Doesn't look like it," said Danny. He took off Tucker's beret, and picked through the other boy's curly hair. "No bumps, either."
"Hm," said Jazz. "It could be that something is keeping them asleep. Like that time with Nocturne. Do you think you could-?"

But Danny was already shaking his head. "I don't have any control, Jazz," he said, holding up his fingers, which were flickering in and out of visibility. "Dream invasion is a no-go." He stared at his hand. "Jazz," he said slowly. "Did they really do this on purpose, I mean, what was that... that... What was it supposed to do?"

"Danny..."

"I need to know, Jazz! I need to know what it was supposed to do, and what happened, and why we're here so that I can start to try to do something about it!" Danny cringed away from the harshness of his own voice. "Please, Jazz."

Jazz looked down, still rubbing Sam's shoulder in an attempt to wake her. She pulled her hand into her lap, and massaged her palm with her other hand. "Alright," she said, "Alright. But I need you to promise me something first. I need you to promise me that you aren't going to blame yourself. Okay?"

"Jazz. You know I can't do that."

Jazz sighed. "At least promise me that you'll try not to blame yourself, okay?"

"Okay. Okay," said Danny. "I can do that. Yeah, I'll- yeah. I promise. Just please tell me what's going on?"

Jazz licked her lip before starting. "That- They said that the Fenton Mortifier was designed to make ghosts relive their deaths."

Danny felt something break inside of him. He had been holding out hope that the weapon hadn't worked as intended. That it was supposed to do something else. Something less awful. He pushed the feeling to the side, swept the broken pieces under a rug. He nodded, to show Jazz that he understood, that she should go on.

"When you were hit, you kind of froze. You were just hovering there for a few minutes, and, I don't know what Mom and Dad were doing. Just watching? I don't know. I wasn't looking at them. You started to scream, then you started to, um, spark a bit, after that. Electricity. And... You know. You can... Scream really loudly."

"You mean-?"

"No one got hurt," said Jazz quickly. "It wasn't focused, and the shield actually stopped it, I think. And, I mean, everyone inside the shield is here, so. No one got hurt."

"Except that they aren't waking up," said Danny, balancing on the edge of hysteria, not noticing that the wind was picking up, "and they're here in the Ghost Zone!"

Danny found himself wrapped in Jazz's arms. Jazz was rocking him back and forth, and he could tell that she, too, was on the brink of tears. The wind died back down to a gentle breeze.

"Jazz," said Danny finally, pulling back. "What's the rest? How did we get here?"

Jazz shuddered. "After- after you stopped screaming, you-" Jazz paused, apparently rethinking her phrasing. "A portal started to open up. Right over your chest. That's the last thing I remember before waking up."
Danny groaned. "So this is my fault."

"Danny-"

"I had better not be waking up to you blaming yourself for everything wrong with the world," said a third voice.

"Sam!" exclaimed Danny and Jazz together.

"Ugh, my head hurts." The goth girl sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. Then she froze, staring at Danny. "Oh, heck, Danny. Are you okay? They hit you with that."

"I'm fine," said Danny. He flickered in and out of visibility. "Kinda."

"Nnh," said a fourth voice, before Sam could do more than scowl and open her mouth. "It's too dark to wake up."

"Tucker!" said Danny, happy for the reprieve. "You're alive!"

"I, huh, what? I'm a jive?" Tucker sat up abruptly. "Ahh! Technus! What happened? Where are we? Danny, do you know where we are?" Before Danny could answer, Tucker frowned. "What happened to your face?"
Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Awakenings

Danny and Jazz explained what had happened quickly. Sam and Tucker had less to fill in than Danny. They had been actually conscious of their surroundings up until the portal.

"You're sure this isn't Undergrowth, right?"

"Doesn't seem like Undergrowth," said Danny.

"That's a relief, I guess," said Sam. "It's too bad you don't know where this is, though."

Guilt squirmed in Danny's stomach. He really didn't want to say anything. Didn't want to put this into words. But he didn't keep secrets from his team. (That wasn't strictly true, but the other secrets were mundane things, birthday presents, what some of his nightmares were really about, that he liked to sing in the shower, not really worth mentioning.)

"That isn't quite what I said. I said that I didn't recognize where we were."

Tucker raised an eyebrow at Danny. He had been messing with his PDA, trying to get a signal. He wasn't entirely convinced that they were in the Ghost Zone. "Isn't that kinda the same thing?"

"Um. No. I think- I think that I know where we are."

"Yeah?" said Sam, curious.

Jazz, meanwhile, was frowning. She was probably wondering why Danny hadn't said anything.

"I think this might be my lair," Danny said finally.

"Wait," said Tucker, finally looking up from his PDA, "isn't that a good thing? I mean, doesn't that mean that you can, like, control everything here?"

"Not exactly. The lair connection is supposed to be all subconscious. It's more like this is a dream I'm having, than anything else. At least that's, you know, my understanding." He ran his hand through his hair. "I guess. I don't know."

"Okay, okay, we can work with this," said Sam.

"Yeah," agreed Tucker. "So... What's first, try to wake everyone up, or find the door?"

"Door, I think," said Jazz. "People will start to panic when they wake up. It'll be easier to get them to do what we want if we already have a way out and a plan."

Everyone looked at Danny, who briefly flicked out of view entirely, and then pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt. "I don't know where the door is," he mumbled.

"Really? What about your ghost homing thing?"

"God, Tucker, I thought we had stopped calling it that," said Sam, punching Tucker in the arm.
"Okay, okay, whatever, but, seriously? I thought that you could always get home?"

"Well, usually," said Danny. He glanced at the palm of his left hand, at the electrical burn that spread out from its center. "But, this is... You remember how I was right after, you know, the Accident? Like, I held it together at the hospital, but after that I kept falling through things, or going invisible, or hovering? I don't even know if my ghost sense is going to work properly."

"Well," said Sam, "heck." She bit her lip. "But, Danny, are you sure that you're okay? I mean, you aren't in pain, or anything, right?"

Danny shook his head. "Just sore and tired." (This was one of those lies that wasn't worth mentioning. Danny was not okay.)

(The looks they all gave him told Danny that they didn't buy it for one second.)

"So, should we start looking for the door anyway?"

"Shh!" said Danny suddenly. "Do you hear that?" He tilted his head, and cupped his ear. There was rustling, a voice, muffled, but plaintive. "People are waking up."

"Really? I don't hear any-"

There was a high-pitched shriek, and Danny was on his feet, running towards the sound. He avoided people who were still lying prone, and the backpacks and other debris from the school that were strew all over the ground easily. (A little too easily, really. He could see in the dark, but still.)

It turned out that Mia was the one who screamed. Mia was one of those girls who was neither popular nor unpopular, but comfortably in the middle of the spectrum. She could hang around, if not with, the A-list without being harassed, but she could also be found regularly in the library, volunteered at the community center, and played the clarinet in band. She was a few inches taller than Danny (not much of an accomplishment, Danny was the shortest in their class by far), had hazel eyes and long brown hair, and liked the color green.

Danny had no idea why she had screamed. She was holding her eye, though, so maybe she had hurt it somehow.

"Mia? Mia, what's wrong?"

The girl looked up. "Danny?" she said incredulously. "What? What's going on?"

"I'm not entirely sure," said Danny, kneeling in front of her. He could fake calm for other people. "Why did you scream? Is something wrong with your eye?"

"I-um." Mia was blushing. "I guess I just got freaked out because I woke up outside. It's kind of silly, isn't it? Like, this kind of thing happens all the time," She sniffed. "But then I rubbed my I and I think I tore my contact, and it really hurts."

Danny sighed in relief. He had been worried. "Do you need help?"

"No, I've got it."

Danny looked away when the girl reached into her eye to pull out the contact. He had literally given himself stitches before, but for some reason, contact lenses always made him slightly squeamish.

"Do you know where we are, by the way?" asked Mia. She was still holding the one eye shut.
"We're clearly not in town anymore, but I'm not, like, super familiar with the, um. What do you call it? The countryside? The rural area? You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, um."

Thankfully, Danny was spared by Sam reaching the two of them. Bless her for good timing and being able to run really fast.

"Everyone is waking up now," she said. "You said that you and Jazz saw Mr Lancer earlier?"

"Yeah?" said Danny, wondering where she was going with this.

"Well, we should find him. Since he's going to be in charge and all. Because he's the teacher."

Danny stared at her blankly. He had thought that since they were in the Ghost Zone, his parents would probably take charge, seeing as they were supposedly ghost experts- His train of thought came crashing to a halt. Oh. Yeah. That would probably be a bad thing. Right. Wow. Okay. So she wanted to manipulate things so that Mr Lancer was in charge.

Not his parents. That would be a disaster waiting to happen. Good thing Sam and Jazz (this was totally a Jazz thing) were 100% more sneaky than he was.

"Right," said Danny out loud. "Good idea. He was over this way, I think." Danny could, in fact, see Mr Lancer quite clearly from where they were, the teacher had wound up quite close to Mia, but he was pretty sure that no one else could. Danny waved at Jazz and Tucker, who were trailing some distance behind Sam, using their flashlight and PDA respectively to light their way. Then he stood, and offered a hand to Mia, who took it gratefully. By that time, Jazz and Tucker had caught up, and they were all able to walk together towards where Mr Lancer was now regaining consciousness.

Others were waking up, too. Some were demanding to know what was going on, others were assuming that they had been possessed again, and complaining about the inconvenience of being dumped on a random hill. One or two were trying to get their cell phones to work. Danny also distinctly heard Nathan and Lester, the twins, wondering out loud if stars could be green.

Even before their little group had reached Mr Lancer (going slow for Mia's sake, she couldn't see very well with only one contact, and her backup glasses were in her locker, back at school), the teacher had started to try to gather and take charge of the students. He really was making a heroic effort, but the other conversations and the darkness were making that difficult to do.

"Mr Lancer!" said Jazz as they approached. She would be the first one to greet the teacher.

"Night Watch! Miss Fenton! You nearly gave me a heart attack!" This was patiently untrue, but, well. Whatever. Mr Lancer was also the drama teacher, and this was kind of a dramatic situation. He was allowed to be dramatic. "Do you know what's going on?"

"Kind of," admitted Jazz. "But we should probably wait until everyone is here."

"Of course, you're right, Miss Fenton. Who else is with you? Ah, Mr Fenton, Miss Manson, Mr Foley, and... Miss Battaglia? Did you hurt your eye?"

"Just lost my contact," said Mia in a strained but cheerful tone.

"Oh. I see. I see." Mr Lancer then went back to trying to get everyone's attention. Most people were just straight up ignoring him, although Mikey had come over in the meantime. (Worth noting: Mikey was the second shortest person in the class. He beat Danny out by a quarter of
an inch, having passed him over the summer. This meant that he was the second most likely person to be shoved in a locker by Dash.

Danny was starting to feel bad for Mr Lancer when, without warning, the ground beneath them erupted with more of those brilliant blue flowers. Once Danny quelled his initial surprise, and relaxed from his fighting stance, he saw that the flowers formed a starburst centered on Mr Lancer. The sudden light combined with the combined shrieks of Mr Lancer, Mia, and Mikey managed to draw everyone's attention.

Mr Lancer quickly moved away from the flowers. Generally, in Amity Park, glowing = dangerous. He did, however, take advantage of the fleeting attention of his students. It turned out that he was pretty good at that. Take the time he had fended off the Box Ghost with a rolled up magazine and a hysteric rant about pathos in Cannery Row, for example. Everyone had gotten an A on that test.

Soon, everyone was gathered. "Alright students," began the teacher, "I know this looks like a bad situation, but we've all been in worse." There was a murmur of agreement. "I must admit that I don't quite know what is going on, so we must first try to piece together what happened. Now," Mr Lancer raised his voice to be heard over the buzz of renewed conversations, "the last thing I can recall before waking here is Mrs Fenton using that weapon on Phantom." All eyes turned to the Fenton's. Danny saw with a jolt of horror that his mother was still holding that thing.

Characteristically, the Doctors Fenton weren't paying attention. Instead they were scanning the crowd with frowns on their faces.

Then, Danny met his mother's eyes through the lenses of her red-tinted goggles. Maddie's face brightened almost immediately. "Danny! Jazz!" she exclaimed. "There you are!" She and Jack pushed through the crowd. Admittedly, the students didn't give them much resistance. Danny tried very, very hard not to cringe when they wrapped him and Jazz in a hug. He failed, however, when the chill metal casing of the Fenton Mortifier brushed against the tiny stripe of exposed skin between the bottom of his shirt and the top of his jeans. Maddie pulled back, holding his shoulder with her free hand and examining his face. "Are you hurt, Danny?"

"No," said Danny, looking away, "I'm fine."

Mr Lancer cleared his throat. "Yes," he said, "well. I would like anyone who has something to add to raise their hands." The last three words were almost shouted. Mr Lancer looked expectantly at Jazz, but she did not raise her hand. Danny, too, looked at her curiously. That wasn't like her. Mr Lancer sighed and called on Paulina.

"Oh, there was that technology ghost, and then my ghost boy came to save us, and then the Fentons shot him with that awful weapon, and then he started screaming, and I was trying to help him but that nerd Lester-"

"Be kind, Miss Sanchez."

"-got in my way, and I fell down, and then it got really, really loud, and the next thing I know, I was here on this gross hill."

"Mr Spengler," said Mr Lancer tiredly. "That is, Nathan."

Nathan gave a similar account to the one that Jazz had given Danny. The others in the class more or less repeated it. The only difference was that none of them knew what the green swirl over Phantom's chest had been.
From the frowns over his parents' faces, though, they knew.

Finally, after everyone else had gone, Jazz raised her hand. Mr Lancer called on her. "Do you have anything to add about how we got here?"

"Yes," said Jazz decisively. "I just wanted to make sure that I was right first." She took a deep breath. "That green swirl you all saw? That was a portal to the Ghost Zone. I believe that we are currently in the Ghost Zone."

Dash scoffed. "Yeah, right! I saw the Ghost Zone when that freaky skeleton army took over. It didn't look anything like this. It was all green, and swirly"

"Yeah," said Tiffanie, backing up her boyfriend. "And there were these floating doors everywhere."

"I know," said Jazz. "I think that we might be behind one of those doors."

A few other people started to argue. The Fentons jumped in in defense of their daughter. Before too long, Danny had had enough.

"Look!" he said loudly. Well, as loudly as he could with his throat torn up the way it was. Good thing he had something of a commanding voice. "Even if this doesn't look like the Zone to you, you've got to admit that this isn't a normal place."

"Oh, yeah? Why, Fentonio?"

"First off, the flowers. Secondly, and most of you probably wouldn't have noticed this, but stars can't be green."

Everyone looked up. After a few seconds of everyone agreeing that, yeah, the stars looked kind of green, Mr Lancer sighed, deeply, as if he were dredging up the very dregs of his soul, as if he was about to do something that he knew he would regret, both immediately and for the rest of his life, and said, "I suppose that since this is the Ghost Zone, and you two are the experts, Mr and Mrs Fenton, that I should cede my authority to you for the duration of this crisis."

"No!"

Every eye turned to Danny, who had clamped his hands over his mouth.
"Sweetie, what do you mean, 'no?'" asked Maddie, clearly hurt.

Danny lowered his hands, thinking fast, keeping one part of his mind focused on staying visible. This would be a bad time to lose control.

"I-" stuttered Danny. "We- that is- um. I j-just." He steeled himself, and looked both of his parents in the eyes. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not, Danny-boy?" asked Jack, sounding lost. "We're the experts."

Danny badly wanted to scream that they weren't, but there was truth to Jack's statement. His parents were extraordinarily skilled ectologists, well versed in the theories of both ghost biology and spectral physics. The problem was that they had inherited a lot of prejudice from Jack's side of the family, which had included witch hunters, vampire hunters, exorcists, and other people who believed in but despised the supernatural on principle. That prejudice, coupled with the tradition of stories in which ghosts were the monsters, had turned into confirmation bias in their work, which led them to concluding that, because the few ghosts they had studied lacked recognizable nervous systems, all ghosts were mindless, heartless monsters. Imprints of the deceased, nothing more. Wrong, but understandable.

Instead, Danny took a deep breath. "Yeah. You are. But you don't think about the consequences when you do things."

"What do you mean?" asked Maddie, her frown deepening.

Danny played with the hem of his hoodie. "We're here in this situation because you didn't think things through."

"We're here because of that darn ghost kid!"

Danny flinched, his train of thought coming to a halt. All that was going through his mind now was stay visible stay visible stay visible.

"No, Dad, we aren't," this was Jazz, coming to the rescue. "We're here because you shot him with a thing designed to be traumatic without thinking about what he'd do next."

"Even putting aside the moral issues," added Sam, with the air of someone who very much did not want to put aside the moral issues, "you guys know that Phantom is powerful. You know about the Ghostly Wail. Um. The screaming thing. And I've sat through enough of your ghost lectures to know that you know that high tier powers like that are usually tied to a ghost's death."

"Yeah, so, really," said Tucker, looking intensely uncomfortable, "you could have predicted the Wail. You should have done controlled testing before using it in a combat environment with all of us innocent bystanders standing nearby. If he had really let loose, and the shield wasn't there, he could have probably brought the building down on us. Remember, he flattened a forest with it once." He seemed to realize what he was saying at the last minute, and looked at Danny apologetically.
"And don't try to say that no one could have predicted the portal," said Danny, finally picking up his own argument. "This isn't about that. It's about all the stuff you could have predicted, but you didn't. A-and you can't- you can't say that ghosts don't feel pain, or you didn't think Phantom'd react like that 'cause you wouldn't've made that if you didn't. I thought you were better than that" Danny sniffed, and to his consternation, found that he had started to cry. "I love you," said Danny, wiping at his eyes, "I really do. But I don't want to die because you guys decided to pick a fight with a ghost."

"Oh, Danny," said Maddie, softly, "I'm so sorry. We didn't know you felt that way." Behind her, Jack nodded convulsively. "We'll do better," she said. She looked at Jazz. "We'll do better," she repeated. "I promise, both of you." She pulled a strand of hair away from where the wind had blown it into her face. Danny only now noticed how the wind had picked up, and how the temperature had dropped. Not good. But Maddie still had more to say. "And when we get home, we'll try to find a more... humane way of dealing with ghosts. For now though..." she paused, frowning, and she turned to address Mr Lancer. "I'm afraid to say that this is the only weapon that came through with us. Or at least, the only weapon that was still with us when we woke up."

"But don't you always have, like, tons of weapons? In, like, your suits and stuff?" asked Star.

"Yes," said Maddie, "we do. But they were all gone when we woke up."

"That darn ghost kid must have taken them!" said Jack, loudly. Danny winced. If this really was his lair, then that statement wasn't entirely untrue.

"So you mean to say that if a ghost attacks us we'll be defenseless?" asked Mr Lancer in tones of alarm.

"Not quite," said Maddie grimly. "We have a small portable shield, and we still have the Mortifier." She hefted the gun, slightly. "Hopefully that will be enough of a deterrent."

Valerie cleared her throat. "That's not all we have;" she said. She was clearly nervous. Was she going to..? "I've got a couple blasters with me." Ah, so she wasn't going to reveal herself as Red Huntress. Okay. That would have been a surprise. "And I saw a bunch of stuff from the gym kind of scattered around. Like, you know, backpacks and stuff. Maybe some other weapons came through?"

Mr Lancer clapped his hands together, making everyone jump. "Excellent idea Miss Gray! Our first order of business should be to determine our resources. We should look for backpacks, tools, pieces of the gym, anything that might help us survive or get home. We should spread out. Work in pairs or small groups. Stay in sight of these... flowers." He gestured to the starburst. "Bring everything you find back here."

The students separated along clique lines. Dash, Kwan, and Tiffanie stuck together. Paulina and Star browbeat Dale into 'protecting' them. Elliot and the Spengler twins grouped up, much to Nathan's disgust. Mia, Hannah, and Sarah went together. Mikey and Ricky, who were best friends, grouped up. Rebecca and Ashley stuck with Mr Lancer. Valerie ignored directions and went off on her own. Jack and Maddie, reading the atmosphere around their children for once, decided to strike out together.

This meant that there were two dozen teens stumbling around in the darkness. The flowers and the stars gave off light, but not that much light, and cell phone lights were of limited utility.

"This would be easier if we had more light," said Sam.

"Probably," said Jazz, pointing her little flashlight at the ground.
"I can see fine," said Danny, his tone teasing. He desperately wanted to take his mind off what had just happened.

"Of course you can," said Tucker with exasperation. "Show off."

"Hey!" The voice was faint. Hannah, perhaps? Danny couldn't quite tell. "What's that?"

Danny scanned the hillside until he found someone pointing, and then followed her finger to the horizon. His eyebrows went up. Yeah. That was weird.

"Is that the moon?" demanded Tucker.

"That's way too big," said Sam.

"Yeah," agreed Danny, watching the white curve come up. "It's coming up too fast, too." He was more bemused by this than anything else. They were in the ghost zone, after all.

In a couple of minutes, the whole landscape was bathed in silvery moonlight. A few moments more, and the moon—well, the not-moon—was overhead.

"So. That was really convenient."

"Yep."

"Right after we were complaining about how dark it was."

"Yep."

"Not the first really convenient thing to happen, either."

"Nope."

Sam cocked her head to one side. "Wow. You know what would be great? If a portal home showed up right now." Nothing happened. "Eh. It was worth a shot."
Chapter 8: Lights in the Dark

With the light from the not-moon, the work of collecting all of the backpacks and other debris went quite quickly. One by one, the groups, not finding anything more to pick up, began to drift back.

There were no weapons, unless one counted a baseball bat. It didn't even have the word 'Fenton' written on the side. Danny was relieved.

More worryingly, there wasn't much in the way of food. The assembly had been called after lunch, and even if it hadn't been, most people at Casper High bought the school lunch. A few bags had chips, crackers, cookies, or uneaten vegetables, but even factoring in the bags from people who weren't there, there wasn't enough to keep everyone fed for a day, let alone for however long they were going to be here. Worse, hardly anyone had water.

Danny cautiously raised his hand after the last revelation.

"Do you have something to add, Mr Fenton-Danny," Mr Lancer said tiredly, changing his mind on how to address Danny halfway through. Danny supposed that Mr Lancer didn't want to inadvertently set off one of Jack Fenton's infamous, rambling, rants.

"I think that there might be water past those trees at the bottom of the hill." Danny had asked Sam, Tucker, and Jazz whether or not they could see the water. They had said that they could see something beyond the trees, but they couldn't tell if it was water or not. Danny had decided that it wouldn't be too much of a stretch for him to be able to see that far, in this light.

Mr Lancer peered towards the base of the hill. "We'll have to look into that. Did anyone else see anything strange? Useful?" Mikey raised his hand. "Mr Erikson?"

"Ricky and I saw a building," said Mikey.

Mr Lancer blinked. "Really? What kind of building? Where?"

"One of those little round buildings, with pillars," said Ricky Marsh. "It's at the top."

"A gazebo?"

"No," said Mikey, shaking his head. "It was made of stone, with walls. It was one of those things you see in really fancy cemeteries."

"Ah. A small tomb then. Odd thing to have in the Ghost Zone."

No one really wanted to go check out the creepy tomb at the top of the hill, and water was a priority, so after gathering the most important items together, they all started down the hill. It took a long time to get to the trees. Longer than Danny thought it should have, but then, they were walking very slowly. The others weren't used to this kind of thing, and Danny was still exhausted. At least it was all downhill.

As the hill started to level out, the class began to slow. Mr Lancer came to a halt several meters from the trees. Conversations that had been subdued before, while they were walking, began to rise in
volume until Paulina cried, "We don't have to go in there do we?"

"Can't we wait until the sun comes up?" demanded Lester.

"The sun might never come up here, you doofus," said his twin.

"Maybe we shouldn't all go in?" asked Elliot. "Maybe just, you know, you people who do like, martial arts and stuff."

"Didn't you tell me that you did martial arts last week?" asked Rebecca archly.

"Uhh. No?"

Danny didn't entirely understand what everyone's problem was. The trees weren't any denser than the ones in the parks in and around Amity Park, and it was any darker here than Amity Park at night. The trees weren't even horror movie trees, all gnarled and pale, rotting leaves clinging to dead, skeletal branches. No. These were proper, healthy trees, with leaves and needles still affixed to their limbs. Just right for the beginning of October, although otherwise it was a bit warm.

Yeah. He didn't get it.

"We-" Mr Lancer faltered. "We will split up. I'll ask for volunteers to go through with me and Mrs Fenton, and everyone else will stay here. Who was it who had that yarn?"

"That was me!" said Sarah. Her appearance was almost stereotypically Irish, freckles, red-blonde hair and all. Almost, because she very rarely wore green, and because she could take a tan. She flipped her bag off her shoulder, and pulled out the yarn.

"Now, volunteers?"

It took some time to figure out who was going and who was staying. People kept changing their minds when they saw who else was going and who was staying. Eventually, it wound up being Mr Lancer, Maddie, Danny, Jazz, Sam, Valerie, Dash, Kwan, Ricky and Mikey on the 'going' team, and Jack, Tucker, Paulina, Star, Ashley, Nathan, Lester, Rebecca, Mia, Hannah, Dale, Sarah, and Tiffanie on the 'staying' team. They, meaning Team Phantom, had decided that Tucker should stay on the principle that at least one competent person should be staying. Sam had argued that Danny should stay and rest, but Danny didn't want to let that thing out of sight.

Maddie went first. Then Mr Lancer and Valerie, with Valerie carrying one of her blasters. Jazz, Sam and Danny went last. Everyone else sort of bunched together in the middle.

Mr Lancer paused at the first tree to tie the end of the yarn to a branch. The hope was that they'd be able to follow the yarn back if they got lost. Danny thought that was rather optimistic. If they got attacked by anything, the string would probably snap. Heck, the string might snap if the person holding it tripped, or if they didn't spool it out fast enough, or if there were any animals in the woods who messed with it, or if it got abraded or cut by a rough bit of bark. Or any number of other things. It wasn't like their luck had been spectacular thus far.

On the other hand, Danny's portal hadn't dumped them on Skulker's island, or the Burning Lands, or any one of a number of nasty, simply inconvenient, or uncomfortable places he had visited in the Ghost Zone since he was fourteen. Actually, even places that Danny liked, like the Far Frozen, were too conducive to, well, life. His class would not have appreciated hypothermia. Or freezing to death. Thinking about it that way, they were downright blessed.

It was much darker under the branches of the trees, but Maddie and Mr Lancer insisted that they
conserve their batteries, especially on the phones, so only Maddie, Jazz and Lancer had flashlights on. This made the people in the middle bunch up even more.

Danny was squeezed in between Sam and Jazz. At first he wasn't sure why they were walking so close to him, but then he remembered how much he had been flickering earlier, and figured that they were protecting him from view. He was so lucky to have friends who thought about these things.

There were quite a ways in, maybe a quarter of a mile, when Danny's ghost sense went off. He tensed, shivering. It was good to know that his ghost sense was functional, but the fact that it made him so cold was not. It hadn't chilled him that much since before he got his ice powers under control. He didn't know what it meant, but he wasn't happy about it.

"What's wrong?" muttered Sam, leaning slightly closer to Danny.

"Just got a chill," he said, using their code for his ghost sense. He was scanning the trees as they walked, looking for whoever had set off his ghost sense. Beside him, Jazz and Sam were doing the same. Danny was so intent on looking, that he tripped over a tree root, and would have face-planted if Sam and Jazz hadn't caught him. All the others turned to look back at them. Danny blushed, taking up his stay visible chant again, and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Freaking klutz gonna get us all killed," muttered Dash.

"It isn't like you're any better," said Ricky. Danny blinked. The curly-haired boy was usually pretty timid. Then again, he and Mikey had come into the woods. Danny allowed himself a tiny smile. Sometimes crises did good things.

Then his ghost sense went off again. That meant that the ghost was still nearby.

"Mr Marsh, Mr Baxter," said Mr Lancer. "Please, consider the situation."

There was a tense moment. Danny chose to ignore it. He was still looking for the ghost.

He only saw it after they started moving again, and when he did he almost staggered in relief. He did lean into Jazz a little. It was a will'o-the-wisp, a blue-green dot of light about the size of his thumb. Harmless, to both ghosts and humans. Well, as long as the humans in question didn't follow them into a swamp or whatever. They tended to live in other ghost's territories, whether that territory was a realm, a lair, or a haunt, for protection.

There was a clan of them living in Amity Park. They were nice. Friendly. Helpful. Useful, too. They liked to eat popcorn and cotton candy. Their language was a bit strange, combining color, brightness, pitch, and tone. It had taken Danny forever to learn, and he still couldn't really speak it, seeing as he couldn't change color, and, sadly, his vocal cords, while quite remarkable, couldn't handle trombone sounds.

The presence of the wisp was good for other reasons. It meant that if there was a stronger ghost here, that is, stronger than a wisp, then that ghost wasn't terribly territorial (Danny still wasn't entirely convinced that this was his lair).

The thing was, that where there was one wisp, there were others. Danny's ghost sense went off again and again and again, as little lights flitted between the branches.

(Danny didn't get why the people up ahead weren't noticing. Sam and Jazz weren't seeing as many as he was, but they were still seeing them. He supposed that this was just another example of Amity Park obliviousness.)
Danny was freezing from the inside out. He had retreated into his hoodie, pulling the hood down, tucking his hands into his sleeves, and crossing his arms. He was breathing heavily, trying to use the slightly warmer air to thaw himself. Sam and Jazz were now even closer to him, their arms touching his, sharing their warmth.

There was something in the air, though. Something familiar, but distinct from the green-gold scent of the early-fall woods. Something sweet.

"Apples?" he asked, faintly. The cold had done away with all the progress his voice had made in the past couple of hours. He began to look more closely at the trees. Food was a problem. If there was food here, it would be helpful. "That's an apple tree," he said, pointing.

"What's wrong?" asked Jazz.

"That's an apple tree," he repeated. "It has apples."

Jazz shone her flashlight at the tree, revealing red-cheeked apples hanging among the green leaves like so many rubies. "Oh? Oh! Mr Lancer! There are apples on these trees."

"Wonderful work Miss Fenton!" Mr Lancer said, turning. Danny squinted when the teacher's flashlight's beam passed over his eyes.

"Actually, it was-"

"Finally, food!" shouted Dash, practically throwing himself at the tree. Jeez, he was loud.

"Wait!" shouted Maddie, even louder. Danny flinched hard. Supernaturally good senses were not always comfortable. (At least, that was what he blamed his flinch on.)

"What?" demanded Dash petulantly.

"It might not be safe," said Maddie. "Remember, we aren't in the human world any more. We're in the Ghost Zone. We don't know if these are safe to eat. They could be ectocontaminated."

"Mom," said Jazz, incredulously, "almost all of the food we eat is ectocontaminated."

"No it isn't," said Maddie, defensively.

"We haven't used the meat drawer in the fridge since it got taken over by animate hot dogs."

"That's different than this," protested Maddie. "Those apple could be made of ectoplasm. They could be actively poisonous. They could be here to act as food chains. Besides, we never expected you to eat those hot dogs."

"We ate the turkey, Mom, what about the turkey?" asked Jazz. "We had to re-kill that with a broom."

"Food chains?" interrupted Ricky, somewhat desperately.

"We haven't had any proof," said Maddie, "but some accounts suggest that by eating a ghost's food, you can become bound to it or its realm."

"I thought that was fairies," said Mikey.

Maddie sniffed. "Those stories are clearly about ghosts. If you look back far enough in any-"

This was when the will'o-the-wisps decided to swarm the group.
Everything happened remarkably quickly after that.

The Fenton Mortifier came up, to train on the swarm. Valerie raised her weapon, too, but Danny hardly noticed. Danny was too focused on that thing and how oh, Ancients, she was going to use it again.

(The will'o-the-wisps weren't Dead. They were Deathless. They had never died. But Danny wasn't thinking about that, and even if he had been, Danny had no desire to find out how they were affected by that thing.)

Whatever had broken in Danny earlier had sharp edges.

A wooden spear shot from the apple tree, impaling the silvery gun. Maddie screamed, falling back, just in time for the spear, still connected to the tree, to pulse once, shattering the gun. Danny registered a splash of red against the teal of his mother's jumpsuit, and it couldn't be. That was too much blood.

Then the energy from all the wisps hit him like a train.
Hey, so it turns out that my italics and bolds are being eaten. That shouldn't affect the story too much, and hopefully I'll be able to find out what's happening there soon and get it fixed.

Sorry for the inconvenience~

Chapter 9: A Few Facts

Some facts about ghosts.

Ghosts eat.

Exactly what a ghost eats varies from ghost to ghost. Some ghosts like human food. Undergrowth could get away with light and soil. Nocturne liked dreams. Spectra ate your depression, then followed that back to suck away your life force. Ember got a kick out of worship.

All ghosts, though, can at least absorb ectoplasmic energy, and excess emotional energy.

Different ghosts have different tastes. Spectra is a good example, favoring depression over all else. Other ghosts hate the flavor of emotion, preferring the pure taste of ecto-energy.

It is possible, if rare, for a ghost to 'overeat.' Adult ghosts, after all, can simply stop.

For child ghosts, though, things are different. Child ghosts can't stop. They absorb energy constantly. They need to absorb energy constantly. This means that they are more prone to overeating.

The symptoms of this are not severe. Lethargy, followed by increased energy.

Incidentally, the reason that so many ghosts tolerated wisps in their territories, was that will'o-the-wisps can process one type of energy, into another type of energy. They can alter ectoplasmic energy into excess emotional energy. They can change negative emotional energies into positive ones. Sadness into joy. Or vice versa, depending on the tastes of the ghost they are catering to.

They can also hold onto a great deal of energy for an extended period of time. This means that they are always prepared to feed the ghost in whose territory they reside.

Danny was a ghost. A child ghost, to be precise.

He was also human.

He was also neither.
Both.

Either.

There were some things that affected Danny as if he was a ghost, all the time, regardless of what form he was in. The Specter Deflector, for example. Or the Boo-merang. Some things affected Danny as if he was human at all times. It could be rather interesting to be hit by something that could supposedly vibrate ghosts into goo, only to have it tickle slightly, or to have someone announce that they were using some ancient defense against evil spirits, only for it to affect every ghost in the area except Danny. With other things, the effects were mixed. Such as with Ember's music, or Freakshow's staff (although Danny was never entirely sure if his lingering humanity was the reason that he was able to resist the later). With a few things, whether or not they affected him depended on which form he was in. Like ghost shields. Sometimes, there were things that were hurtful to both humans and ghosts that didn't touch Danny at all.

Then there were some things that were harmless to humans and ghosts, but could be very dangerous to Danny.

Like the will'o-the-wisps.

Over time, Danny and his friends had discovered that absorbing too much excess emotional energy could affect Danny strangely. It had taken them a while to figure out. For the longest time, Danny hadn't even realized what he was doing. He didn't actually know for sure what he was doing until he'd had a long conversation about it with one of the Far Frozen doctors.

Even now, Danny wasn't always sure how different emotions affected him, and they did seem to affect him differently. Sam's theory was that it was an absorption rate issue, and that depending on his own emotions at the time, he absorbed different kinds of energy at different rates, and that the energy that he didn't absorb hung around, and messed with him. Tucker and Jazz thought that it had more to do with a subconscious awareness of what was going on, and what emotions were 'in the air.' (Tucker had gotten way, way too many jokes out of that.) Danny wasn't sure this was the case. The proportions of the emotions seemed to matter.

Danny had managed to at least figure out how different things usually affected him. Too much anger made him nervous, shy. Too much fear made him aggressive and paranoid. Depression made him, well, depressed.

The will'o-the-wisps back home, in Amity Park, knew very well that Danny had these issues. They knew that it was important for him to have a balanced diet.

These ones, here, they had never met Danny. But they were eager, or least anxious, to meet the ghost whose lair had sheltered them so gently for the past two years. They wanted, needed, to show him that they were useful, to show him that they could stay.

They did that by releasing as much of as many different types of energy as possible.

Sam didn't immediately register the presence of the wisps as a bad thing, except for the firefight they’d inadvertently started. She didn't interact with the ones in Amity Park nearly as much as Danny did, but she did know them, knew that they were friendly.
Mrs Fenton getting stabbed by the apple tree after trying to fire on the will'o-the-wisps was not something that Sam would have expected, even knowing that the plants here were animate. Valerie shooting at the little ghosts oddly did not elicit the same response. Mr Lancer, Dash, Kwan, Ricky and Mikey were panicking. Well. To be more accurate, Dash and Kwan were panicking, Ricky and Mikey were hiding, and Mr Lancer was trying to salvage the situation.

That was just within the first few seconds of the wisps showing up.

In the next second, Danny was gripping Sam's coat as if his life depended on it. Sam looked at him, and traced his gaze up, to the luminous, kaleidoscopic, symphonic, swirl that was centered just a meter over Danny's head.

It was only then that Sam remembered all the trouble Danny had had with the wisps when they first moved into Amity. She looked back at Danny, alarmed, and saw how blank his expression was. Then Jazz caught Sam's eye, and they each knew that the other had just come to the same conclusion.

"Go help your mom," said Sam. "I've got this." That was the right decision, wasn't it? Danny would never forgive himself if his mother bled out because she and Jazz were too worried about him to help her (even if his mother had done far worse to him that very day). Mr Lancer probably had first aid training, but Jazz had first aid experience.

Jazz nodded, and struggled out of her jacket, which Danny also had in a death grip, and ran over to her mother, making sure to trip Valerie up while she was at it. Good old Jazz.

Okay. So, how had they dealt with this before?

"Hey!" Sam yelled up at the wisps, trying to shout over their music. She waved with the arm that wasn't trapped by Danny. She spent what felt like hours, but was probably only seconds, trying to get the attention of the wisps, only to conclude that they were either ignoring her or didn't understand English. Fine.

She looked back at Danny. Oh, jeez, he was not looking good. She pulled at him, trying to get him to look at her. When he finally did turn, it was to reveal that there was a needle-thin line of toxic, glowing green in each of his irises.

"Sam?" he said softly, only audible to Sam because of how close he was standing. He dropped Jazz's jacket, and raised his hand to touch Sam's face. His hand was painfully cold. "Are you scared?" he asked, sounding both confused and slightly offended. He blinked once, slowly, and tilted his head.

"Is someone hurt? I smell blood."

Wow. What was it with Danny and saying super ominous things when under the influence of mind-affecting supernatural shenanigans? What was it about this situation that even made Sam think the word 'shenanigans'!?

"Danny," she said, as calmly as possible, "I need you to ask them to stop."

"Ask who to stop? Mikey and Ricky? They're just playing hide-and-seek. Would you like to play? I think that we should all play. It'll be fun!" Danny's mouth stretched into a smile that was much wider than it should have been.

"No, Danny, not right now. You need to tell the wisps to stop feeding you. You know it's not good for you."

"But they're so happy."
"I know Danny, but I think they'd prefer it if you were healthy, right?"

"Mm," hummed Danny. Then he hummed some more, turning back to the swirl of light and sound above him. Then he whistled, sharply, and the wisps, for the most part, fell silent. A few jingled excitedly, but another, larger instance squealed at them in reprimand, sounding like nothing so much as a shrieking clarinet. Danny hummed at the wisps some more, and the largest of them, which was just slightly larger than a beach ball, floated down to Danny, whereupon it uttered a few inquisitive bars of oboe and cello music, flashing in shades of green, blue and orange.

Valerie shot at it.

The shot was blocked by a falling branch.

The wisps responded by rumbling like a forest of drums. Loud, low, and deep. Valerie paled. She had no idea that this was just an intimidation tactic. That the wisps had no means of backing up the threat.

The large wisp continued to float down, and Danny raised his hands to meet it, releasing Sam's coat. Once the wisp had settled in his arms, Danny brought it down, close to him, cuddling the little ghost as if it were a stuffed animal.

"Pretty," he said finally, as if that explained everything.

"Danny?" said Mrs Fenton.

Danny started to turn to her. Sam grabbed him. Danny looking at Mrs Fenton would be bad for two reasons. One, he'd see that, despite Jazz's best efforts, Mrs Fenton was covered in blood, and probably freak out. Two, his eyes were still messed up, and Mrs Fenton, not to mention Valerie, would inevitably interpret that as evidence of possession.

There was a moment of silence, as everyone processed what she had done. Above them, there were a few bell-like titters from the ghosts.

"Danny," said Mrs Fenton again, more sternly. "Show me your eyes."

Of course Mrs Fenton could have already come to the conclusion that he had been possessed.

This time, Sam wasn't able to hold Danny back. He turned, facing his mother, Jazz, and Mr Lancer. The sharp intake of breath from all three of them told Sam that the green light in Danny's eyes was clearly visible.

"Sam," said Mrs Fenton, with an air of forced calmness, "step away from Danny. Now."

As if Sam was going to do that. She glared at the older woman, shifting even closer to her friend. Mrs Fenton frowned, but turned her attention, and her glare back to her son.

"Get away from my son, ghost."
Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Perspectives

Maddie's wounds weren't as bad as Jazz had initially feared. The cut across her bicep was ragged, yes, but not deep. The one on her lower arm was a bit more troubling. It looked as though the spear had at first pierced the flesh on the outside of her radius, and then torn through it simply by virtue of the spear's diameter increasing as it was propelled forward. Still, it hadn't damaged the radial artery, so as long as they could get it wrapped up, it should be fine.

What really bothered Jazz, though, was that her mother had been covered in a tacky red ooze that had seeped from the broken remains of the Fenton Mortifier. She didn't know what it was, and she didn't know what it could do.

Maddie insisted that it was fine. That the substance was harmless, except to ghosts. Jazz wanted to believe that, but she highly doubted that her parents had tested the substance's effects in the human bloodstream, which is where it was going to be if Jazz didn't get Maddie's wounds cleaned.

So Jazz was a little too busy to notice what was going on with Sam and Danny, or even to pay much attention to the wisps that were providing all of her light, right up until Maddie said Danny's name, and Sam failed to keep Danny from turning to answer her.

Now Maddie's demand that the ghost get away from Danny hung in the air. Jazz bit her lip. Did Maddie mean the wisp? Did she not see Danny's eyes? There was always hope, right?

"Get away from my son!" repeated Maddie angrily, surging to her feet. "Get out of him! How dare you possess my Danny, you barely corporeal waste of space!"

A tiny frown creased Danny's face. "Rude," he said. Then, "You're hurt." He sounded surprised and concerned, if only mildly. He then vanished, only to reappear inches in front of Maddie.

Maddie started backwards, but regained her balance well enough to try to punch the will'o-the-wisp in Danny's arms. Danny caught her by the wrist of her injured arm, causing Maddie to gasp in pain.

"Why do you always want to hurt me?" asked Danny. "I'm just trying to help." He turned to Jazz. "Is it some kind of psychology thing?"

"Danny-

"Don't talk to it, Jazz!"

"Rude," said Danny, and Jazz saw his grip on their mother's arm tighten. Danny hummed, contemplatively.

Maddie didn't react though, except to grit her teeth and say, "Resorting to violence just to get your way, Phantom?"

"No," said Danny, and he set her arm on fire.
Jazz rapidly realized that Danny had not, in fact, set their mother's arm on fire. Yes, it certainly looked as if he had, as if Maddie's arm was wreathed with yellow-green fire. Yes, Maddie was screaming as if she was indeed on fire. But Maddie's arm wasn't crisping, there was no smell of burning, and Jazz was familiar with several ectoplasmic reactions and ghost powers that looked exactly the same, not the least of which was ignis fatuus, something that will'o-the-wisps were quite good at.

So Jazz wasn't terribly surprised when both Danny and the fire vanished, leaving Maddie's arm intact.

Wait. Intact.

Intact.

As in, healed. No longer wounded. Whole. The hole in her forearm was gone, as was the scratch on her bicep. How had Danny done that? Since when had he been able to do that? Or had the wisp done that, somehow? Wisps weren't very strong, and rarely had powers beyond the three basics and their energy filtering ability, but that was by far the largest wisp Jazz had ever seen. They tended to be closer to tennis balls in size.

More importantly: Where had Danny gone?

Actually, no, never mind, there he was, hiding shyly behind Sam. He was fully visible, but oddly hard to see. Jazz wouldn't have spotted him except that the will'o-the-wisps were all crowded around him.

Danny caught her eye and giggled. The wisps chimed and twinkled.

The sound drew the attention of the others, including Sam, who, from the way she jumped, had somehow not noticed Danny hiding behind her.

"You-!" began Maddie, clearly furious.

"I know what we should do!" said Danny, happily, bouncing slightly. "We should play a game. Like tag! Or hide-and-seek! Or, oh, oh, hide-and-seek tag! Team hide-and-seek tag! Oh my gosh this is going to be so much fun. Everyone has twenty minutes, okay? Okay!"

Then he disappeared. For real, this time. Seconds later, the wisps were all gone as well, dispersed into the woods, taking their light with them.

Mr Lancer, thankfully had left his flashlight on, even though he had dropped it, so they weren't in complete darkness. Jazz started looking for where she had dropped hers.

"Oh my god," said Maddie, breaking the silence. "Oh my god, my baby boy..."

"Mrs Fenton," Mr Lancer began cautiously, "Maddie, are you sure that was Phantom?"

"I thought- But his eyes... That wasn't a typical pattern. Maybe... Mind control instead of outright possession... Why do you ask?"

"He healed you, that doesn't seem like something Phantom would do after..."

Maddie blinked and stared down at her arm, as if she hadn't even noticed. She frowned. "No, it
doesn't. It is possible for a host's personality to come through in the case of mind control. Theoretically, anyway." She frowned, deeply. "Mr Lancer, you should take the children back. I'm going to go after Danny."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," said Jazz. She had finally found her flashlight, and was now playing the little beam around the trees.

"What do you..?" Mr Lancer trailed off, seeing what Jazz was seeing, or rather, not seeing what Jazz wasn't seeing. "The Invisible Man, where did they all go?"

Not only Danny, but Sam, Valerie, Dash, Kwan, Mikey, and Ricky were all gone.

Back on the mortal plane, in a government-owned office complex an hour's drive from Amity Park, a confidential meeting was taking place.

"... so you see, if we play this correctly, we can not only gain access to the Fenton Portal and all their research," said a reedy man in a white suit, "but sufficient funding to mount an expedition to the Core of the Ghost Zone."

"And finally destroy it."

"Well, yes," said the reedy man, nervously, tapping the pointer in his hand rhythmically against his thigh. "That goes without saying."

"What about the children?" asked one older man.

"Well, of course we'll look for them. But we have to think about the greater good."

"Young man, if we tell the public that we are taking their money to go find twenty-four civilians, twenty-one of which are school children, we had better not come back without them."

"No," said a woman. "In the end, their survival, even the survival of this organization, is irrelevant. Our only goal should be to destroy those monsters."

"Miss Green, please," interjected yet another man, this one with an impeccably pressed suit and styled hair. "I think that our operatives are more than skilled enough to complete both objectives. The retrieval of the students and their teacher, and the obliteration of all ectoplasmic filth." Then he smiled. "But, Mr Brown, if you are worried that our organization will become obsolete, well, if you will recall, ectoplasm has uses beyond weaponry."

"Most of those uses are patented by the Fentons," pointed out the older man.

"Yes, and wouldn't it be tragic if none of them were to make it back?"

Valerie took off as soon as the ghost possessing Danny did. It was easy. She had already been fading away, trying to find enough cover to change into her suit. It was the only way she could think of to get Danny back. Valerie's suit had Phantom's ectosignature saved to its tracking device.
She activated her suit, mentally urging it to find Phantom. Her board sprung from her boots, and she angled upwards, through the foliage, shielding her face with her arms.

The glow her tracker was easy to see in the moonlight. She ignored the smaller signals, the ones labeled with numbers. Those were surely those smaller, glowing orbs. She looked for Phantom's signature.

It wasn't there. Valerie growled in frustration. How was it that Phantom always disappeared?

But... Maybe it wasn't Phantom that had possessed Danny? Maybe it was one of those smaller ghosts? But then the question was, why wouldn't they possess all of them?

Valerie answered her own question. Because ghosts loved nothing more than causing pain, whether that pain be physical or emotional. The only exception was Danielle, and that was because she wasn't really a ghost. She tapped her tracker again, trying to change it so that it followed the strongest ectosignature.

Right before she did so, however, the screen flickered, and it briefly showed Phantom's signature as coming from everywhere. Valerie stared at the screen, mouth suddenly very dry. She might not be a scientist, like Mrs Fenton, but she did make sure to know how her equipment worked. She had spent hours talking to Vlad about it, particularly the scanner, before he had revealed himself to be a ghost. Half-ghost. Whatever.

The only reason for the tracker to pick up Phantom's signature as coming from all directions, was if this was his lair.

Dash wasn't scared of ghosts. He was a big, tough guy. The quarterback. The leader of his team. The leader of his school. A guy like that couldn't be scared of ghosts, especially in a town like Amity Park.

But an army of ghosts converging on him from all sides?

Yeah. So he panicked. So sue him. He ran away from those ghosts as fast as his legs could take him, trying to follow the yarn out of the woods.

But then he heard something chasing him.

He put on another burst of speed, no longer caring where he was running. It was too dark to see where he was going, anyway. Then he tripped, fell, and whatever was chasing him fell on top of him, knocking all the breath out of him.

As soon as he regained his wits, he started to fight against his attacker. But the thing that was on top of him began to speak in a familiar voice.

"Dude! Stop!"

"Kwan?"

"Yeah, man."

"What are you doing?"
"What are you doing? Fenton's mom and Valerie are the only ones that can fight ghosts. What if you got ambushed out here?" The shadow that was Kwan looked around. "Crud, it's dark out here."

"Yeah. You think they've gotten rid of those ghosts yet?"

"You see what that one gun did to Phantom? And you know Val went off the deep end since Paulina kicked her off the A-list. Yeah. I think they've beaten those ghosts by now."

"Okay," said Dash. He took Kwan's hand and let himself be pulled up.

"You didn't sprain your ankle or anything, man?"

"Me?" Dash snorted. "No way. Now, uh, what direction did we come from? Kwan? Dude?"

"Crud."

Ricky and Mikey had intended to hide. Just hide. Really. They weren't going to run away like idiots (also known as Dash and Kwan). Staying with the actual ghost hunter was a much better plan than running off into a dark forest that you knew was haunted.

So they ducked behind a tree. That's all they did.

Until a bunch of curious ghosts phased through the tree they were hiding behind. Then they did run. But only a little. Only to the next tree.

They didn't notice the hole until they had fallen into it. It wasn't their fault. The shadows had hidden it perfectly.

They were so surprised, they didn't even scream on the way down.

Sam, like Valerie, left to go after Danny.

Unlike, Valerie, however, Sam had no ghost tracking devices. Well, no ghost tracking devices except for her eyes. Her plan was to follow the still-visible wisps, and hope that they led her to Danny.

Meanwhile, a question was echoing in her head. What the heck was team hide-and-seek tag?
Chapter 11

Chapter 11: Clarity

It took Danny hours to recover. It happened slowly. First a feeling that something wasn't quite right. Then the feeling of detachment, of distance receded, and suddenly he realized that team hide-and-seek tag wasn't a real thing.

That wasn't good. He had just told his friends that they were playing a game that didn't exist, and then he ran off. With Leader. That was the wisp he was carrying. Not his actual name, which was a series of oboe and violin tones and two particular shades of blue, but that couldn't be translated into English as a name. So. Leader. Because he was the clan leader. Leader was very nice, and soft, and fuzzy, and squishy, and pretty.

Danny let himself be distracted by Leader's superior qualities for a few minutes, during which he cuddled into and mumbled at the ghost. Leader returned Danny's mumbles with comforting piano notes.

But he couldn't ignore the problem forever. He had to find his friends so that they could figure out a new game to play. One that everyone knew. That wasn't too bad. It would be just like regular hide-and-seek.

Danny sighed. No wonder his mom had been so mad at him. He'd been the rude one all along.

He frowned. There was something bothering him about the whole conversation. He didn't want to think about it. He wasn't in the mood to think back. He wanted to go back to skipping and frolicking through the woods, examining the flowers, eating things, like apples, pears, limes, and the odd insect, because he could.

Still, he couldn't do that when his friends weren't happy. And they weren't going to be happy when they were stuck playing a game that they didn't know the rules for.

But hadn't his mother been upset before he said anything about the game?

So what had happened? He had healed her arm. She'd done something awful to it, and it had been covered in something gross that had reacted weirdly violently with his ectoplasm. Surely she wasn't mad about that? Before that, she'd said something about using violence to get his way? That couldn't be right, he'd never- Unless he counted fighting with ghosts and ghost hunters. He did do that. But it was to help people. To keep them safe and happy. Not to 'get his way.'

Why would she say that? Why would she be so mean? It wasn't like her.

His humming took on a distressed edge as he tried to recall exactly what Maddie had said to him.

'Resorting to violence just to get your way, Phantom?'

He examined the sentence. The question? Was she confused about what he was doing? Did she not know that he was trying to help? But she knew him. He'd never hurt her! He didn't want to hurt anyone. Ever. She knew that, right? Right?

It wasn't like she hadn't known it was him. She'd called him by name!
She had called him by name.

She had called him Phantom.

Phantom.

She knew.

Danny was so caught up in his internal anguish that he didn't even notice that he had curled into a ball on the ground, his hands knotted into his hair. Leader and several other wisps hovered over him worriedly.

She knew.

She knew and she hated him. They all hated him. He was the worst. What was he doing? They were probably hunting him down right now. He sobbed. They all hated him. It was all his fault. He couldn't exactly put his finger on what 'it' was, but it was definitely his fault and he knew it. What was wrong with him?

The wisps brushed against him, trying to give him comfort, but Danny was basically insensate at this point. Still, the contact eventually made him realize that not everyone hated him, and he crawled into a tree to sing to the little ghosts.

Then he began, at last, to regain enough focus to remember what had happened before healing his mother. Considering that she had been wounded in that time period, this just made Danny freak out again. Somehow, he had forgotten that in order to be healed, a person first had to be hurt.

It was a bit of a cycle. Danny thinking of something that upset him, calming down, getting distracted, trying to figure out how the situation had come about in the first place, and freaking out again. However, as time went on, the calm periods got longer, and he spent less and less time distracted by trees, or flowers, or odd looking shadows. On the other hand, his underlying anxiety began to build. Yes, it was somewhat muted due to what Danny now recognized as an energy overload, but it was still there, and growing, and it was what was fueling his intermittent panic attacks.

So Danny did the only thing that his rather abused mind considered logical.

He found a hole and hid in it.

It was a nice, deep, dark hole. More like a cave than anything else. So dark, no one would be able to see the lights of the wisps that accompanied him, let alone the lights of his eyes. So deep, no one would hear him humming and singing to the wisps, or the wisps responding to him. The walls were sturdy, so if his powers did something strange (and he could now recall several strange things that he had done while his was out of his mind, including whatever he had done to Maddie's arm) he probably wouldn't do any damage.

No one would find him. He'd be safe. They'd be safe.

He let himself relax a little, and found a nice alcove to tuck himself into, a little divot in the stone that was just the right size to cradle his body. He spoke to Leader and the other wisps, then. They deserved an explanation for all the craziness Danny had put them through, especially since Danny had essentially kidnapped Leader.

They were alright with that, though, strangely enough. Leader was a very old wisp, and he claimed to have been through much worse during some first meetings. Beyond that, they were curious. They wanted to know about Danny, and Danny obliged. For a while anyway.
Lying down, listening to the musical will'o-the-wisp language, Danny began to drift off. The day had been a hard one, and he was completely exhausted, both emotionally and physically. The energy that the wisps had given him had perked him up in addition to giving him a case of temporary insanity, but it was in the sense that giving an espresso to someone who hadn't slept in two days might perk them up. It helped them stay alert a little longer, but it wasn't particularly healthy, and it didn't erase the need for sleep.

When Danny woke again, it was to the sound of voices. Human voices.

He started violently awake, dislodging a dozen or so wisps from where they were dozing on top of him. His first and strongest impulse was to vanish. So he did, the wisps following his lead.

Then he started to wonder why he had gotten so scared. Valerie was the only one with weapons now. No one else could hurt him. He took a deep, calming, breath.

The voices sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place them. They sounded scared. Lost. That was okay. Danny was lost, too. They could be lost together. But first he needed to find out who it was.

He walked towards the voices, his steps light, humming a little. It really was nice down here. Nice and dark and cool. Lots of tunnels.

Danny turned a corner and almost ran right into the muzzle of the Fenton Mortifier. His wide, scared eyes tracked along the gun's length, back and up to his mother's gloved hands, along her arms, to her shoulders, to her face, which was twisted into an almost unrecognizable rictus of hate. Behind her stood his father, just as hideously furious. He knew they were going to shoot him.

"Please," he whispered.

Maddie pulled the trigger.

Danny woke up screaming, clutching blindly at his chest, lightning licking off of him in random spurts. Will'o-the-wisps hovered worriedly in the air around him as he wedged himself further into the corner he found himself in. It was odd, normally he hated confined spaces, but now, in his hysteria, it felt comforting, like an embrace.

(It occurred to him, in a distant sort of way, that it was good that none of his human friends were here. If they had been holding on to him, they would have been electrocuted.)

He only stopped screaming when the action became physically impossible. When his voice and lungs would no longer cooperate.

But when he stopped, and his hysteria receded, he had something that he didn't when he had fallen asleep. Clarity. He really remembered, now. More than that, he was able to think.

Wow, he'd been a mess. He was still a mess. At least now he knew what was going on.

He unfolded himself from his little alcove. He'd had his freak out, and his recovery time. Now he needed to find the others. That shouldn't be too hard, right? I mean, all he had to do was fly up, find the group that had stayed, and then follow the yarn to the group that had left. He frowned. It had been a long time since he had left them. They may have moved. Scratch that, they would have moved, after being 'attacked' by ghosts. He shook his head. Even so, unless everyone was in under the trees, he should be able to spot them from above.

Still trying to dispel his doubts, Danny stretched, and brushed himself off. Then he hummed an explanation to the handful of wisps still with him, and reached for his core.
The next thing he knew, Danny was curled on the ground in agony.

Oh. No. No no no no no. No. This couldn't be happening, not on top of everything else. He couldn't- When had he last gone ghost? When he went to go look for Technus in the gym? Had that- that awful, horrible, monstrous thing damaged his core? Because this wasn't because of the wisps. He'd dealt with overeating before, and although this time had definitely been worse than that time, it didn't keep him from accessing his other self.

Danny closed his eyes and forced himself not to panic. He couldn't afford to panic. There were people relying on him, and, speaking of panic, he didn't even want to think about what Sam and Jazz were probably going through right now.

(He was a terrible friend, and a worse brother.)

Eventually, he got back to his feet. First things first. Get out of this hole, because he wasn't going to find anyone down here. Not even Dash was that dumb. (And what did that say about Danny?)

Danny had just started to walk back to the vertical shaft he had climbed down when his ear twitched, and he froze, listening. There were voices. Human voices. Danny broke out in a cold sweat. It couldn't be. It couldn't be his parents. There was just no way. Even if it was them, they wouldn't have the Mortifier with them. That thing was broken.

Besides, now that he had calmed down again, he could tell that the two voices did not belong to his parents. They were both young. Male. Danny frowned, listening. Not Dash. Mikey and Ricky? And they were arguing about something?

Danny hummed a request for quiet to the wisps, and invisibly made his way towards the voices. The tunnel he took was much narrower and more serpentine than the one in his dream, which soothed him somewhat. Especially because when he tested it, he could pass through the walls intangibly.

After a few minutes of walking, he was close enough to start hearing what the argument was about.

"... should have stayed!"

"We were calling up to them for an hour. They didn't hear us, we didn't hear them."

"Yeah, but they would have found the hole eventually."

"Not likely. And then, how were they going to get us out? We don't have ropes, or climbing gear, or anything, really. And considering how far we slid, we probably couldn't communicate with them anyway, not unless they fell down themselves."

"I still don't like it, Ricky. When you're lost, you're supposed to stay put."

"In the human world, sure. Back home there are organizations, and people do search parties and stuff. But here, well, no one's really sure where we are to begin with."

"I guess," said Mikey. Danny peered around the corner to see the boys making their way by cell phone light. The red-haired boy sighed deeply, and adjusted his glasses. "It's just so dark in here, though. It's creepy."

"Yeah," agreed Ricky, not sounding too happy either.

This was going to be tricky, Danny realized as he backtracked down the tunnel. The shaft that he came down wasn't going to be an acceptable exit for the two humans. They'd have to find another
one. Also, speaking of human, a normal person wouldn't risk stumbling around down here without a light source. Danny fumbled in his pockets for his phone, an old brick phone that Tucker claimed was indestructible, and sighed in relief when he found it. If he lost another one, his parents would k-

His thoughts skittered to a halt.

(They had already done a pretty good job of it, hadn't they?)

Danny shook his head to clear it. He had a plan of attack now. He could help Ricky and Mikey find their way up, and then the three of them would look for the others.

Now to put it into action.
Ricky glanced over at his red-headed friend. He hadn't meant to make Mikey feel bad. The situation was bad enough as it was.

"So," said Ricky, trying to find something less depressing. "Doesn't this kind of remind you of the Warrens of Warlock's Way?"

"Maybe," said Mikey sullenly. "Except you're not a level four fighter, I'm not a level three wizard, and hopefully there aren't any kobolds in here."

"Yeah, that'd kinda suck, huh?"

"Heh, yeah."

There was a scuffing sound from up ahead, and the clatter of falling stones, and both boys froze.

"Then again," Mikey said, "we didn't have to worry about cave ins in the game."

"Yeah, but doesn't that sound more like-"

There was another clattering sound, and then a cough.

"-footsteps," Ricky finished quietly.

"Hello?" a voice echoed faintly from down the tunnel. "Is someone there?"

"Isn't that-?"

There was another clatter, and a light began to shine from around the corner. "Hello?" repeated the voice. "Mikey? Ricky? Is that you?" After the last question, a small figure came around the corner.

"Danny?" asked Mikey incredulously. "What are you doing down here?"

The light in Danny's hand bobbed as he came closer. "I- I'm not sure. The last thing I remember is all those little ghosts showing up, and then I'm in here? Wherever here is. What are you doing here?"

"We fell down a hole," answered Ricky. "What do you mean you don't remember?"

"Um. I think that I might have been overshadowed."

"Overshadowed?" asked Mikey.

"Um. Possessed," Danny said, his voice wavering a little. "Where's everyone else?"

"We don't know. We fell when the attack happened."

"Oh," said Danny, sounding very disappointed. "I was hoping that you knew more than me."

"Hey," said Mikey, "is that a Nokia?"
"Huh? Yeah, I guess. You don't mind if I turn this off, do you? I want to save my batteries."

"Oh, yeah, sure," said Ricky, checking his own battery. "I'm good for hours yet."

"Cool," said Danny. He switched off his phone and put it back into his pocket.

Ricky tried to examine Danny's eyes surreptitiously. If someone was possessed, their eyes were supposed to change color, flash, or glow. They looked normal, though, the same sky blue as always. Once Ricky had satisfied himself on that count, although he wasn't sure what he would have done if Danny was possessed, Ricky let his eyes wander over the rest of Danny's face.

Danny looked awful. The circles under his eyes were even darker than usual, and where his skin wasn't smeared with dirt, it was unhealthily pale. Also...

"Danny, what's that on your face?"

"Um, dirt probably," said Danny, rubbing the wrong side of his face.

"No," said Ricky, "here." He reached out to touch Danny's face, his fingers brushing against the angry, red-pink mark on Danny's face.

Danny flinched away, hard, a haunted look on his face. His hand came up to touch the mark, and Ricky saw that there was a similar wound on Danny's hand.

"It looks like a Lichtenberg scar," said Mikey.

"A what?"

"A Lichtenberg scar," repeated Mikey. "You get them from electrical injuries. Like being struck by lightning."

Danny was still just standing there, hand on his face.

"How-?" started Ricky.

"I don't know," said Danny. He tugged up his hood, and looked down, effectively obscuring Ricky and Mikey's view of the scar. "It must have happened when I was ove- possessed. When I was possessed." He turned away. "Come on, we've got to find a way out, and I bet that there isn't any way out from where you've come, right? So we should go."

"Did that seem weird to you?" asked Ricky.

"Yeah. But, dang, I wonder what that ghost did to him."

"Yeah."

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Danny kept his hand pressed to his face as he walked away. How had he forgotten the scars? At least they hadn't noticed his ears. He wasn't sure he could explain away the ears. Then again, how often do you really look at another person's ears?

"So," said Ricky, "how long have you been up?"
"I don't know. Not very long. Ten or fifteen minutes? How long has it been since you were... attacked?"

"Two or three hours, I think," said Mikey. "We haven't really been keeping track."

"Okay," said Danny. "Neither of you are hurt, right?"

"No, the hole we fell down was kinda sloped, so we're fine. You?"

"I'm fine," lied Danny. His attempt to transform earlier showed that he clearly wasn't, but there wasn't anything Ricky and Mikey could do about it. Either he would heal on his own, or he'd have to talk to the doctors in the Far Frozen. Or, ugh, Vlad. As much as he hated to admit it, Vlad knew more about hybrid biology than anyone. Except maybe Clockwork, and Clockwork couldn't always help.

They passed where Danny had slept, and reached the shaft he had fallen down. They spent a while trying to see if they could climb up it, but it became apparent that they could not, even with Danny discretely using his enhanced strength to help them.

They then took the opportunity to rest. Danny, who had been asleep, was fine, but the others had been walking for a while, and before that, they had been trying to climb up the hole they had fallen down.

Once they felt better, they decided to keep going, and not spend any more time on the shaft. They clearly weren't going to get up it. After a bit of walking, they came to fork, a split in the tunnel.

"So, which way should we go?" asked Mikey, nervously.

"This way," said Danny, without hesitation. Pointing to the right-handed path.

"Why that way?"

"Can't you feel it?"

"What?"

"There's a breeze."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Also, I think that this might slope up a little."

"Really?"

The two human boys examined the right-hand tunnel, looking for the signs Danny had pointed out. In truth, Danny didn't see a slope, and, although he could feel a slight breeze, that wasn't his reason for choosing the right-hand side. His real reason was that he wanted to go down the right-hand path. It was a strange feeling. A pull. Almost like his sense of where home was, on a normal day, but not quite. He wasn't sure if he could trust the feeling, but he heard the invisible wisps humming approvingly, and they knew this place the best, so it probably was the right way.

"Well," said Ricky, "it isn't as if they other way looks any better."

"Yeah," agreed Mikey.

They turned down the right-hand tunnel. Eventually, it did start to tilt up, and then they saw a light at
the end of the tunnel. Not in a 'you're going to die' way, but in a 'your trials are going to end' way. Although, Danny had learned that those could be the same thing, and he wasn't sure if he had seen any light at the end of the tunnel when he was dying.

Anyway, they came out in a little clearing, the not-moon shining brightly overhead. Danny breathed a sigh of relief. Being underground was okay, but seeing the moon (or not-moon) and stars (or not-stars) was so much better. Danny took a deep, cleansing breath. He could smell the trees, the grass, the earth, the faint sweetness of flowers and fruit, and the coolness of the air. His breath came out in a puff of mist, and his ears picked up distant music.

Before Danny could turn to Ricky and Mikey, and propose moving on, one of the smaller wisps, one whose diameter was about the length of his thumb, that had been following Danny dropped invisibility and zoomed off into the trees. Danny stared after it blankly, because, heck, how was he supposed to explain this?

"What was that?" exclaimed Ricky.

"Um," said Danny, thoughts whirling. He had nothing. So. Time to go to good old plan B: Run away from the problem! "I don't know! Let's follow it and find out!" He smiled wildly at the other two boys, before remembering that his teeth weren't human-normal at the moment, and then took off in the direction the wisp had gone.

His sharp ears picked up more music, this more discordant. Behind him, Ricky and Mikey were stumbling along. Then, a voice, one he knew.

"... I'm sorry, do that again, but more slowly."

There was a sound like a face being smashed into a keyboard.

"Look I know you're frustrated, but how do you think I feel? You've been leading me all over the place and I can barely tell what you're saying... Okay, so you're saying he's over here?"

That was Sam! Danny slowed down. He didn't want to. He wanted to run right up to Sam, but he didn't want to loose Ricky and Mikey. Wait, maybe he should try to loose Ricky and Mikey, at least temporarily, because it sounded like Sam was talking to wisps, and he didn't want them to be scared, but it would be mean to abandon Ricky and Mikey, not that he would be abandoning them, just avoiding them for a little bit, but they might think that he was abandoning them, and that might scare them more, or they might be angry with him, and he really didn't want that, and now it was too late because he had frozen and they had caught up to him.

"What- What was that?" asked Ricky between gasps, hands on his knees. Mikey stood, well, bent, next to him, his face red with exertion.

"I think I heard Sam," said Danny.

"Your girlfriend?"

"We aren't dating!"

The three boys looked up in surprise. The dark-haired girl had found them first, and was looking down at them with displeasure.

"Why did you-" she cut off when Danny ran into her, burying his face in her shoulder, and holding her tightly. "Danny you're freezing," she said, quietly.
"I know," he said back, his breath misting as he spoke. Sam's wisps were still with there, just invisible. "Where is everyone?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Sam. "Looks like you found Ricky and Mikey, though. Where were you guys?"

"We fell down a hole," said Ricky, still struggling to get his breathing under control.

"Really?"

"Yeah," said Mikey, "there's like this whole cave system down there."

"Interesting," said Sam. "More to this place than meets the eye, huh?"

Danny pulled back, rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess," he said. "How are we going to find everyone?"

"I have an idea, I don't know if it'll work, but, hey, nothing to loose, right? So, Jazz said that when she first woke up, she got the flowers to show her where you were. I thought that maybe they could do the same for us."

"Flowers? What flowers?" asked Ricky, skeptically.

"The blue ones. Remember when Lancer was trying to get everyone's attention?"

"You mean the freaky glowing ghost flowers? Why don't you just ask a ghost? Speaking of-"

"Well, I would ask a ghost, but I don't see any around, do you?"

"I don't see any flowers, either, Manson."

"Look again," said Sam, pointing behind them. Danny followed her finger over his shoulder, to a tree adorned with glowing, dark purple flowers with hot pink veins. "I don't care for pink very much, but that's pretty cool."
Chapter 13: Red Bird

Danny and Sam followed the trees without hesitation. Ricky and Mikey needed a little more convincing. They didn't trust the trees. Or anything about the situation. Danny had caught both of them staring into his eyes, so he was pretty sure that they both thought that he might 'still' be 'possessed.' Danny rolled his eyes at that thought.

Only Sam and Tucker had noticed the one time he had actually been possessed. Heck, only Sam and Tucker had noticed when he had been under mind control. For that matter, Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were the only ones who noticed anything amiss when he had been replaced by shapeshifters. The fact that he had to refer to the latter two in the plural just went to show how crazy his life was.

It was annoying to have Ricky and Mikey looking at him like they knew anything about what his life was like. Looking at him judging, as if ghosts were always to blame for everything. It wasn't their fault. They really didn't know anything. But it was still annoying.

Even so, his mood had improved greatly since they had found Sam. Having someone who did know, who understood, at least a little bit, with him was amazing. Reassuring. Like having his feet underneath him again. An anchor in the storm. Not that the wisps weren't great, but they were rather alien, even from a ghostly perspective, and there was always that divide between the Dead, the Deathless, and the Neverborn.

There was a muffled, groaning noise from ahead, and Danny's ears pricked. Literally rotated to pick up the sound. That was weird. His ears did do that sometimes, but typically only when he was Phantom. Having it happen to him when he was at least superficially human was new. It felt different. It was hard to quantify how, but it did. Just the way the muscles and blood vessels moved beneath the skin when, overall, his blood was truly blood, his flesh truly flesh, and his nervous system was powered by chemicals and electricity.

Not that it helped him hear. His ears were hidden under his hood, and the angle adjustment was minuscule. Danny hoped that this was temporary.

"Hey," whispered Sam, leaning down slightly, to whisper in Danny's ear, "what happened?"

"Ran around like a crazy person, freaked out a few times, took an hour nap, found out I can't change, ran into those two. You?"

"Ran around like a crazy person looking for you. You know the flowers wouldn't show me where you were. They'd only show up if I asked for Tucker or Jazz. I had to play charades with the wisps."

"Well, we were underground. No flowers there."

"I guess that makes sense. What do you mean, you can't change?"

"It hurts to try," said Danny quietly, glancing back at Ricky and Mikey.

"Heck. We need to get you to the Far Frozen."

"Yeah," agreed Danny, shivering and hiding another puff of mist. "I think that's Valerie up there, by
"What do you mean?"

"You don't hear that?"

"No."

"Well, it sounds like Valerie. If Valerie was a cat that got stuck in a tree."

"What?"

"I don't know. It made sense in my head. Maybe I'm still not quite right. Mom thought I was possessed, right?"

"I think so. I kinda left right after you did. I thought I could catch up."

"Okay, then."

They fell quiet, not wanting to attract too much suspicion from Mikey and Ricky.

"So, Manson," said Ricky.

"What do you want, Marsh," said Sam flatly.

"How did you get separated from the group?"

"I ran after Danny when the ghosts took him and got lost."

"Are you sure you aren't dating?" teased Mikey.

"We're sure."

There was quiet again, and then Mikey said, "Danny, you know a lot about ghosts, right?"

"W-what do you mean?"

"Because of your parents?"

"Oh. Yeah. Some."

"Why do you think that this part of the Ghost Zone is so different from what we saw before? I mean, you do think that this is the Ghost Zone, right? You weren't just backing up your mom?"

"I do think that this is the Ghost Zone. As for why it looks different, um," Danny sucked in his lips, trying to think of a legitimate reason that didn't require knowledge he wasn't supposed to have.

Thankfully, he was spared having to answer when a creaking sound, like highly distressed wood, emerged from the woods in front of them, followed by an echoing snap.

"What was that?" asked Mikey fearfully.

"It sounded a little like a tree coming down," said Sam thoughtfully. "It's on our path. Do you think that it's one of us?"

"Shh!" said Danny, trying to listen. The others fell silent. In a moment, all of them, even those without supernaturally good hearing, could hear a faint moan. "I think that's Valerie!"
"She sounds hurt," said Ricky.

Danny gave the curly-haired boy a look with wide and wild eyes. "Really?" he said. "Oh no," He took off along the flower-illuminated path.

"Dammit, Marsh," said Sam, before she, too, ran.

"That wasn't- You aren't supposed to run towards the loud noise and the stuff that-! Argh!" He shared a look with Mikey, and they followed, albeit more slowly.

(Danny wasn't sure how he knew these details when he was running away at high speed.)

But even though Danny wanted to keep on running until he reached Valerie, he had to slow down. The trees were closer together here, the underbrush thicker. He could just phase through, but, well. Valerie. Danny knew that she still had her suit. Which meant that whatever was giving her trouble was formidable.

But he was still a healthy distance ahead of the others. Good. It might have been better if they had stayed back, safer, but Danny knew that Sam would never do that, and Mikey and Ricky had already demonstrated that they'd follow him if he ran off. This way that had at least a small margin of safety.

Danny could now clearly hear Valerie, although most of what she said was either insults, or frustrated growling. Danny knew ghosts who didn't growl half as much as Valerie.

Finally, he pushed through the last of the brush and into bare spot beneath a huge, twisted tree. The branches towards the center, where they split off from the trunk, formed a cage. One that Valerie Grey was stuck in.

Currently, Valerie was in her suit, her board, though, was nowhere in sight. Her back was up against one of the 'bars,' and she was using her legs to push against the opposite one with all her might. The tree itself was thick with tiny white flowers, no bigger than Danny's fingernails.

"Valerie?" said Danny, his voice lilting up at the end, making the name a question. "Is that you?"

Valerie's reaction was hilarious. She flipped herself over, smashed her face into the branch that had been behind her, recoiled, and smacked into the other side of the cage, knocking loose a rain of flower petals that settled on her red suit like radioactive snow. Then she stared at Danny, completely silent.

Belatedly, Danny wondered if her suit could visually pick up invisible ghosts, or if it still only had that ectosignature radar. There were something like two dozen wisps floating around him, all invisible. It would be rather difficult to deal with Valerie if she was busy being all paranoid about ghosts being around.

"Valerie?" he repeated, more hesitant.

"Danny? You aren't possessed?"

"Um," said Danny, "no? But if you think about it that'd be my answer even if I was possessed. Or... Doing the possessing? Is that the right way to say it?" He blinked. What the heck was he saying? Ancients, he was going to get himself killed. "Look, I've got people behind me, so unless you want all of them to be asking why Red Huntress is here..." Danny trailed off. It wasn't untrue. They all would be asking, even if Sam already knew. Sam was good at the whole no special knowledge thing. Unlike Danny.
Speaking of...

"How did you know it was me?"

Yep. There it was.

"Valerie, I've known you for years and we were dating for, like, a whole week. It'd be kinda embarrassing if I didn't know what your voice sounds like." Not that he was being ironic or anything. Nope, not Danny. (Lancer would be so proud.)

Valerie nodded once, sharply, and deactivated her suit, just in time for Sam to push through the bushes.

"Wow," said Sam. "Nice tree."

"Not from here," said Valerie, bitterly. "How'd you get the ghost out of Danny?"

"I didn't, it left on its own," said Sam, raising an eyebrow. Only someone who knew her very well would see that she was disgusted both by the question, and her answer. "How'd you wind up in that tree."

"It's a long story," said Valerie, uncomfortably. "Are you the only ones here? What happened to everyone else?"

"Mikey and Ricky were right behind us," said Sam, turning around and squinting, pulling back a handful of foliage. "Yeah, they're still coming."

"And everyone else?" prompted Valerie.

"We got separated. Probably at the same time you did. Last time I saw you, you were shooting at those little ghosts."

"Yeah," Valerie frowned. "What was up with those, anyway?" She turned a little to look more directly at Danny. "All they did was grab you and leave. You ever see anything like them?"

"Um," said Danny. This was another question that Danny wasn't sure if he should answer properly, if at all. Ricky and Mikey crashed through the bushes and he was still thinking.

"Valerie?" said Ricky, incredulous and once again out of breath. Those two really needed to exercise more. Seriously. They lived in a town that was constantly under attack. They really should be able to run faster. Otherwise they might be caught by something nasty. Caught by a ghost. Caught by a monster. (Caught by a different kind of monster). Falling buildings. Hurt. Caught. In pain. Injured. Maimed. Danny caught himself starting to hyperventilate, and compensated by holding his breath.

"Danny," said Valerie, sharply, and Danny realized that he had missed a large part of the conversation.

"What?" said Danny, feeling dazed.

"Come on, Danny, you aren't going to get out of the question that easily."

"What question?"

"Those little ghosts. Did you ever see anything like them?"

Danny bit his lip and glanced up at Sam. She shrugged. "Maybe. Well. Actually. Yeah."
"Fenton."

"They, um. They're friendly, usually."

"Oh my god, Danny," said Ricky. "You mean you mess around with ghosts? These ghosts? They attacked us. Are you crazy?"

Danny frowned at Ricky. "No. I'm not saying this very well. Give me a second." He rubbed his eyes. "There are ghosts like these, like, they're the same type of ghost, living... Um. Not living. You know what I mean. There's a group of them in Amity Park. They never cause trouble. I just, you know, figured that it was better for everyone to focus on the ghosts that were actually hurting people. So, I, um, didn't say anything." He looked down and bit his lower lip, raising his hand to mask the action. "They're harmless, really."

"They put a log through your mother's arm and walked off with your body!"

Ducked his head. He had managed to put his mother's wound out of his mind.

"I don't think that they did the tree thing," said Sam, coming to his rescue. "Considering the fact that you're stuck in a tree..." She waved her hand dismissively. "Not to mention, she had that stupid gun," Sam muttered. Then, more loudly, "Speaking of the tree problem, what have you tried to do to get out?"
It turned out that Valerie had tried a great many ways to get out of the tree. All of them had been brute force methods. All of them had failed.

Mikey and Ricky kept asking how she had gotten stuck in the first place. Valerie kept deflecting them, until they tried to force the point, and then Valerie had said, "How did you two manage to fall down a hole, anyway?" in her best A-list voice, and they had dropped it.

It was too bad, really. It would probably be a great story.

(Sometimes Danny resented Valerie, just a little bit.)

(Why couldn't they see he was trying to help?)

They started brainstorming new ways for Valerie to get out. They failed. Miserably.

"Look," said Danny, finally. "There's clearly an intelligence behind this."

"Ghost's aren't intelligent," said Valerie, trying to free her foot from where it had been trapped between two branches. "They're mindless monsters. Your parents have said as much."

"The evidence doesn't support that," said Mikey. "I mean, Phantom is clearly capable of formulating complex strategies."

Valerie's shoe popped off, and she sighed. "So is a chess program."

"Chess programs don't do puns."

"They could be programmed to do puns."

"That-"

"Seriously, can we leave the Turing test for later?" interrupted Sam. "Danny, you were saying?"

"Well, whatever it is," said Danny, feeling a little weird about referring to himself in such a way (but not that weird, he already managed a double life), "it probably didn't like whatever you were doing before it... grabbed you, or whatever. So, maybe you could do a peace offering, or something? Show it that you aren't going to do that, any more?"

Valerie snorted. "Danny, this is a tree."

"We're in the Ghost Zone. It might not be just a tree."

"Clearly, it's not just a tree," said Valerie angrily. "Otherwise I'd be out by now."

"Okay, okay," said Danny, rolling his. "If you're really dead set against telling us what happened, there is another way. It's kind of hit-or-miss though. And, by the way, we do all know that you have those blasters, remember? I think we can all conclude that you were shooting at something."
"Just tell me how to get out."

"Right. So, it turns out that humans can manipulate ectoplasm to some degree. It's easier when there's a lot of it, and when it isn't being, how should I put it, used by anyone else. Putting it in, um, more science-y terms, I guess, it would be, ectoplasm with no associated ectosignature." Danny rubbed his neck. "It's more complicated that that, but, well, I don't think you want me to go on all night. Or, um, you know. However long it would take. What time is it supposed to be now, anyway?"

"My phone says that it's three in the morning."

"Thanks, Mikey. Anyway. Because humans can manipulate ectoplasm, and the Ghost Zone is mostly ectoplasm, it can sometimes seem like humans are the ghosts, in the Ghost Zone."

"That doesn't make any sense. Ghosts are ghosts. Humans are humans."

"Yeah, but- Okay, look, you know that ectoplasm can go through normal stuff, sometimes? Intangibility, and all? Basic ghost power?"

"Yeah."

"So, humans can trigger that state in ectoplasm, if they try hard enough. It's trickier when it comes to an actual ghost, because they're in control of all their own ectoplasm, but with inanimate stuff, stuff that doesn't have its own will, then you can do it without much trouble. You just have to think about it the right way."

"How do you even know about this?"

"Well. Lets review what my life is like. One, there is a hole in reality in my basement. Two, I'm so clumsy that I've been permanently banned from handling anything fragile at school. Three, one of my chores at home is cleaning the basement."

They all stared at him. "You're saying that you, what, tripped and fell into the Ghost Zone."

"Yeah," said Danny, giving Sam a look. Why was she staring? She knew this story. Maybe she was just surprised that he had told the truth. "Look, just focus on trying to phase through."

"Okay, sure... How?"

"Um. Try to convince yourself that it isn't really there. Or that it is there, but it's permeable."

"Right." There was quiet while Valerie pushed against the branches again. "What if there is an ectosignature?"

"Then it kind of depends. You basically have to fight the ghost? Mentally, I mean. You need to have more force of personality, more willpower. Or, at least, more willpower than the ghost is willing to put into it. Which is really hard, since that's sort of what ghosts are. Or, um, the reason they exist. What holds them together?" Danny nodded. "So, typically, you aren't going to be able to phase through a ghost. Or an ectoblast, because those are energized."

There was more pushing. "I don't think that this is going to work, then."

"Why?"

"I think that these have an ectosignature."

"Well, yeah."
"What do you mean, 'Well, yeah?'"

"Well, it's a tree, right? A cohesive, complex form. Not a puddle. But it shouldn't be a very strong ectosignature. You should be able to overpower it, at least momentarily."

Valerie tried once more.

"Wait a second," said Sam, "what about the present? Didn't you say that kept floating through everything?"

"Yeah, but everything in that part of the Zone is default intangible. Clearly, that's not the case here."

Danny knocked his knuckles against the tree's trunk.

"Present?"

"It's a long story."

Valerie sighed. "Maybe one of you two could give me a demonstration, seeing as you know so much about it?"

Danny glanced at Sam, who promptly turned, and put her hand on a tree trunk, frowning. Slowly, her arm sunk into the tree. "A bit more resistance than usual," she observed once she was wrist-deep. She pulled her hand out.

"You've been in here, too, then, huh, Manson?" said Ricky.

Sam and Danny shared a look. "Duh," said Sam, finally, apparently deciding that admitting it would be easier than trying to dance around the point. "The Ghost Zone is totally Gothic."

"Okay. Fine. Whatever," said Valerie. "Congrats on still being one of the weirdest people in school. But... You're actually making the tree, intangible, right? Could you make it intangible for me, and then I can get out."

Danny frowned. "Maybe," he allowed. "But intangibility doesn't always work the way you think it should. A lot of ghost things are like that." He walked up to the tree, so that he was standing directly below Valerie, and then put his hand on it. "Want to help, Sam?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure."

Danny closed his eyes. He had to be careful, here. No ghost powers, just natural human ones. No glowing. No turning invisible. He had to sink into the tree, too, not just give the tree intangibility. He couldn't make this look too easy, either. Even though it would be. The twist of the mind this kind of intangibility required was just short of natural for him. It was like standing on one foot. Or winking.

"Okay," he said, reaching up to touch the bars. He could feel his fingers start to sink into the bark. Sam had been right. There was a lot of resistance. It felt feathery and icy cool, like sticking his hand into a snowbank. He wondered why. Perhaps there was a lot of physical matter mixed into the ectoplasm? "Okay, Valerie, try now."

Valerie responded by virtually ramming into the bars. "Jesus-!" Valerie said, swallowing any more dire curses. "Not working! Ouch." She rubbed her shoulder vigorously. Then, under her breath, growing louder with each word, "Stupid ghost tree, stupid float-y ball ghosts, stupid Phantom. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"What does Phantom have to do with it?" asked Mikey, who had come closer to watch Sam and
Danny turn the tree intangible. Danny raised an eyebrow. He'd have to remember that Mikey had good ears. Not good enough to hear Sam and Danny earlier, but still good for a human.

Valerie glared at the red-headed boy. "Seriously? What doesn't he have to do with this? It's his fault that we're here. I bet this is his lair, and he's just biding his time, playing with us, trying to separate us so that he can kill us off one by one."

All four of the children on the ground stared up at Valerie, unimpressed.

"What?" said Valerie, bitterly.

"You're still going on about that?" asked Sam. "I'm pretty sure that if the ghosts here wanted us dead, we'd be dead. I can think of a dozen ways a ghost could kill with intangibility alone. Besides, what would the point be? What does a ghost gain from killing someone?"

"They exist to spread misery," said Valerie with conviction.

Ancients give him strength. Danny wished he could confront her about Ellie.

"Really? Really? What evidence do you have?" asked Sam, "Danny, do your parents even have any evidence of that?"

"No," said Danny. He didn't really want to get involved in this argument. Well, he did. But he didn't. He hated having to stand there and listen to a whole species (was that the correct term?) being maligned, a group that he was at least partially part of, without being able to properly defend them.

"Oh, come on, they don't even have nervous systems."

"So, what? Are you trying to say that just because they don't feel pain they can't be people? You know that there are humans who can't feel pain? Are they not people?"

"They still have brains!"

"Guys," said Danny, after they continued to argue. "Guys," he repeated, more loudly. "Guys, can we do this later? Like, after we get home? This isn't going to help."

"So what do you suggest we do?" demanded Valerie, with poor grace.

"If I were you, I'd go with Sam's first suggestion. Disarm yourself."

"And leave myself defenseless?"

"You're already defenseless. I assume you tried to shoot your way out, and it didn't work."

"Yeah."

"And we all know these trees can change the way they're shaped. So what's to stop it from crushing you or something? Just put the blaster down, Valerie. It isn't going to help you if you're stuck in there."

Valerie sighed through her nose. "You really think this is going to work."

"Yeah, I do."

"I don't get how you can trust these ghosts so much."
"I'm just not as eager to jump to conclusions as you and my parents."

"Fine," said Valerie, grudgingly. She pulled her blaster out, and set it down.

"What about the other one?" asked Mikey.

"I left it with Danny's dad."

Ah, heck. Danny had forgotten about that. Hopefully the wisps hadn't decided to investigate the larger group of humans. Then again, it wasn't like Jack could hit anything smaller than a barn reliably.

"Nothing's happening," said Valerie, exasperated.

"Well, maybe it doesn't believe you," said Sam. "I mean, I wouldn't, after everything you've said here."

"Valerie," said Danny. This conversation just kept dragging on and on. "Let's talk about this. Let's go over why you hate ghosts so much. Because, really, it's kinda extreme."

"I've already said."

"No, you said why my parents hate ghosts. Why do you hate ghosts?"

Valerie picked up her blaster and gave Danny a dirty look. "You know why."

"Yeah, but, give me a refresher, or something."

"Phantom and his stupid dog ruined my life. Ghosts attack our town on a constant basis. Why wouldn't I hate them?"

"So... You're judging an entire group based on the actions of a few individuals. Doesn't that strike you as wrong?"

"A few individuals? Are you serious? Do you even know how many ghost attacks there are in a single day?"

"I do. Do you? More to the point, do you know how many ghosts live, or, well, you know, in Amity peacefully? Without attacking? Because that number is a lot higher."

"Are you serious?"

"Why would I lie?"

"You could still be possessed."

"Really, Valerie, really?"

Valerie sighed. "I guess not. But how do you even know about these 'peaceful' ghosts?"

She would ask that. Luckily, the conversation had been going on long enough for Danny to come up with an answer. "You know I used to have straight As in middle school?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" asked Ricky.

"Well, why do you think my grades dropped?"
There was quiet. "Your grades dropped because you were hanging out with ghosts?" asked Mikey, his eyes narrowed.

"Um. No. My grades dropped because some of them won't stop harassing me. But I wind up meeting a lot of other ghosts. Like, you think that the first time I got spirited away to the Ghost Zone I got back home on my own? No. I got a lot of help from other ghosts. Like, a lot, a lot. You ever get kidnapped by a ghost, Valerie? Did you get away on your own?"

"I guess not," she said. Danny could tell that she was thinking of the time they had been kidnapped by Skulker. "Still, what do you expect me to do here?"

"I don't know. Just... Try not to jump to conclusions with everyone. Give the ghosts a chance."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know that's not what you meant."

Valerie rolled her eyes dramatically. "Fine. I'll 'give the ghosts a chance.' Happy?"

Regardless of whether or not anyone was happy with the situation, Valerie's statement was apparently sufficient for the tree, which shuddered, tilted to one side and then dumped Valerie out.

"I hate ghosts," grumbled Valerie as she picked herself up off the ground.

"I'm sure the feeling's mutual," said Sam.

"You four don't have any food on you, do you?"

"No," said Ricky, "and thanks for reminding us about how hungry we are."
Chapter 15

Chapter 15: In the Bark

"Hey, Danny."

"What, Mikey?"

"You said that humans can manipulate ectoplasm."

Danny looked over his shoulder, to stare flatly at the red-headed boy. "Yeah?"

"So could you become invisible? Or fly?"

"Uh. In especially thick ectoplasm, I guess you could fly." Danny turned away to keep walking. They were trying to go in a straight line, so that they'd be able to eventually come out of the trees. "Not sure what the point would be, though. If you're in the Ghost Zone proper, then there's not much point. In most places you can, um, not sure how to describe this. Gravity is pretty subjective. If you decide that gravity is up, then you'll fall up. Takes practice, though."

"And invisibility?" asked the boy eagerly.

"Not really," said Danny. "You could make yourself transparent to ectoplasmic radiation, but that would be it. Most ghosts can perceive light, so it wouldn't mean much. Also, you wouldn't be able to tell if you had actually done it. I..." He trailed off. "I guess that if you were doing that, you'd be invisible to some ghosts who are invisible. But only some, because a lot of ghosts can finagle it so that they can see in, like, ultraviolet, or infrared, and leave themselves visible in that spectrum."

"That's too bad," said Mikey.

"What, were you hoping for superpowers?" teased Ricky lightly.

"Well, yeah," said Mikey, shrugging. "Weren't you?"

After a while, a familiar scent reached Danny's nose. "I smell apples again," said Danny.

"Really?" said Sam, brightly. "Do you see them."

"Ignore it," said Valerie, darkly, "it's probably a trap."

"A worse trap than starving to death?" asked Ricky.

"It could be. You don't know what these'll do. You heard Mrs Fenton." Danny sighed. He was hungry, and he knew that the apples wouldn't do anything to him. He was less sure about them being healthy for everyone else. At this point, he was certain this was his lair, but considering that his subconscious thought it appropriate to a) stab his mother, b) drop Ricky and Mikey down a hole, and c) trap Valerie in a tree, he was no longer sure he could trust it with food.

"You know what," said Sam, "I'm going to eat one. Then we can take a half-hour break, and when nothing happens, then the rest of you can go ahead and eat some. Sound good?"
"We do need to find the tree, first," said Danny, scanning the branches around them.

"Are you sure you smell apples?"

"Yep. Might be a little farther on. Come on." Danny walked on, past Sam, to the front of the line. "Yeah, definitely up here."

In another minute, they came across a tight grouping of apple trees. The branches were heavy, bowed down with fat, round apples. They were still a little too far up to easily reach. Sam had to stand on her tip toes to pick one.

"Sam, you really shouldn't."

Sam gave Valerie a defiant glare, and took a bit of the apple. She froze, and her eyes went wide.

"Sam?" asked Danny, worried that something bad had happened.

She quickly chewed and swallowed her mouthful of apple. "Wow! This apple is great!" she exclaimed, surprised. She took another bite. "Really good!" she said around the second bite.

"So good that you will never again be able to eat mortal food?" asked Mikey.

"No. And why do you sound so excited about that being a possibility?"

"No reason," said Mikey, blushing.

"So..." said Ricky. "We just wait now?"

"Yeah. Figure if it's poisonous, it'll kill me before too long."

Everyone found somewhere to sit while they waited. There were a few attempts at conversation, but everyone was too tired and stressed to be anything like polite and social. Mikey actually nodded off. Ricky, Valerie, and Sam got into some kind of three-way glaring contest. Sam and Ricky had never really liked each other. Even before Tucker had blamed Ricky for throwing up in Sam's lunchbox, they'd had a kind of animosity. Sam disliked Valerie due to a combination of the whole Red Huntress thing, and Valerie's former A-list ties. Valerie disliked Sam because Sam didn't bother to hide her animosity. Danny wasn't entirely sure why Valerie and Ricky were glaring at one another. He wished they wouldn't. It would be so much better if everyone could get along.

(He was so tired. Why was he so tired? He had slept. He had done more on less sleep.)

Danny sighed, and leaned slightly into Sam. He wished that he knew where everyone else was for certain, but this was fine, too. He was sure that they were all fine. Danny closed his eyes. Sam was so warm. It was nice. He could feel her. Tell that she was okay. It gave him a sense of security, of calmness. Danny breathed in deeply. This was nice.

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Sam looked down at Danny, who had fallen asleep with his head on her arm. He still looked awful, in some ways worse than he had before they had run into the wisps. Exhausted, bruised, and, most worryingly, sick. Ever since the accident, Danny hardly ever got sick.

This was all the adult Fentons' fault, Sam decided. If they hadn't built that thing, they'd still be in
Amity. Danny would be healthy, at home, in bed. They'd all be at home, in bed. They would have surely beaten Technus by now.

"So you haven't died yet," observed Valerie.

"No, really."

"I guess that those are safe to eat, then," Ricky said, standing.

"Yeah, could you please get me a couple more? I don't want to wake Danny up."

"Fine," said Ricky. "Enjoy having your boyfriend sleeping on you."

"We aren't dating."

"Keep telling yourself that."

Maddie gave Jazz a boost into a nearby tree. Jazz grabbed a branch, and pulled herself up. She climbed up to the crown of the tree, and looked out and around. She also took a moment to run her fingers over the words carved into the trunk.

"I think I see something," Jazz called (lied) down.

"What do you see, sweetie?"

"Some kind of movement," she said (lied). "Branches moving. Maybe a bit of color. I can't make out much more than that."

"Which way?"

"Downhill," said (lied) Jazz, "but it might not be anything."

"Alright, Miss Fenton, why don't you come down now?"

Jazz slithered down the tree, dropping the last few feet before the ground. They'd been looking for the others for hours. Jazz didn't understand it. She knew why Sam and Danny had left. Danny had been out of his mind, or nearly so. Sam had wanted to help him. What she didn't understand was why Dash, Kwan, Mikey, and Ricky had run off. No, that wasn't quite right. She knew why they had run off. They were scared. It was stupid, but there it was. What she didn't understand was how they had straight up vanished in the little time between the wisps showing up and the wisps leaving.

After calling for them didn't work, and it became apparent that they weren't lying unconscious somewhere nearby, Mr Lancer had made the decision to try to backtrack, regroup with the larger group, and possibly form search parties. However, it evolved that the yarn had, predictably, broken.

So they had come up with idea of getting a better vantage point by having either Jazz or Maddie climb trees (plural, because even in the trees, they could only see so far in the half-light provided by the ghostly moon). Mr Lancer, overweight and nonathletic as he was, had no hope whatsoever of getting up into the trees. Maddie's arm, though healed, was still sore and weak. Therefore, it had fallen to Jazz to do the climbing.

The first couple of times she had gone up had been ordinary. Well, ordinary if you could call
climbing trees in a pocket universe created by your younger brother's subconscious ordinary. Honestly, that was a bit weird, even for Jazz. (Being cursed, lost in China [specifically China, don't ask], kidnapped by ghosts, sucked into parallel universes, evil doppelgangers, and time travel were all on Jazz's list of ordinary, for reference.)

When she went up the third tree, however, there had been flowers in the branches. Little, lacy, white things, with long stamens and petals that curved back on themselves. The tree was, or at least, was modeled after, a pine. There should not have been flowers. Furthermore, they only grew from the top few branches, invisible from the ground. They seemed so earnest, though. Jazz couldn't help but compliment them.

The next tree had more. These ones were pale pink, with ruffled, layered, petals. They were a little like carnations, for all that they were growing from an oak. The fifth tree had yet another variety, these being dark teal, with five round petals. The sixth tree had been more ambitious, with large, rose-like toxic green blossoms.

(Jazz was rather forcibly reminded of when she had been ten and Danny had been eight. Their parents been busy with one of their inventions- Jazz couldn't recall which one exactly- and Danny had brought a drawing home from school, one he had been particularly proud of. Maddie and Jack had complemented it, in a kind of off-hand way, but it had been clear to Jazz, and, more importantly, Danny, that they hadn't looked at it. Jazz, feeling sorry for Danny, had given the picture, which had been quite good for an eight-year-old, a great deal more attention than she normally would have. Danny had responded by showering her with pictures for weeks until she snapped at him. She wasn't proud of that, but she had been ten. There were limits.)

The seventh tree was different again. Instead of flowers, there were words carved into the trunk:

'Hi, Jazz!'

For a while, Jazz had been convinced that Danny was nearby and just messing with her invisibly. That kind of harmless (relatively) teasing was just like her brother. However, a couple of trees later, it became clear that she wasn't talking to Danny. Or, at least, she wasn't talking (perhaps communicating was a better term?) to the part of Danny that she normally did.

This part of Danny (Jazz hesitated to call it [him?] Danny's subconscious) seemed to be focused (relatively) on two things- Making sure that Jazz was comfortable (a frequent question carved on the trees was 'Are you OK?'), and directing the group of three. Where he (it?) wanted to direct them was a mystery to Jazz, but even if this wasn't quite Danny, it was still Danny. Jazz was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt.

This was complicated by the fact that this aspect of Danny seemed to have no grasp of the concept of time. Or sarcasm. Also, that, although it did answer Jazz's question, it often wrote those answers in trees she didn't climb. Additionally, much of the relatively small amount of space that the... entity used to write would often be filled with apologies for things that Danny had done, or supposedly done, to Jazz. Jazz couldn't remember most of them. At least one narrative was preceded by the phrase 'one time I dreamed that-.'

Jazz wasn't ignoring these, exactly. They were important to Danny, otherwise he wouldn't be bothering to write them into the trees. But she had a limited amount of time in each tree, and even as an aspiring psychologist, she had to prioritize. She could talk to Danny about his guilt complex later. Right now, her task was getting their mother (and Mr Lancer) where they needed to be (wherever that was). Or where Danny thought they needed to be.

Arguably, the later was more important. Maddie had hurt Danny. Hurt him badly. Jazz wasn't sure if
she would ever be able to comprehend how badly, not without dying herself. A safe environment was a key component of any healing process, and if having Maddie in a particular place would make Danny feel more secure, then Jazz was going to get her there.

Regardless of whether or not that particular place was safe for Maddie. Not that Jazz though that Danny would or had ever harmed either of their parents intentionally, but the incident with the gun (the pieces of which Maddie was still carrying) showed that Danny could potentially do a great deal of damage unintentionally. Jazz surprised herself by not particularly caring. She couldn't imagine anything that Danny would do, intentionally or otherwise, being permanent, and this was, overwhelmingly, Maddie's fault.

Jazz took a deep, calming breath. Getting angry would not help. Correction: getting visibly, physically, angry wouldn't help. On the other hand, Jazz had seen cold, calculating rage be quite effective in these situations. The trick was not to become bitter. Like Vlad. Who was creepy and kind of gross. Jazz sighed. Maybe she should develop an entirely new type of anger.

There were more trees to climb, though. Jazz didn't need a boost for this one. The branches were low enough that she was able to pull herself up without any difficulty.

She was about halfway up, when she noticed words carved into the trunk. Normally, they did not start until Jazz was higher. What really made her stop, though, was what they said.

'I think I'm asleep.'

"What does that mean?" asked Jazz, under her breath. She decided to keep going, but there were more words waiting for her by the next branch.

'I'm not sure. This is weird. It's like I'm everywhere but- Not really? Or I always was? Like I'm dreaming. I don't think I'm going to remember this when I wake up.'

Jazz let out a puff of air. "Okay. So, you're answering my questions like this now. Okay. Where are you, and where are you taking us?"

'I'm with Sam, Valerie, Ricky, and Mikey,' answered the carvings a few feet up. 'I wish that it was just Sam, Ricky, and Mikey, but I couldn't keep Val trapped, and I can't have her just running around shooting at everyone. I don't think I knew that before I fell asleep. I'm trying to get you guys to where Kwan and Dash are, but it's hard because they keep moving like idiots. You are getting close.'

"Aren't you moving around, too?"

Jazz's eyes widened as another line of letters was etched into the bark.

'Yes,' it said, 'but in a line. Not all over the place. Why do people make it so hard for me to help them?'

'I don't know, little brother. Are we going to be seeing you soon?"

'I don't know. Is Mom still mad at me?'

"Jazz?" came a faint cry from below. "Why have you stopped? Are you having trouble?"

"No!" Jazz yelled back. "Just plotting my course!"

"Okay, sweetie, take your time! Be safe!"
"Okay, Mom!"

Jazz looked back at the writing.

'I didn't do anything to the apples, by the way.'

"She still thinks that you're possessed," said Jazz, resuming her climb. Her position was getting uncomfortable.

'Oh,' came the dispirited response. 'I don't think that I'll be able to manage this much longer. Being me, here. I mean, it's- I'm always me but also not? This still isn't quite properly, correctly, entirely me. It is- but it isn't. It's not the right order, I guess. And there are extra things? And missing things? I'm trying.'

"You know this isn't your fault, right, Danny?"

The next bit of writing was uneven. Messier than it had been. 'Isn't it? I had one thing I was supposed to do, one thing, just one thing, keep- ' the next few words were illegible, '- but I can't even do that, can I?'

"Danny, this isn't your fault, and we're all fine."

'Amity isn't.'

"Technus can't have done that much damage." Was that the right thing to say? Jazz was pretty sure it wasn't, but what else could she say? "Look, why don't you tell me about... This. This place."

'It's deeper than it looks. It's safe here.'

"That's good." She was at the top of the tree now. "You know the way out, then?"

'Yes.'

"You going to share?"

'I'm going to light up Dash and Kwan.'

"What?" said Jazz, alarmed. Surely he couldn't mean that he was going to shoot at them. But then what?

Below Jazz, and in the near distance, a number of trees seemed to catch fire. On closer inspection, though, the trees weren't on fire. They were just alight with glowing, orange and red flowers.

'Do you like the flowers?' The letters were a little lazy. Not quite as distinct as before. 'I think I need to sleep now. For real sleep. Goodnight, Jazz.'
Chapter 16: Fruit of Your Labor

Danny began to shiver and mumble in his sleep. Sam put her arm around his shoulders and rubbed his arm. He let out a soft, shuddering, sigh, and relaxed again. He began to purr, a little. Thankfully quietly enough that only Sam could hear him. She didn't want to have to explain how Danny could make that kind of sound.

"You aren't going to wake him up?"

"You're not waking Mikey up," observed Sam. She glanced at Valerie who was eating an apple with the air of someone with a gun pointed at their head. "You two should probably get some sleep, too. I'll keep watch."

"What about you?" asked Ricky.

"I'm used to late nights. It's mornings I have trouble with."

"If you're sure. I'd better not wake up being eaten by some kind of monster ghost, though."

Ricky did eventually find a spot to lie down in. Valerie, annoyingly, did not. Sam finished her current apple, and tossed the core into the bushes.

Danny shivered into her side again. "... like the flowers," he muttered. "Sleep now. Mm." He quieted again.

"Sam," said Valerie, suddenly.

"What?" said Sam.

"Is this-" She licked her lips, staring at Danny. "You hang out with the Fentons a lot. What are the side effects of being possessed? Is this... Normal?"

Sam thought about her answer for a second. "You mean the sleeping? Yeah, that can be normal. Side effects really vary a lot depending on the ghost, what the ghost did, what kind of possession it was, etcetera, etcetera." Sam waved her free hand. "Considering that this ghost apparently had Danny running all over the place, yeah, being exhausted is normal. Of course, he's not the only one sleeping." She nodded at Mikey and Ricky.

"Yeah, but he's been sleeping longer."

"I guess. There's just something weird about this whole thing."

"What do you mean?" asked Sam, uneasily.

"I don't know."

"Maybe if you sleep on it."

"I can't sleep here."
"Whatever," said Sam.

"Oh my gosh!" They both turned to look at Mikey, who was now sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Why do I feel like I slept on the ground?"

"Because you did?" said Sam.

"What?" Mikey groped on the ground near him for his glasses, until Valerie had pity on him, picked them up, and put them on his face. Mikey adjusted them slightly, so that they were straight, and then groaned. "I was hoping this was a dream."

"Yeah, that would have been nice, huh? The apples don't seem to be poisonous, by the way."

"Thank god. I'm starving." Mikey then began the task of picking apples. This was a bit more difficult for him, due to the fact that all of the easy to reach ones had already been eaten, and that he was a good deal shorter than Ricky and Valerie. Eventually, however, he was able to pick several, and began to eat them enthusiastically.

Shortly after this, Danny began to stir again. Instead of falling back to sleep, however, he opened his eyes, and blinked blearily up at Sam. He blinked again, and then rubbed his eyes. "Apples are okay, then?"

"Yeah, they're fine."

"Mhm. I'm sorry for laying on you."

"It's fine."

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Jack had been devastated when he had discovered that all of his weapons had been stolen. The weapons represented hours and hours of work. Months of research, at a minimum. Sweat, blood, and, in a few cases, tears.

That wasn't all that upset him, of course. He knew that without the weapons, he, and all the children now under his care, were vulnerable. Even with the blaster that one girl- What was her name? Valerie?- had given him, he knew that he wouldn't be a match for any but the weakest of ghosts. Not that he was going to say that, no. He had to keep morale up. Reassure the kids that he could protect them!

Tucker didn't seem to be buying it, though. Of course he wouldn't. Tucker knew him too well, knew too much about ghosts, to be fooled. Ah, well. You couldn't fool everybody.

But despite everything, Jack was excited. He was in the Ghost Zone! Finally! This is what he had dreamed of.

Then, too, he wasn't completely helpless. His weapons might have been stolen, but he'd had more things in his pockets than weapons, and, well, this wouldn't be the first time he had to MacGyver something up! A lot of what he had could be converted into simple blasters with a bit of ingenuity. It wouldn't be easy, but then, what was?

He'd had Tucker helping him at first, but, man! That kid was even clumsier than he was! So the geek was now just standing by, watching him nervously.
Okay, maybe he had gotten a little off track. He wasn't making blasters any more. But, hey, when else would he be able to test his theories? Well, his and Maddie's theories. And this could help them escape!

Wow, when Maddie got back, she'd be so pleased. Well, assuming that this didn't blow up in his face. Some of his inventions had a tendency of doing just that. Also assuming that it worked.

But if it did? Wow! It would be great!


The sudden, fiery light took Dash and Kwan by surprise. So they did what they had the last time they had been taken by surprise. They booked it.

Unfortunately for them, the lights, or more precisely, the flowers that shed the light, weren't something that they could outrun. In fact, the red-orange light kept suddenly showing up in front of them.

(It was a good thing that they had never been caught in a real forest fire, and that they weren't being chased by anything that wanted to hurt them. They would have surely died.)

Kwan and Dash were both very fit young men. But the last several hours had taken their toll. They simply couldn't keep up their furious, adrenaline-fueled pace. They had to stop. Only then did they realize that the flowers were just that- flowers. Glowing, ghostly flowers, but still. Flowers. "What's up with the freaky flowers?" asked Dash.

"I don't know, man," said Kwan.

"I hate this place," said Dash. "It's freaky. Like Manson. Or Freaktonio."

"Who?"

"You know. Freaky Fenton."

"Oh. Right."

"You don't think they're gonna, like, eat us, or anything?"

"How'm I s'posed to know?"


The lights Jazz saw could not be seen at ground level. Jazz was, therefore, able to tell her mother and Mr Lancer that she had seen glimpses of Dash and Kwan. Not in so many words, of course. She had said something more along the lines of seeing movement in the trees, and then glimpses of white, red, and blue, the colors of the Letterman jackets Dash and Kwan wore all the time. Mr Lancer and Maddie drew their own conclusions.

Jazz kept going up into the trees every few dozen feet. The words carved on them had devolved back into unfocused rambling and the occasional pearl of wisdom. Jazz made sure to respond quietly
to each one. Especially the more depressed ones. She could do a lot of good, if she could ameliorate those kinds of thoughts.

After a while, though, they started to get close enough to detect the warm glow of the flowers even at ground level. Jazz had told Mr Lancer and Maddie about the lights just before that point, trying to make it seem as if they had just shown up without warning... Which they had, just, almost an hour ago. It wasn't quite a lie, but it was still a deception.

At that point, Mr Lancer and Maddie had an argument. Maddie thought it best to turn back. She believed that they were walking into a ghost's trap. Mr Lancer, on the other hand, really wanted to find his students, any of his students.

Once the argument had gone on for about twice as long as Jazz thought it should, she decided to cut the knot, and just go. After announcing her decision loudly, of course.

Jazz wasn't quite as fast as Maddie, but she had a head start, and the trees, underbrush, roots, and even the ground itself seemed to help Jazz stay ahead. Heh. Seemed.

Jazz knew better.

Still, Maddie was right behind her when she practically tripped over Dash. Who was... lying on the ground for some reason?

Dash stared at the three of them, Jazz, Maddie, and Mr Lancer, for a solid thirty seconds before leaping to his feet. "Mr Lancer!" he exclaimed. "I didn't think that I'd ever be glad to see you!"

Jazz saw Mr Lancer's eyelid twitch, but he smiled and said, "I'm glad to see you as well, Mr Baxter. Are you alone, or-?"

"Huh? No, duh, I'm with Kwan." He looked around. "Kwan?"

A head poked out from around the trunk of a tree. "S-sorry, man, I just had to, um." Kwan stared wide eyed at Jazz and Maddie. "Um. You know."

"Danny's not with you?" asked Maddie, still a little hopeful.

"Why'd Fenton be with us?"

"We thought he was with you."

"Yeah. And what happened to those two nerds?"

"And Valerie and Manson?"

"We're not entirely sure," admitted Mr Lancer.

"We need to get out of here now," said Maddie. "This place isn't safe."

The flowers abruptly closed and stopped glowing.

"Yes," agreed Mr Lancer, "let's."
Tucker watched Jack assemble... He didn't know what Jack was trying to make, actually, but it gave him a very bad feeling. It reminded him of the Fenton Ghost Catcher. It was round, and flat, and tied together with glowing green string. It also, and more ominously, reminded him of some of the occult stuff he, Danny, and Sam had looked into both after the Accident, and after the blood-blossom incident.

The ones that they tried either didn't work on Danny, or didn't work very well on Danny. But that was just it. The ones they tried. They didn't try any of the more dangerous rituals or anything that was supposed to hurt, banish, or do anything permanent to the ghost or spirit they were aimed at. That would be like testing whether or not someone was immune to bullets by shooting them in the face. If they weren't immune, they'd be dead.

This thing that Jack was making, this reminded Tucker of those things, those rituals. Tucker had been trying to sabotage the thing, but Jack wasn't completely hopeless when it came to observational skills. Just mostly hopeless. Tucker was honestly hoping that the ground would eat the thing, like Jazz said it had with the Fentons' other ghost weapons.

Unfortunately, the ground seemed to be shy. Which was just like Danny, come to think of it.

He wished that he was doing something useful, instead of just sitting here.

The group as a whole had moved away from the treeline. They thought that the woods were too creepy. Tucker didn't really get it. Surely they saw creepier things back home on a regular basis? The way the too-bright moon hung, unmoving, overhead was eerie, sure, but compared to stuff that showed up in Amity, it was pretty tame. It hadn't turned into a gaping maw full of teeth or anything.

(That had never quite happened in Amity Park, but there had been a ghost that made everyone think that there were two suns, once. Good times.)

Tucker was gazing forlornly at the treeline when he began to see lights flicker between the branches. He glanced back at his classmates. Most of them were asleep, or watching Jack. Tucker edged closer to the trees, and, when no one stopped him, simply walked over to them.

"Hello?" he called, softly. Then he squeaked, loudly, as a ghost, a pink-tinted will'o-the-wisp, materialized in front of him. It began to play music at him. It sounded something like Wagner, but Tucker wasn't a classical music expert. He raised his hands and made a 'slow down' motion. The wisp stopped, but hovered expectantly.

Tucker fumbled in his pocket for his PDA, sparing a glance back at the group. They hadn't noticed anything, it seemed. Good. He pulled out his PDA and turned it on.

Between the Ghost Gabber and Danny's help, Tucker had managed to make a translation program for the wisps' language. It was far from perfect, but it was usually better than charades.

Tucker typed in the words 'Can you say that again?' and the PDA played a series of notes.

The ghost sang something back, flashing, cycling to orange, then red, and finally a deep violet, and Tucker hit the translation button. "Circle," said the cool, feminine voice of the program, "bad danger for lord. You are friend."

Tucker made a face. The program didn't account for changes in brightness or color. Yet. He was working on that. 'Repeat that, but more simply.'

The wisp buzzed in frustration, but complied. "That which is large orange flesh drawing. Is danger for lord question. You are friend question."
'I am Danny's friend, if that's what you mean. I don't know if it's dangerous,' typed Tucker. He hoped that translated properly.

"Lord which is spirit of place which shelters. Lord which wears also flesh. Speaking box flesh know of circle purpose question. Speaking box flesh should destroy if friend is emphasis."

It took Tucker a while to process that. He didn't know if he should be offended that he was being called 'speaking box flesh.' Or if he should feel threatened by that last sentence. He decided not to be. The program definitely needed work, but he was beginning to suspect that the wisps here and the wisps in Amity Park spoke different dialects.

"Do you know what it's supposed to do?" asked Tucker out loud.

The wisp floated there for a moment, before letting out a trill that the program translated as "Question" and Tucker realized that he needed to type in his own question.

"Know not," translated the program finally. "Yet we see like in past. Of chalk and salt and blood. Cruel things. The red thief. The stealing of shadows. Violations."

Well, that didn't bode well. 'I will try to distract him,' typed Tucker. 'You go find Danny, and as many of your friend as possible. If I can't distract him until you or Danny gets back, then I will break it. Okay?'

The wisp trilled. "Acceptable," said the program.
Chapter 17

Chapter 17: Conditions

With Dash and Kwan added to their party (Jazz would kill Tucker for adding that phrase to her vocabulary. Why did he have to show her that video game? Why did it have to be so good?) Jazz was no longer the only one who could climb the trees. This meant that Danny (Danny?) stopped talking to her. It also meant that she couldn't fib about what she saw anymore.

Maddie and Mr Lancer decided that Jazz had probably been seeing Dash and Kwan the whole time, and that Danny, Valerie, Sam, Mikey, and Ricky had probably been lost in another direction entirely. So, they concluded, the logical thing to do was return to the larger group. This was somewhat easier than just looking for people, because they knew that as long as they went uphill, they would eventually break free of the trees. Uphill might be difficult to find on the ground, with all the bumps caused by tree roots, and the way trees obscured one's line of sight, but once up in the crowns of the trees, above the leaves, the hill was easy to see.

So up they went.

Mr Lancer was hoping that the others would do, or had already done, the same. He kept mentioning how bright they all were, and how, surely, they would see the simple solution. Maddie, meanwhile, kept trying to disabuse him of the notion that they had already left the forest, and were waiting with the larger group. She clearly believed that they were being held hostage by ghosts.

Finally, Jazz snapped. "What would the point of that even be?" she demanded irately.

"Excuse me?"

"What would the point of that even be?" repeated Jazz. "I mean, we're clearly in some ghost's lair to begin with. They could do whatever they wanted to us. You saw what happened to you with that apple tree. What would be the point of taking hostages? And Danny- The ghost that possessed Danny," Jazz corrected herself, "healed you. If he just wanted to trap us, why not do it then?"

"Oh, Jazz," said Maddie. "You can't think of Phantom as a logical creature. It isn't human. It isn't alive. It doesn't think. It just wants to feed on our emotions. It's trying to drive us to emotional highs, especially fear, so that it can feed. It can't do that if we're dead, and judging by it's past actions, it thinks that it can get more of those highs by lulling us into a false sense of security, trapping or attacking us, and then 'fixing' the problem. That's the only reason it 'healed' me," she finished, flexing her wrist uncomfortably.

"You just said that he doesn't think."

"It's a metaphor, Jasmine. I suppose that it's like saying that a bacteria thinks, or a virus thinks. Or perhaps a computer. They don't, but sometimes we talk about them as if they do."

Jasmine stared at her mother. "Sometimes I can't believe you," she said finally. "Don't you have any empathy?"

Maddie took a step back, as if she had been slapped.

"If ghost really were just what you say," continued Jazz, "obsession, hunger, self-preservation, stolen
faces, and an echo of what once was, we'd all be dead now. Especially if this is Phantom. You hurt
him, and we are so far from his only 'food source' that it isn't even funny. He could just kill us, and
go back to Amity."

"It kidnapped your brother! Why are you defending it?"

Jazz let her breath hiss out from between her teeth. That was a question that she couldn't easily
answer. Or, more precisely, she knew the answer, but couldn't say it. Phantom was her brother.
Danny was Phantom.

Jazz huffed and turned on her heel. "Whatever. Let's hurry up."

Danny's group was on the move again. They had decided in a three to two vote to try and make their
way uphill to rejoin the larger group. Danny had been less than pleased with this decision. Sam had
picked up on his unease, and had joined him in dissenting. (He didn't deserve to have a friend as
good as she was.)

He wasn't sure why he felt this way. Normally, he liked being near, if not necessarily in, the group
when there was danger near. It meant that he could help them faster if they were attacked, or if a
problem came up. Now, though, he really just wanted to be alone with Tucker, Sam, and Jazz.

His mind drifted to a sleepover they'd had a couple of weeks ago. It had been an almost perfect day.
Only two ghost attacks, lots of video games, sunny, but not hot, with a cool, clear night. He had
fallen asleep sandwiched between his two friends while they watched a movie. He sighed. Why
couldn't every day be like that? With everyone safe and happy...

Danny wondered if it was because they were all in his lair. If he was picking up their presence
without them actually having to be nearby.

(It flitted through his mind that this wouldn't be so bad.)

Before he could examine that quiet thought in more detail, Danny's breath came out in a shuddering
plume of mist. He dropped the apple he had been eating, and stared at it, somewhat alarmed by the
amount. The wisps weren't going to ambush him again, were they? He thought that he had explained
to them why that was a bad idea.

"What was that?"

Danny turned to face Mikey, who was staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Um-" said Danny, racking his brain for an explanation, any explanation. Before he could find one,
however, the wisps, and it was a swarm of wisps, curse it all, arrived, all of them singing at once. It
was like listening to an orchestra warming up, all the instruments playing different pieces, running
through scales, squeaking when they weren't properly tuned, the musicians whispering to their
neighbors, stands and chairs colliding as everyone tried to get comfortable. In other words, a
cacophony. Danny couldn't catch one word in three.

Valerie had her blaster out and was taking aim. Danny saw her squeezing the trigger, and he was
there, faster, much faster, than any human should have been, seizing her wrist, pushing her arm up,
making her shot miss. She gaped down at him, her eyes wide. "Danny, what?"
"We talked about this Valerie!" said Danny. They had, and Valerie had promised to give ghosts a chance, to not shoot first, ask questions later. "How would you like to be walking in your back yard, and then someone's shooting at you? They haven't done anything to you, leave them alone!"

Valerie's surprise morphed to anger, "I don't have a back yard anymore, thanks to gh-" she froze, mid-word. Her eyes flitted up to where he firmly (too firmly?) held her wrist, before dropping again and boring into his. "You," she said quietly.

"What?" said Danny, his voice wavering. What did she see in his eyes?

"You!" she shrieked, trying to wrench her wrist away, blindly firing the gun. "You're Phantom! You've been possessing Danny this whole time!" shouted Valerie, kicking him. The wisps buzzed angrily, and swirled, but did not intervene. They probably couldn't. They had a hard time being tangible.

"Have not!" exclaimed Danny, incensed, before mentally kicking himself. He should have denied being Phantom. Way to go, giving Valerie another reason to hate him.

"It's your fault we're here!" continued Valerie as if Danny hadn't spoken. "You tried to blame it on Mr and Mrs Fenton but it's you! Your fault!"

"I-" Danny stuttered. "You- That-." He sucked in a deep breath. "Fine! Maybe it is! But I didn't want this! I don't want this! I didn't want to- to die again." He was crying. He was crying in front of Valerie, Mikey, and Ricky, not to mention Sam (it was okay to cry in front of Sam. Sam had seen him crying so often before). "Y-You have no-"

Without warning, Valerie swept his legs out from beneath him. He fell backwards, reflexively letting go of Valerie's wrist, he didn't want to pull her over, too, and hit the ground hard. Valerie stood over him, aiming the blaster at his forehead. "Get ou- Ouch!"

Sam had tackled the taller girl, and they both went down in a tangle of limbs. "Leave him alone!" shouted Sam, trying to pull away the gun.

"You- you're with Phantom?! You-!" she cut off when Sam punched her in the face, and responded with a growl.

Valerie might have a black belt in karate, but Sam had trained with Maddie Fenton and a number of ghost martial arts masters, had lots of practice, and was willing to fight dirty. She was a match for Valerie, as long as the other girl didn't use her suit.

Danny scrambled up, staring at the two of them in horror. He- he didn't want this. They were his friends! Even if Valerie didn't act like it all the time.

"Stop," he whispered. "Stop," he said again, more loudly. "Stop!"

The ground rumbled like thunder. Vines shot out of the ground and grabbed hold of the girls by their clothing, dragging them apart. One wrapped around Valerie's wrist, yanked it out of her hand, and then disappeared underground (should have done that earlier). The vines then released first Sam, and then a shocked Valerie.

Danny sat down heavily, feeling dizzy, drained. Sam ran over to him. She put her hand on his shoulder, carefully, as though he might start under her touch. He didn't. He leaned into it, moaning. (More than moaning. There was a ghostly keen of distress under his words. He didn't care anymore, he was tired.)
"Danny," she said, "what happened?"

"I don't know," he said. "Something's wrong." He looked at Valerie, who had her fists up, ready to fight, then back at Mikey and Ricky, who had their hands up in a position of surrender, and finally up at the wisps, who were now hovering near him, making soothing sounds. He hummed up at them, and several, including Leader, floated down to gently nuzzle him. "Something's wrong," he repeated. He looked back at Valerie. "I know you don't like me."

"That's an understatement, ghost," snarled Valerie.

Danny flinched. "I know you don't like me, but I didn't want this- this situation, either. I don't want to be like this." He ran his hand through his hair. "I don't want-" his breath hitched. "Valerie," he tried, using a different tack, "you know that I keep my promises. You know that. You know that." He watched her carefully as he said that and saw her stance relax, slightly, saw her bite her lower lip.

"What are you suggesting?" asked Valerie.

"A truce. Until we get back to Amity. I don't want to hurt anyone, you don't hurt me, we work together to get everyone home. Just like that time with Skulker."

"Yeah?" sneered Valerie. "And what about what you did to Mrs Fenton?"

Danny bit his own lip, absently noting the trickle of blood that ran down his chin. "Knee jerk reaction. I thought she was going to- to use that thing again."

"What so you were scared? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," hissed Danny. "Wasn't that the whole point?" He glared at her, letting his eyes burn. "You humans have no idea what it's like to die."

Valerie glared back, but she was first to blink. "One- No, two conditions," she said finally.

"What?" asked Danny.

"I want to be armed."

Danny looked at her with disgust. "You are armed."

"You took my gun."

This was a challenge, Danny realized. A power play. She was checking to see whether or not Danny, that is, Phantom, would out her as Red Huntress. Danny rubbed his eye. He hated this. He hummed at Leader, asking him if he could bring the gun up from underground. He knew, somehow, that it wasn't very far, but at the same time, he knew that he wouldn't be able to get the vines to bring it back up. Leader conferred with a few other wisps, responded with an affirmative, and dived down.

"Where are they going?" demanded Valerie.

"To get your gun," said Danny. "What's your other condition?"

"You get out of Danny right now."
Chapter 18

Chapter 18: Deceptions

"You get out of Danny right now."

Yeah. Danny should have seen that coming. "I can't."

Valerie scowled. "You expect me to believe that?"

Danny laughed brokenly. "It doesn't matter what you believe. I can't. You think I haven't tried? You think I want to be stuck like this?" Careful. Don't lie outright. "Does this look like a normal overshadowing?" He gestured at his ears, his eyes, his teeth. "You didn't even notice before, and you know you looked at his eyes. The best I can do is pull myself back. Let Danny drive." Danny noticed Valerie's unyielding expression, and sighed. She wasn't making this easy. "Look, we've dealt with this before."

"What?! When?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"It's true," input Sam.

"Shut up," said Valerie. "You've been covering for him. I thought you were Danny's friend."

Sam glared at Valerie. "I am Danny's friend. I have been covering for Phantom, but so has Danny. We have dealt with this kind of issue before. It isn't easy, but we do have the equipment to fix this back home."

"And what exactly is 'this kind of issue'?"

"Getting stuck."

"So... Is this something that happens to you, or something that happens to Danny?"

Danny bit his lip again. He wasn't sure what to say. What Valerie was asking was kind of like saying, 'is a maple a plant or a tree?' However, Sam was the one that answered. "It happens to Danny. When ghosts try to overshadow him, they either get kicked out right away, or weird stuff happens. Not always getting stuck, but that's happened a couple times." Wow. That was actually really creative. It was also true. Overshadowing did not work well on Danny, even when he was in human form. Poindexter, Danielle, and about half a dozen other ghosts could attest to that. The kinda-sorta body swap with Poindexter wasn't even the weirdest result.

(No, that honor belonged to an incident wherein Danny and another ghost managed to swap memories. Danny still had his human brain, so it didn't affect him that much, but the other ghost had been utterly convinced that he was Danny. Thank goodness it was temporary.)

Valerie's frown only deepened. "You knew this could happen, but you still possessed Danny?"

"It wasn't like it was a conscious decision," defended Danny. Great. Now he was feeling guilty for something he didn't even do.

"What's that supposed to mean?"
Danny finally looked away from Valerie. "You have no idea what it's like."

"You said that before, what does it have to do with anything?"

"Have you- Have ever been scared? Like, really scared. Not like a phobia, but of something that you know is reasonable. Something that you have every reason to be frightened of. Something- Something that you thought you didn't have to worry about ever again but- Surprise!- you were wrong. You were so, so wrong, and you ran headfirst into it and it hurt you and you're hurt, and you can't think, and you can't even-" Danny took a deep breath. He was rambling. "I was scared. I wanted to hide, and I wasn't thinking."

"You're saying that it's just a coincidence that you pick the son of ghost hunters."

"I- That- I know Danny. I- I guess I thought he wouldn't mind? I don't- I don't know."

"Phantom's one of the ones who's helped Danny get back home," added Sam helpfully.

"Whatever. You said that you can pull back." "Yeah."

"So who have we been talking to?"

"Danny, mostly."

"And when you ran off with Danny?"

"Um. I panicked. I knew I screwed up. And, um, I was kind of having a bad reaction to, um, being here. I've never been here before." Heck, too much information, too much information!

"But- This is your lair, how-?"

"I stay in Amity Park. And do you know how big the Ghost Zone is? People call it the Infinite Realms for a reason."

"What do you mean, this is his lair?"

Danny hadn't forgotten that Ricky and Mikey were there, but he was surprised that Mikey had asked anything, considering how much tension there was. "Um. A lair is a pocket dimension in the Ghost Zone that a ghost is subconsciously linked to."

"So you control everything here?"

"Uh, kind of?"

"So you can get us out?" asked Mikey, excitedly.

Danny shook his head. "It doesn't work like that."

"Why?" asked Ricky, clearly disappointed.

"Yeah, Phantom, why?"

"How much conscious control do you have over your dreams, even when you know you're dreaming? This is all subconscious." It certainly wasn't what he had expected his lair to look like, either. When he had thought about it, not a frequent occurrence, he had imagined something colder.
"And I'm not exactly at my best right now."

Valerie made another face. Danny could feel her indecision. Literally. "What about these... things?" she nodded at the wisps. The wisps flickered and whistled, offended.

"They're will'o-the-wisps," said Danny. "They're harmless."

"I need more than that."

"They're, uh, the technical term is vassals. They're like remora. You know, those little fish? But for ghosts. They, um," he faltered at the blank look on Valerie's face. "They have symbiotic relationships with other ghosts. Vassalage. Like, they help other ghosts out, and in return, they live in their lairs and haunts and get protection and stuff. They aren't dangerous on their own. They usually aren't even tangible."

At that point, leader and the wisps that had gone with him, popped up from beneath the ground, all crowded together in a tight knot. They dispersed a moment later, leaving Valerie's blaster on the ground. Then gathered again at Danny's side, mumbling possessively.

"And they're here because?"

"Like I said, they live here, they're-"

"No, I mean, why did they just show up like this?" asked Valerie, picking up her blaster.

"Oh, um. I don't know. Got kinda distracted by all this. You going to shoot me or..?"

Valerie sighed through her nose. She looked at Sam. "You think that he's telling the truth about letting Danny be in charge?"

"I know he's telling the truth. It's hard to fake Danny's level of awkwardness."

Valerie looked back at Danny. "I'll do your truce. But if I say that I want to talk to Danny, you'd better let me talk to Danny."

"No problem," said Danny. Literally no problem. She was talking to him now. "Just... Hold off on telling the Fentons about this, if you see them."

"What? Are you more scared of them than me?"

"Yeah, actually. You've never killed me, so yeah. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to ask these guys what happened and why they decided to swarm again after last time."

When Danny turned his attention to the wisps, they gathered even closer to him. They didn't entirely understand what was going on. There was nearly infinite variety among ghosts. Danny was weird, but not unbearably so. They brushed up against his exposed skin like icy butterflies. Danny sighed, and sang to them, asking what had brought them there, what was wrong.

They answered.

Danny felt all the blood drain out of his face. "Oh, heck," he whispered. "Oh, no, no, no, no." He struggled to his feet, Sam helping him up.

"What did they say?" asked Sam.

"They, argh, it's hard to explain, we've got to go now, I'll explain on the way."
"Hold it!" said Valerie. "I want to talk to Danny first."

"Fine," said Danny. Whistled at the wisps, and the group split, half of them going on ahead. He shut his eyes, and pulled back the green light that he knew was flooding them. When the insides of his eyelids were no longer tinted green, he made a show of looking around and blinking, before blanching, and exclaiming, "Oh, jeez, we have to go right now!" He pulled Sam along with him, hoping that Valerie and the other two would come along. They should be able to keep up. He wasn't going very fast. Whatever had happened with those vines a few minutes ago, it had taken a lot out of him.

"Wait!" said Ricky. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"That's-" Danny was breathing heavily, which was rather worrying. He trilled a request for extra energy at the wisps. He needed it. "You ever watch Forbidden Planet?"

"Duh, it's a classic," said Mikey.

"Monsters from the id?"

"Yeah, like- like I said, it's a classic."

"Well," huffed Danny, "some things can do that- well, something like that to ghosts. And Dad- and Dad is making something that- that looks like one of those things, to these guys. Calling it a shadow thief, or something, it doesn't- doesn't translate well. Unless- Unless you want to be dealing with Phantom's monsters, we've got to get him to stop."

Maddie was the first out of trees. The others followed quickly thereafter. Maddie, Dash, Kwan, and Mr Lancer all expressed relief at being out from under the trees.

Jazz didn't share in their relief. Something felt off. Wrong.

It took a few minutes to spot the others, but when they did see them, or, more specifically, Jack's great caution-orange bulk, they, or, more specifically, Maddie, Dash, and Kwan, ran up, exclaiming happily. Mr Lancer wasn't the kind of person to run unless he was being chased, and Jazz just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Badly wrong. She hung back.

"Maddie!" exclaimed Jack, loud enough to be heard even over the distance between him and Jazz. "You won't believe what I've done! You have to see this! Where's Danny?"

Maddie responded more quietly. Jazz cursed herself. She could have heard if she had been closer. It might have been important. But before her inner Danny could castigate her any more, she saw Tucker break off from the group, and come jogging towards her.

"Jazz, where's Danny?"

"We got separated. What's going on?"

"Argh. This is not good. You have to help me sabotage this thing, I've been trying, but Mr Fenton won't let me near it anymore."

"What is it?"
"I don't know, but there was a wisp here, and it didn't like it and it looks like the Ghost Catcher on steroids so I don't like it, please help me break it. It can't possibly be a good thing." He tugged her sleeve.

Jazz followed him. "Did the wisp say what it was supposed to do?"

"Yeah, but, well, my program isn't perfect. I have no idea what it was trying to tell me, beyond, you know, danger."

"Did Dad say what it was for?"

"I asked him, couldn't follow the explanation. Had something to do with an ancestor of yours?"

"This is amazing, Jack!" said Maddie. "I can't believe you did this in just a few hours." She threw her arms around him, and kissed him. "We'll be able to pull Phantom out of Danny!"

"Yeah! That ghost will wish he never touched our boy!" Jack put his hands on his hips and nodded, smiling broadly. But then he faltered. "You'll check it for me, right? I'm not always good with calculations. If I got anything wrong..."

"Of course I'll check, dear." It was Maddie's turn to grimace. "This is our fault, though, isn't it? This is just what Danny was talking about earlier."

"I know, Mads, but we can fix this," said Jack, softly. "We just have to get Danny back, first."

"You're right. I just... I wish we'd used another weapon. What were we thinking, the Mortifier was completely untested... And now it's broken."

Jack blinked. "Broken?"

Maddie showed him the pieces. Jack frowned, but looked interested. "I think that we can actually incorporate some of these, to make the effect stronger."

Maddie blinked. "Of course! Here, and here!"

"Mom? Dad? What are you doing?"

"Jazz! Your father has built something that should pull Phantom right out of Danny!"

"Really?" asked Jazz, falsely bright, her eye twitching. "What if- What if Phantom has already left Danny?"

"Then this should still pull him right here!" said Jack, proudly.

"Once he's trapped, we can force him to take us home," added Maddie.

The twitch in Jazz's eye became more profound. "Are you sure that's really the best thing to do? I mean, giving him another reason to hate us."

"Don't worry, Jazzy-pants! We've got- Tucker! Get away from that!"

Tucker flinched, and put up his hands. "Sorry," he said, backing away.
Maddie and Jack began to work on the object. Jazz withdrew to where Tucker was standing. "Were you able to break it?"

"Wasn't even able to touch it."

Jazz and Tucker tried several more times to either sabotage the device, or to distract the older Fentons from working on it. They even managed to recruit Mr Lancer in one attempt. It didn't work. Jazz was considering just straight up smashing the thing, and she knew Tucker was too, and damn the consequences, when Maddie suddenly straightened, smiling.

"That should be it, dear. Based on your ancestors' writings, well, this should work." She worried her lower lip. "I would have liked to test it in lab conditions first, but I suppose it would only work in a ghost's lair or haunt anyway." She smiled uneasily. "If I can have all of you back away a bit?" she called to the students, waving them off. Jazz and Tucker tensed, ready to run at the device as soon as they had an opening.

Before anyone moved very much, however, a series of crashes and snaps emanated from the treeline. A moment later Danny emerged, followed shortly thereafter by Sam.

"Stop!" he shouted, breathless. "You don't know what you're doing!"

"Hit the button!" yelled Maddie.

"No!" screamed Jazz and Tucker in stereo, lunging towards the device.

There was a flash of light.
Chapter 19

Chapter 19: The Shadow

It was a weird sensation.

A burning hand in his chest, wrapping around his core, pulling.

There was the sensation of falling.

(Why was it so hard to breathe?)

There was an epiphany. A revelation. He knew now, why he'd been so tired. His core was trying to adjust. Trying to spread itself too thin. Trying to make things easier for the others. Trying trying trying. It had been damaged. He, Danny, had been damaged. That first attack, dying again, the portal. He wasn't ready.

It was a weird sensation.

Like he wasn't quite in his body. Like he was watching from the outside. Like he was aware of everything and nothing at the same time.

It had happened three (four) times before.

Once, with Poindexter. Those first moments, looking through the mirror, trapped, he had been so scared. His fear had only grown the longer he had stayed there, tethered to a place that wasn't him, wasn't his. He was always scared.

Then the next time, it hadn't been anyone's fault. An accident. An error. Unintentional. He had run headfirst into the Ghost Catcher, splitting himself, except not. He had still been both of himself. Not separate. Together. But apart. The same, but different. It still hurt his head to think about.

The third time, he had done it on purpose. He had promised Sam and Tucker a fun weekend, but he couldn't just ignore the ghosts attacking Amity. His nature pulled him in two different directions, and the Ghost Catcher was the only solution. It'd had a bizarre effect on his personality. Both halves were trying too hard at their assigned tasks, and there was a buzzing, underlying, elastic tie linking the two of them and it hurt.

(The fourth time was buried under a hundred layers of denial, guilt, and self-hatred. A moment in time, a hand clawed hand brushing incidentally against his core as it deposited an artifact of time itself, leaving behind a decade of memories.

[Claws through his chest- he couldn't breathe- this wasn't the way it was supposed to be. What was Vlad doing, he had promised to fix things, but it hurt more and more and more. All he was was pain, anger, FEAR and he was staring down at his human self and it still hurt. He couldn't do this, what was Vlad doing? This wasn't what they had agreed on. It wasn't supposed to be this way. It hurt and he had to protect but it hurt and they were already gone and he was out of control and he couldn't.]

And Danny buried the flash again. No. It didn't excuse anything.)

It was a little like making a duplicate, too, if he thought about it, but it was forced. Violent. A
violation. Entirely against his will.

It hurt. But it was a different hurt than dying. This was more like a strain, an ache in his bones.

He could feel the way out. The redirect. No. He wasn't doing that. He wasn't walking into a trap. He wasn't going to imprison himself. He pushed and fought and struggled and searched. There were ways and there were ways. He had a right to protect himself.

His mind skittered, trying too pull back the thought. It was too much like- But it was too late. There was too much going on.

Sam caught him before he hit the ground. Good Sam. Thank you Sam. Jazz and Tucker were going after something on the ground. Good. They were too good. They were always helping him and he was so useless. Jack was holding both of them back, one in each hand. A wave of fierce possessiveness came over him. All ghosts had it, at least a little bit. Danny kept his tamped down, rarely manifested, and then only as over-protectiveness, afraid that he'd hurt someone, afraid that he'd do something unforgivable, take a step too far from humanity. But Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were his. His, and no one else had the right- No one else could touch-

But his parents were his, too, and he was supposed protect them. Why were they doing this? What did he do wrong?

He gasped, eyes rolling back as the hand around his core constricted. Sam was lowering him to the ground. It was too hot! He wanted it to be cold. Cold was good. Cold was safe. He wanted it to be safe, everyone safe and cold and not changing in confusing ways, his parents were supposed to be his parents, not the enemy. They were supposed to help him, why?

Why was he so weak? Why wasn't he doing something? Why did he always wait for disasters to happen? Why was he so passive? He should be more active, proactive, should have done something, something more.

His core was abruptly released, and it curled in on itself, trembling. Danny could breathe again. He could feel everything. Every blade of glass. The weave of his clothes. Sam's hands cradling him. He could feel his lair, really feel it, and he could feel the shadow trapped by the makeshift device lying on the ground just a few meters away.

The shadow was an extension of the lair, just as the lair was an extension of Danny. But it was an unnatural, pinched-off extension, a reflection of his thoughts of the moment. Still, his lair drank them in.

Then Danny's core shivered again, and even the illusion of control was lost.

The wisps were screaming overhead. Furious, but unsure of what to do, of what they could do. Danny should have spent longer talking to them, explaining who was who and what was what, but even Danny wasn't sure of that anymore.

Then his mother was at his side, and he didn't know if he should cling to her or flinch away. Not that he had a choice. His body wasn't listening to him. She pulled him away from Sam, and he moaned in protest.

"It's okay, Danny, it's okay. I'm here now, Danny, Mommy's here." He wanted to believe her. He really did. "Phantom's gone, now. He's gone, Danny," she said, rocking him. This was blatantly untrue. Danny's core was weak, hiding, he probably wouldn't be able to use even the least of his powers, but it was still there. He felt her shift. "Valerie, Sam... Ricky, Mikey, are you alright? What
did Phantom do?"

There was a tangle of sound as everyone tried to talk over one another. Sam was trying to soften everything, turn away the knife. She wasn't doing a very good job, this time. They hadn't time to think, to prepare.

Then Valerie raised her voice. "They were working with Phantom!"

"What?" asked Maddie, voice soft, dangerous.

"Danny and Sam- But we only have Sam and Phantom's word of that."

"You- Sam, how could you? You know what ghosts are like."

"Mrs Fenton-"

"No," said Maddie. Danny could feel himself being lifted. "I can't believe this. I know that you were always interested in darkness but this is too much. And you- And Tucker and Jazz, too," Maddie said, with an air of revelation.

"Mrs Fenton, I can explain-"

"No. No," said Maddie, her voice going hard, angry. "Don't you dare try to twist this, Sam. This is- You helped Phantom make my child a slave when you were supposed to be his friend."

"I didn't- You don't-"

"Don't lie to me, Samantha!" shouted Maddie. "Helping that thing- It's the reason we're here!" Then Maddie's tone took on a threatening edge. "When we get back-"

That was all it took to tip the scales. His parents went from friends to enemies in that moment.

(But he still loved them, still needed them to be safe.)

He forced his eyes open and flailed. It was really the only motion available to him at the moment. But he found his mother's shoulder, and pushed off of it. Maddie was taken by surprise, and he tumbled out of her arms. He managed to find his feet- a miracle!- and stumbled in the general direction of Sam. She caught his shoulder, steadying him.

Maddie reached out to him.

"Don't touch me!"

"Danny?"

"I said don't touch me! Leave me alone!" Danny was breathing heavily, hyperaware of the air in his lungs, of the ectoplasm it was laced with. His eyes flicked to the device on the ground, on the shadow huddled inside it.

"Mr Fenton- Daniel..."

Danny looked up at Mr Lancer, but, catching movement out of the corner of his eye, snapped back to face his mother. "Why-" he said. He wasn't entirely rational at the moment and he knew it. He shouldn't be talking, but he couldn't help it. "Why is it that everything you do winds up with me getting hurt?"
Maddie stepped closer, platitudes on her lips, but she was, shockingly, stopped by Mr Lancer. "Mrs Fenton," he said. "Perhaps you ought to... Stay back. And Jack. Let Jasmine and Mr Foley go. Please. I don't know what you think they were doing, but they clearly aren't doing it now." He turned to Danny, smiling gently. He bent, so that his eyes were level with Danny's. "Daniel... Danny," he said softly, "could you- What do you mean by that?"

"I- I don't'..." His breath hitched, his eyes still fixed on Maddie... "They... It isn't- They don't mean to... It's just- The inventions, they don't always work right. The boomerang. The blasters. The shrink ray. The security system. Trackers. All the goo, and the chemicals. The por-" He stopped dead, then took a deep breath. "It- It's nothing."

Lancer looked over his shoulder. "Mrs Fenton, maybe you could go... Make sure Phantom doesn't get out, something." He looked back at the device on the ground, frowning when he saw Jack still holding on to Tucker and Jazz."

Maddie glanced at Lancer, took a step back, and scowled. "I would never-"

A sound of cracking ice cut through the air, dangerous, sharp-edged, and brittle. All eyes snapped to the device, to the shadow. Even the wisps stopped shrieking and buzzing. It was upright, now, head thrown back. Still indistinct, but humanoid. He was laughing.

"You would never?" hissed the shadow. It's voice was overlaid with static, the edges of it's words curled around with desperate screams. "Tell us, Madeline Camilla Fenton, what is it that you would never do?"

"Phantom," said Maddie.

Broken ice laughter. "Phantom? I'm afraid you're mistaken. But, come. We were talking about you. What you would do. What was it? Hurt a child? Hurt your child?"

"We're the ones asking the questions here," said Maddie.

"Oh? So you don't want to tell them how you continue making weapons even when they turn on your children? How you ignore their injuries? The bruises, the blood... Didn't you notice?"

"What do you know, you-" Maddie visibly forced herself to calm down. "You are going to take us home. Now."

"Why?" asked the shadow, sounding genuinely curious. It's voice was more normal now.

"Because if you don't we'll leave you in there. Permanently."

"Hmm." The shadow opened a pair of vividly green eyes. "No. Even if I could, I wouldn't."

Maddie's lips twitched, and she turned slightly, to face Sam and Danny. "This is what Phantom is really like. Are you happy you worked with it now?"

"Aren't you going to-?" asked Mr Lancer.

"It'll change it's mind, or whatever passes for it's mind, eventually," said Maddie, dismissively. "Danny, I need to check you for possession aftereffects. I don't want you going into shock."

"Unwise," said the shadow. "Almost as unwise as thinking you can hold me."

"And what do you think you know about it, huh?!!" exclaimed Jack.
"Everything. I know how you hurt him. How you always hurt him."

"Mrs Fenton-"

"He's lying."

"How many weapons have you fired in his direction, as a joke? How many have you fired to wound? Can you even tell when he's hiding his pain? When he's afraid of you?"

"Mr Phantom-"

"I am not Phantom. Not truly. Not in the way that humans would understand it, Mr Lancer."

"Just ignore it, Mr Lancer."

Mr Lancer frowned. "I don't think I will. Mrs Fenton, over the past three years I've seen-" He glanced back at Danny. "I've seen a lot of things. Troubling things, and ghosts are the least of it. This is the first reasonable explanation I've heard, no matter that it's from a ghost."

"It isn't what you're thinking. They're just so ignorant. They don't even know what they've done. He still loves them. We still love them." The eyes blinked, focusing first on Jack, then on Maddie. "Why do you hurt him? Hurt us? It doesn't matter now, though. Here you'll be safe. Be kept safe. You won't be hurt, won't be allowed to hurt anyone, not anymore."

It was at that point that Tucker, who had managed to surreptitiously slip his Lipstick Laser from his pocket and aim it at the device, fired. Sparks flew out as the device caught on fire and the shadow vaporized.

An unnatural pressure came off Danny’s soul, and the lair began to recover from it's shock. Danny could feel it, peripherally. Kicking into gear. It thrilled him, deep down, even as it horrified him. Finally, finally, finally.

"Tucker! Why-?"

"Because what you were doing is wrong!"

Danny leaned against Sam, staring up into the sky. Clouds were gathering. It was going to start snowing soon.
Chapter 20

Chapter 20: Snow

There was an argument going on. Well, arguments, really. Two different languages. Danny was the only one who could understand both. (Understand being a relative term). It was kind of funny, really. One of the arguments was whether or not one set of arguers should flee the other.

Danny wasn't paying attention, though. He was looking up, thinking. In a few minutes, the swirling clouds would start to block out the moonlight. He wondered if it would start snowing. He blinked, looking down again.

Mr Lancer looked like he was ready to physically fight Maddie, which was really funny. Paulina was screaming something about 'her ghost-boy.' Valerie looked as if she was about to throw up. Most of the class had actually started to agree with Tucker, which was nice.

But then Maddie just had to ruin things.

"If you're going to believe that thing about all the rest, you have to believe it about not being Phantom! That means that Danny is still possessed!"

"I am not!" said Danny. A thought, a plan, bloomed, unbidden. It would be cruel, but- He was nearly beyond caring, right now. There were more important things than feelings. This would get dangerous to the humans, when it did start snowing, if they kept arguing like this. It could get dangerous for the wisps if it resolved in some decision against them on the part of the humans. It would be dangerous to Danny regardless, as much as he loved the cold. He hesitated a moment. This would hurt his parents. This was one of the reasons he had kept his secrets for so long. He didn't want to hurt them.

But they were the enemy, now. They had made themselves a danger to Danny, which he could deal with, and to others, which he couldn't. So.

He seized the hem of his shirt, and pulled it up, over his head. His t-shirt and undershirt came off with his hoodie, exposing his bare skin and a veritable constellation of scars. He threw his shirts on the ground. Everyone was staring at him now.

"Are you going to blame all of these on Phantom, too? It doesn't matter though, does it?" Danny laughed, hysteria creeping into his tone. The sound had more in common with breaking ice than he liked. "Because none of you ever noticed! Jazz was the only one who noticed."

Everyone, wisps included, stared at Danny in mute horror. Danny stared back. Heck, he didn't have, like, a gaping wound that he wasn't feeling, did he? He looked down.

It was like time stopped.

He had forgotten about the scar. The scar. The one he never, ever, showed everyone. The one that branched like lightning over his whole body.

Somehow, between now and when he had first woken up here, he had forgotten that the scar was visible even though he was human. Just... It had slipped his mind, somewhere in between temporary insanity and getting his mind picked apart by whatever he'd just-
And they had all seen it, now.

He lunged for the wad of cloth that was his shirts and forced it haphazardly over his head.

"Daniel," said Mr Lancer, sounding as shocked as Danny felt, "what was that scar from?"


"But you went to the doctor for that!" protested Maddie. "You- It faded, it- how..."

"I don't know, maybe it's sensitive to ectoplasm concentration or something," said Danny. Oh. That was actually a good one.

"What about the other ones?" asked Mr Lancer.

"You said that the ghosts would come after you," said Valerie, breathlessly, before Danny could come up with anything. "Oh my god, Danny."

"Did Phantom-" started Ricky, hesitantly.

"He's one of the only ones who didn't contribute to this mess," said Danny. (He did not count the hand-shaped burns left on his arms in that aborted future.) "Heck, even Tucker's hit me with a blaster before."

"One time, man!"

Danny's laugh was a little more genuine this time.

Where had he been going with this?

"The point is," Sam stepped up, wrapping her one arm possessively around Danny, "that you didn't notice. That you never notice. That you're pointing fingers at ghosts, saying they're thoughtless and destructive, when you should be looking at yourselves. Did you even think about what that thing would do to Danny if Phantom was in him?"

Another beat of silence, and then the clouds did what they had been threatening to do all along, and converged on the not-moon, blocking out all it's light. Now the only illumination was the still smoldering device, and the wisps.

"We have to find shelter," said Danny. "It's going to start snowing soon."

There was a murmur of 'How could you possibly know that?' but that was drowned out by a louder voice shouting "Who died and made you king, Fentonia?"

Ah, yes. The ever relevant Dash Baxter, asking the important questions.

Danny was seriously tempted to say 'I did!' or perhaps, 'The jury's still out on that one,' but he wasn't sure it was worth it. On the other hand, he didn't think that he was going to get out of this with his secrets intact. He wasn't sure that he wanted to, anymore.

Then again, the idea of what the Guys in White might do if word of what he was got out... He hadn't forgotten how GIW agents had attacked Sam and Tucker during the Reality Gauntlet incident. Yeah. No. He was going to keep as many of his secrets as he could.

So, instead, he sighed and said, "No one did, Dash, but you have to notice the clouds? And how
much the temperature has dropped? I mean, I can see your breath. If we don't find shelter we'll freeze
to death out here arguing."

"Not to mention, nothing you're arguing about is going to solve any of our more pressing problems,"
added Sam. "Like, you know, food, water, getting home."

"You're saying that it doesn't matter whether or not Fenton's possessed? He could be lying about,
like, everything?"

"What, like you, Elliot?" said Sam. A bit of a sneer crept into her voice. She had never forgiven him
for tricking her into thinking that he was from a vegan goth from Hungary so that he could date her.
"But seriously? All that he's done is point out the obvious."

"But there isn't anywhere to go," protested Tiffanie.

"There's the woods," began Sam.

"The woods that attack people and are full of ghosts?" asked Dash.

"It isn't like there aren't ghosts here," said Tucker, indicating the wisps. Danny could feel the tension
rise among the students. The only reason that they hadn't run was that the wisps had stayed close to
Danny, and away from them, thus far. Well, that and the speed at which everything happened. And
possibly the fact that there really weren't that many options when it came to running. Okay, maybe
there were a bunch of reasons.

"Why aren't you doing anything about them?" whined Paulina.

"Yeah, you're ghost hunters, right?" Tiffanie picked up the complaint. "You should be able to chase
them off, right?"

"Pauli, Tiffanie," said Star, worried, "I don't think that it's a good idea to insult the ghosts right now...
This is their home, and there's a lot of them..."

Really, Star was the only one in that group with a brain. Paulina and Tiffanie had redeeming
characteristics, but sometimes they were hard to find.

"Actually," said Danny, a light bulb turning on in his head, "I think that they might be able to help us
with one of our problems. But first, I think that Ricky and Mikey could be able to help us with
shelter."

"What? How?" asked Mikey, surprised.

"You aren't talking about the holes, are you? Because I don't think that's a good idea." 

"What? No. Earlier, when we were looking for supplies that came through with us, you guys said
that you found a building, right?"

"Oh! Yeah, but it was kind of small. It'll be a squeeze!"

"That should still be fine." A tiny, perfect, snowflake drifted down in front of Danny's eye.

(Would it be such a bad thing if they stayed outside? How could a little snow hurt anyone? It was so
soft, so beautiful, so delicate. A blizzard was just a storm of icy kisses.)

Danny reached out to touch it. His fingertip tingled as it slowly melted, and sunk into his skin.
(An image flickered behind his eyes. Himself and his friends, his family, his classmates, his teacher sleeping peacefully in a snowbank. Safe.)

"We really need to go now," said Danny.
Chapter 21

Chapter 21: Rotunda

It took an unreasonably long time to convince everyone to move. A number of people were suspicious of Danny on the grounds of ‘he’s possessed!’ There was a group who objected specifically to the building because it was a tomb and might be haunted. Or full of zombies. (Danny didn't know whether to laugh or cry). A smaller group wanted to dare the forest.

This new argument was only resolved when Mr Lancer, bless him, noticed that the intermittent snowflakes were making people drowsy (more drowsy than they had been, anyway). After that, people practically raced uphill.

Once he was sure everyone was reasonably distracted, besides Valerie, who wouldn't stop staring at him, and, of course, his friends, Danny whistled a quick request for the wisps to follow him. Danny felt bad, taking advantage of them like this. He had just met them and he was already relying on them so much. But he needed the help.

The building, when they reached it, was a cute little rotunda. The pillars and carvings gave it a Greek flare. The sides were solid, except for one gap between pillars, which served as a doorway to the interior. A flowering vine curled up one stone wall.

Jack checked the building first, and proclaimed it 'No more infested by specters than the rest of this place!'

After that, everyone kind of packed in. It was, as Mikey had predicted, a squeeze. More so than Danny would have thought from the outside, because the center of the single room was taken up by a descending spiral staircase, the well for which was blocked off by a wrought-iron fence.

No one volunteered to look and see what was below.

The interior walls and ceiling were covered with intricate carvings. Abstract images of birds and flowers, of stars, snowflakes, and gears, of people holding hands. There were tessellations. Geometric figures. With a sense of mortification, Danny recognized some of his own doodles. Actually... These... All of these were things that he had drawn, wanted to draw, or admired at one point or another. Yes, that one he had done a few weeks ago, and that was an Escher woodcut that he had particularly liked.

There were benches against the walls, and against the fence. There was some argument about who would get to sit on the benches. The A-listers, predictably, won the argument. They had the muscle to back up their claim, after all.

The wisps followed. Some phased through the walls and ceiling. Others came in through the door. Soon, the rotunda was filled with a coruscating rainbow of light.

Danny glanced out the door and sighed with regret. The snow looked really nice, especially now that the flakes were getting larger and falling faster. They could have had a snowball fight.

"Danny," said Mia, hesitantly. Danny looked back inside, and located his classmate. She still had her one eye closed. "You said that you had a solution to our problem?"
"Oh! Right. I-"

"Wait."

Danny's eyes snapped, instantly wary, to his mother. "What?"

"Phantom."

Danny flattened his lips. "You still think I'm overshadowed?"

"I don't know," admitted Maddie. "But before this goes any farther, I need to know what's going on. I need to know why the four of you, why my children," the 'who should have known better' was unspoken, "would... conspire with a ghost. I need to know how you got those scars."

"We've actually already told Valerie, Ricky, and Mikey some of it," said Danny, quickly, thinking fast. They didn't need conflicting stories from Tucker and Jazz. The lies needed to match up. "But then the wisps told us what you were doing here and..." He shrugged, helplessly.

"Heh. Yeah," said Mikey. "At least it didn't turn out to be the monster from the id thing, like you thought."

"What are you talking about? It was exactly that."

"But- But it disappeared."

"That doesn't mean it's gone," said Danny.

"Hold on," said Paulina, "that creepy thing that was obsessed with Fenton is still out there?"

"Way to go, Foley," said Dale, harshly, "now we're all going to get killed by a horror movie reject, just 'cause you thought it was 'the right thing to do,'" the football player pitched his voice up at the end, waving his hands.

Tucker scowled. "At least I'm not a college reject."

Yay! Distraction! Way to go, Tucker. Now Danny had time to think about what lie he was going to tell while Tucker managed to suck half the class into a fight.

(Danny was sure this would come back to bite them eventually. Everything always did.)

Once the combined efforts of Mr Lancer, Jack, Maddie, Hannah, and Mia, had calmed the combatants down again, Danny had a halfway decent story.

"I'm still waiting for an explanation," Maddie announced.

"I know," said Danny, running a hand nervously through his hair. "Okay. So, I guess I should start at the beginning." He inhaled. Here goes nothing. "Phantom was the first ghost to come through the portal. He came out, what, minutes after the portal shocked me?"

"Sounds about right," said Sam.

"He was a really new ghost back then," continued Danny. "Like, brand new. But we didn't know that at the time, so we all kind of freaked out, then he freaked out, and, well. Once you guys got home we kind of... We weren't totally sure if what we had seen was real or not, and we all were really more focused on my electrical burns, and after that you were so excited about the portal working, we didn't mention it. Which sounds silly now, but you know what that day was like.
"A week after that," Danny continued, "other ghosts started to come through our portal. Before you say anything, I know you didn't notice. I didn't either, at first. But they started to come after me. They'd trip me, push me down, knock things out of my hands. This was during the first few weeks of school, freshman year. You know how I was back then, Mr Lancer."

"If I recall, that's when you were permanently banned from handling school glassware. You're saying ghosts were to blame?"

"For a lot of it, yeah. Mostly they'd stay invisible, or just show up out of the corner of my eye. I thought I was going nuts. I'm not one-hundred percent sure why they picked on me, specifically. We've speculated, but it isn't like any of them ever told me. Then one day, I think that it was getting towards the end of September, Sam, Tucker, and I were walking home, and we were straight-up attacked. Ectopi. We were really in trouble, which, again, I know, seems silly now. But we didn't have any practical experience with ghosts back then. But Phantom saved us."

"That seems to be an odd coincidence," said Maddie. "That he was there just when you were attacked."

"It wasn't a coincidence. He'd been following us."

"What?"

"Well. Me mostly. You know how your ghost detectors kept picking me up? That was why. Which, yes, was kind of creepy, but we were basically the only people he'd ever met who hadn't attacked him on sight. At least, if you have a very loose definition of 'met.' We talked a little after that. He mostly wanted to make sure that we weren't hurt. But you know how he is after a fight. He vanished pretty quickly. Then there was the Lunch Lady ghost, and he somehow got a Fenton Thermos during that fight. He told me that you had thrown it at him? I never quite believed that..."

"I'd never give a ghost Fenton Tech!"

"Right. Anyway. There were a couple of other ghost fights around the school, and at that point he had figured out that FentonWorks was a dangerous place for a ghost to hang around. But the Thermos got full. So he asked me to empty it. I have to say, I didn't exactly trust him at that point, but he wasn't acting like a mindless killing machine, either. He was acting like a person. So I agreed to empty it."

"Why didn't you bring the ghosts to us?" asked Maddie.

"Um. Honestly? Some of the stuff you talked about doing to ghosts, I wouldn't be comfortable doing to animals, and the Lunch Lady ghost could talk. So. Yeah. That wasn't going to happen. Also, you guys hadn't done a super awesome job with the ghosts you had run into, and I didn't want you to get hurt. If Phantom was going to take care of the problem, I was going to let him. Still, I didn't trust him. Not until the locker 724 incident."

"Hah! So that locker was haunted!" shouted Hannah suddenly. The blonde girl was a... He didn't want to say 'conspiracy theory nut.' Considering what Amity Park was like, he didn't want to say that Area 51 wasn't a thing. "Did you meet Poindexter?"

"Um. Sort of? I don't really remember most of what happened. I had blackmailed Phantom into helping me prank Dash. Yes, I know, not a great decision, but I was tired of being picked on all the time. I had been standing next to the locker, watching the latest prank unfold, you know? And then Poindexter just comes out of the locker and starts lecturing the two of us about how we were bullying Dash-"
"Serves you right, Fentoad!" erupted Dash, suddenly. "You shouldn't have blackmailed Phantom! And you shouldn't have messed with me, 'cause now you're gonna-"

"Mr Baxter!"

"Considering that you locked me in my locker just yesterday, and the fact that you made me do your science homework all last week, and you periodically hang me on the flagpole by my underwear, I can't say I feel particularly guilty about stuffing your locker with Fenton-Wipe once, two years ago, and getting Phantom to tie your shoelaces together once, two years ago. I guess I still feel slightly guilty about getting him to run you into the lockers, but all things considered, I think that I've more than paid for it at this point. Anyway, the three of us got into a fight, and Poindexter overshadowed me."

"Overshadowed?"

"You'd probably call it possession, Mom, but overshadowing has technical differences. I'll get back to that later, if you remind me. But that whole thing was a nightmare, because, apparently, getting shocked by the portal messed me up more than we thought it did. Like I told these guys," Danny gestured to Ricky, Mikey, and Valerie, "overshadowing does not work properly on me. Poindexter got stuck. Normal methods of disrupting an overshadowing would not work. He didn't realize it at the time, though. He tricked Phantom into getting trapped in his lair, and by 'his' I mean Poindexter's, and, um. I'd better leave the rest to Sam and Tucker, actually, because I spent the rest of the day overshadowed."

"You say 'stuck' like it was a bad thing for both you and Poindexter," said Lester. "But wouldn't it actually be good for him? He'd have your body, if no one could get him out."

"It was a bad thing," said Danny. "There's a reason that ghosts don't overshadow people long-term. It isn't healthy for them." Danny licked his lip as he thought about how to explain. "A ghost can't get the energy it needs when it's overshadowing a human body. It still has access to the emotional energy of the human it's overshadowing, but other than that," Danny shrugged, "it usually isn't going to get anything. Human bodies don't have the ability to absorb ectoplasm. I mean, you might pick up some from breathing, or eating contaminated food, but even then, that's not generally going to get to the ghost, and most other energies are going to be deflected by the body. The ghost would starve, eventually, especially if they were using their powers."

"And Poindexter was definitely using his powers," Tucker said, jumping in. "That's one of the ways we noticed that Danny was being overshadowed. It took us longer than it should have, in retrospect."

"Yeah, especially when he kept going on about egg creams," added Sam. "But there were plenty of other weird things going on. He didn't act like Danny at all."

"He'd apparently decided that he needed to make things up to Dash, and he did that by intangibly messing with the soda machines in the school and giving Dash and the rest of you guys free sodas. We didn't know how he was doing it, but we did know that Danny wouldn't steal stuff, and he especially wouldn't steal stuff for Dash."

"We didn't know for sure, though, until Phantom contacted us. It turned out that the mirror in the locker was a kind of portal to the Ghost Zone, and Phantom could reach through, a little bit."

"Still couldn't get out though. It was kind of funny, because apparently Poindexter's lair is a copy of Casper High from the fifties, and people kept walking by Phantom and giving him wedgies and stuff while he was trying to talk to us."
"It wasn't that funny, Tucker. Anyway, the three of us came up with a plan to trick Poindexter into going back into his lair." Sam grimaced. "We basically took advantage of his obsession, and pretended that we had shut someone in Locker 724, and pushed him through the mirror when he came to look. I don't know what happened in there after that, but after a while, Phantom came out with Danny. Actually... It looked a little like you were blasted out?"

"That's because we were," said Danny. "Poindexter pushed us out. Apparently that was the only way to get out."

"Yeah, you never told us what went down in there," said Tucker. "We didn't press 'cause you looked pretty sick, but..."

"I felt pretty sick. Having two ghosts fighting over your body is not fun, even if you manage to kick both out afterwards, and one of them is trying very hard not to hurt you. I still don't remember what led up to that. I think that Phantom was loosing pretty badly, and he only took Poindexter by surprise because Poindexter tried to leave but couldn't? I don't know. He always changes the subject when I bring it up."

"You trusted Phantom after that?"

"Well... Yeah. He could have overshadowed me himself instead of working with me, but he never did. This was before we had figured out the whole 'Danny isn't fun to overshadow' thing, remember."

Maddie nodded slowly. It wasn't a nod of agreement, or of acceptance. It was an 'I'm thinking' nod. "And you Jazz? How did you get into this? And why did you think it was a good idea?"

"Uh," said Jazz, and Danny started praying. Jazz wasn't always very good with the on the fly lie. "That's complicated. Do any of you remember Ms Spectra?"

"Penelope Spectra?" asked Mr Lancer, surprised. "You mean the school psychologist from when you were a sophomore? What does she have to do with this?"

"Well, everything. To begin with, she was a ghost."
"Penelope Spectra was a ghost?" Mr Lancer repeated faintly. "I think I need to sit down." The teacher looked around, as if expecting a seat to magically appear in front of him. Briefly, Danny wondered if one would. When none did so, he simply looked back up at Jazz. "Continue," he said.

"I think Danny was the one who realized it first," said Jazz.

"It was always cold around her," said Danny, shrugging. "Also, I know I'm not the only one who noticed how awful I always felt after talking to her."

"That was her thing," said Jazz. "Mom, Dad, out of all the ghosts I've met, Spectra's the worst. If you want to talk about evil ghosts, Spectra's one of the few that deserve the title. She and her assistant Bertrand lived on Earth for years and years. They made up for their ectoplasm deficiency by relying even more heavily on emotional energy, and they get the most power out of depression, sadness, despair, self-doubt, self-hatred... If they get their claws into you, they can drain your life force, too. Make you weak. We did some research about them afterwards..." Jazz pursed her lips and shook her head. "It isn't important right now. They aren't good people. Lets leave it at that. Anyway, Danny..."

"I tried to get in touch with Phantom. He was having a lot of trouble with Bertrand though. Apparently that was their plan. They'd distract Phantom with Bertrand, while they went after the school. But I did eventually manage to reach Phantom. Jazz saw us meet up. She didn't tell me right away though," he said. "I'm still not sure why."

"I told you, I was still in denial about the whole ghost thing," Jazz defended herself. "And I had just see you t-talking to one, I didn't know what to think. I wanted to give you some space."

Good catch, thought Danny, nodding. "We weren't big on planning back then-"

"Back then?" asked Tucker, scoffing.

"Shut up, Tucker. We went back to school the next day. We didn't know where Spectra went after school. The spirit assembly was that day."

"I was doing a speech," reminded Jazz, helpfully.

"Phantom was still having some trouble with Bertrand, so he wasn't able to get there until right before the assembly. Um. Spectra was draining me pretty badly at that point. But I managed to find out that she was planning on..." Danny trailed off. "She was planing on blowing up the stage. Killing Jazz. She. Um. Her modus operandi was driving people to suicide. I didn't exactly snap out of it after she told me that, but I did give her a bit more of a fight, and she called Bertrand back to take care of me. Then Phantom showed up, and between the two of us, we were able to hold off Spectra and Bertrand for long enough for me to tell Phantom about Jazz and the explosives, and then he went to go save Jazz."

"He pulled me off the stage. At that point, Danny was, um..."

"I was getting beaten up pretty badly. But Jazz had the Fenton Peeler that day."
"Right! So I shot Spectra, and that peeled off her whole human disguise and stuff, and then Phantom beat up Bertrand and sucked them both into the Thermos. I mean, it was way more chaotic than that, but that's the gist of it. I started helping out after that. But I was never got quite as involved as Danny."

"And the thefts?" asked Maddie, after it was clear that Jazz wasn't going to say anything else.

"Well, don't tell my parents this," said Sam, "but it turns out that Circus Gothica was evil. You do remember that all of the stolen stuff was found with the ringleader, right?" She waited for tentative nods before continuing, "It turns out that he had a staff that let him control ghosts. We managed to break it. Phantom didn't even remember what had happened."

"And the invasion? Kidnapping the mayor?"

"That... That was actually my fault," said Danny, drawing attention back to himself. "Sort of. The mayor was overshadowed at the time, and the rest of it... It's a really long story, but it boils down to accidentally angering a ghost that decided to get revenge on me and Phantom both."

"You- You're saying that whole thing was because of you?" asked Paulina, outraged.

"In my defense, it wasn't my fault I was in the Ghost Zone that time, and Walker is a petty jerk."

"Walker being..?" asked Mr Lancer. He still seemed to be in shock from the Spectra revelation.

"The ghost behind the whole invasion. He's supposed to be the sheriff for the Barrens, but he makes up rules out of thin air just so that he can arrest people, no one gets a trial, and the prison terms are absurd, even by ghost standards. I mean, Walker's not even two-hundred years dead, and he's imposing thousand-year sentences? For having 'real world' items? Seriously."

"Er, Danny," said Nathan, "you said this 'Walker' is supposed to be the sheriff of the Barrens, right? What are those?"

Danny blinked. He hadn't meant to say that much. "The Barrens are the geographical region closest to our- to the Fenton portal. A lot of natural portals there also open up into Amity Park. I'm hoping that this place comes out in the Barrens, because that will make it a lot easier to get back home."

"And when you say 'supposed to be,' does that mean he was appointed?" asked Nathan.

"You mean there's a government in here?" exclaimed Mikey.

"Yeah. There is but, look, even I don't entirely understand how it works, and I've studied it fairly extensively. If you're still interested when we have a few spare hours, I'd be happy to trawl through the nightmare that is Ghost Zone politics for you, but it isn't important right now, is it?" Danny rubbed his face tiredly. "Besides, hardly anything is applied evenly," Danny mumbled into his hands. "The laws of Ys are different from the laws of Lyonesse." He looked back up to meet his mother's eyes. "Does that answer your questions?"

Maddie's face was no longer quite as impassive as it had been. But she wasn't furious either, like she would be if she still thought that he was possessed. Her brows were furrowed, though. The corners of her mouth were turned down. "Technical differences," said Maddie, finally.

"What?" said Danny.

"You said that there were technical differences between overshadowing and possession. Before I make any decisions about whether or not... this arrangement you have with Phantom is anything like
acceptable, I want to know what those differences are."

Danny took a deep breath. "Okay. So. There are three, um, call them disciplines, that you'd probably identify as possession. Overshadowing, mind control, and possession. Uh. Analogy time. Imagine that you have to get someone to sign something, but they won't do it. Overshadowing is where you forge their signature. With overshadowing, basically you get in between the person's brain and body, and otherwise just pretend to be them. There isn't much mental interaction in between the ghost and the human. You can sometimes mentally push the ghost out, but that's more, how should I put this, establishing control over your own physical space, and the ectoplasm in that place, than anything else. It's mostly a function of force of will. If you can't do that though, um, most of you know what being overshadowed is like. It's like being asleep. I know that some ghosts can manage to make you remember what happened as if you did it, like if you were dreaming, or pass on subliminal suggestions, but that's pretty high level. So that's overshadowing.

"Then you have mind control. In the analogy from before, mind control would be tricking the person into signing. Like, if you made them think that they were signing something else, or signing for someone else. That kind of thing. It can be used on either ghosts or humans, and there are a lot of different, um, I guess you'd call them carriers for it? Like, some ghosts use music, others use pheromones, physical attachments, or visual images. It doesn't actually require the ghost to be physically inside the person. In some ways it's a lot more versatile, but you've got to remember that it's still the person acting, not the controlling ghost. So you get some weird quirks. Like, if the person's morning routine always includes doing ten jumping jacks, then they'll still do that every morning, unless they're specifically being told not to. Because of that, mind control can be hard to detect. It can also be applied to a lot of people at once. On the other hand, it can be really fragile if it isn't renewed constantly. Like, anything that's too far off from a person's natural inclination will break it, depending on how long it's been since it's been applied. Sometimes, it can be broken even while it's being applied, if they're asking for something that's really far off.

"Then you've got possession. Going back to the signature analogy, possession would be like kidnapping them and forcing them to sign. It is not a nice thing to do, it's violent, and there's a lot more mental interaction. Both sides can get damaged. What's more, the person is going to remember everything unless you knock out their memory on the way out. I don't have a lot of data on it otherwise. Possession isn't used a lot, especially not by ghosts that will actually talk to us. There's apparently some debate over whether or not it's a violation of the Second Taboo..."

"How the hell do you even know all of this?" asked Rebecca.

"Um. Gathering data and keeping records is part of my job on the team," said Danny.

"Second law?" said Hannah, sharply. Curse her for her sharp conspiracy-theorist mind. Danny was too tired for this.

"Uh, there are three big laws in the Ghost Zone. Some people call them the Three Taboos. Or the Three Restrictions. They're the only laws that are anything like consistent across the Realms. There's, um, I think the best translation would be Acts of Murder, Acts of Rapine, and Acts of Sacrilege," Danny counted on his fingers. "That's in order of severity. They're not really human-accessible crimes, especially Acts of Sacrilege," he said idly, more to distract his audience, bring the discussion even farther away from him, than anything else, "so I wouldn't worry abou-" Danny stopped dead, eyes widening. He could feel his blood drain away from his skin. Oh no. Oh. No. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said, his voice faint.

He stumbled back to the doorway. Thankfully, no one was standing by it. They didn't like the cold, he guessed. Either that, or they were avoiding the snow.
Danny clutched the lintel, and vomited. Well. There went his... whatever meal he counted the apples as. What time even was it, at this point? The wisps floated down to bob hesitantly by his shoulder. He wanted to tell them, but he couldn't. He couldn't risk-

Oh. Ancients. Technus. Had Technus seen? Would the technology-obsessed ghost understand what he had seen? How long had he been listening to the Fentons' lecture?

What's more-

Danny whirled. "That-" he said. "That thing you made, just now. The circular one. How does it work?"

"Excuse me?" said Maddie, rocking back. She and Jack had come closer, both of them apparently concerned. Mr Lancer had his hands on their shoulders.

"You don't need to give me technical details," said Danny. "I don't even want to know them. But I need to know the underlying principle on which it works," he said, using his hands to underline the words.

"It takes advantage of the metaphysical link between a ghost and it's lair," said Jack. "It pulls on the link. It was supposed to pull Phantom in and trap him"

Danny inhaled deeply. It felt like his head was full of static. Full of bees. This was bad. "You can't tell anyone that you made that."

"What?"

"You can't tell anyone that you made that," repeated Danny. "Never talk about it ever again. If there's some schematic somewhere, destroy it ASAP. Actually, the same thing goes for that- the Fenton Mortifier. You can never, ever, talk about it. Ever. Destroy everything related to it, anything that shows that it ever existed."

"Why?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?" said Danny, laughing. He stopped. "You are, aren't you? Look, there are so many exceptions in the rules for Acts of Murder that even if you caught the attention of the Justices, you'd probably get off, but the Dead hate being reminded of their deaths. Being forced to relive it is something even beyond that. If word got out- and it might anyway, since Technus isn't exactly the kind of person to stay quiet. Do you know how many ghosts would kill over that? But then you've got this other thing on top of that, and arguably this is worse because it isn't limited to one group and- argh!" He scrubbed both hands through his hair. "If this gets out, you will be brought before the courts, and it doesn't matter that you're human. They could execute you. Or worse."

"Execute?" gasped Jazz.

"I'm not going to pretend that I understand all of the rules associated with the Taboos, but directly screwing with metaphysical attachments is one of the few specific examples I remember for Acts of Sacrilege. Which is not," he underlined 'not,' "good. None of you can talk about this. Please."

"Alright, Danny," said Maddie. "Alright. We won't. Just- Please. You're hurting yourself." Maddie shrugged off Mr Lancer's hand, and went to Danny, kneeling down on the ground (When had Danny dropped to his knees?). She pulled his hands out of his hair. Danny tugged away from her, his arms crossed protectively over his chest.
Ricky coughed into the silence that followed. "I don't really get what's going on with these Taboo things," he said, "but what about Phantom?"
"What about Phantom?" echoed Maddie, nonplussed. Then, more sternly, "What about Phantom?"

"Well, like, where is he?" said Ricky. "Because he was posse- overshadowing Danny before, that shadow thing wasn't him, supposedly, and both Danny and Phantom said that Danny was weird to overshadow, so he should still be stuck in Danny, but apparently not? Then, if anyone is going to talk about whether or not you did something that was against 'ghost law' it's going to be Phantom, isn't it?"

"Not a chance," said Jazz, when Danny didn't answer.

"Why not?" asked Ricky, his eyebrows turning down.

"He just wouldn't," said Jazz, her eyes on Danny.

"But-"

"Just drop it, Ricky," said Tucker. "She's appointed herself Phantom's psychologist. She's not going to tell you anything."

"That still leaves the issue of where he is," said Ricky, frustrated.

"He's here," said Danny.

Everyone blinked at Danny. "I know my eyesight isn't great," said Mia, "but I don't see him."

"No," said Danny, his voice wavering. "He's- He's here," he said, rubbing his chest. "He's, um, still in me. But," he said quickly, catching his mother's look of worry and anger, "he's been basically catatonic since you used that," he made a circular gesture in the air between them, "thing out there. I kind of... mentally poked him, but he's not reacting."

"I... see. I see." Maddie sighed heavily. "That's good. Good."

"Um. No. No it isn't. Even if you're going to disregard everything we've just said about Phantom not being a bad guy, what do you think will happen to a lair whose ghost fades? I'm asking, because I genuinely don't know."

Maddie blinked, opened her mouth, shut it, and then went very pale.

Jack, on the other hand... "Well, Dann-o, that's a very interesting question," he boomed. Danny wondered if Jack was in denial about the whole situation. "I suspect that without the guidance of the ghost's ectosignature the lair would destabilize and fall apart. Possibly within minutes!" He nodded. His smile lingered on his face for a few moments. "Wait..."

"Yeah," said Danny, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"What are we doing standing around and talking then?!" cried Rebecca. Others chimed in in agreement.
Danny groaned.

"Hey!" said Sam, sharply. "Danny wanted to move on, you're the ones who wanted to play twenty questions!"

"That's right!" said Mikey. "You said that you had a plan! What was it?"

Well. At least they were back on track, now. Still, Danny couldn't help but feel like he had missed something, though. That he had said too much, or too little, or just the wrong thing. Someone was going to pull on the thread sooner or later, and all his carefully constructed lies would unravel. Along with whatever remained of his life.

(There was a sharpness in Mr Lancer's eyes.)

"Yes," said Danny, softly, standing. "That's right." He held out his hands and whistled up to the wisps. Those that had drifted down while he was being sick gathered closer, several of those who had remained above descended. "These guys aren't from here originally," explained Danny. "So they must know where the exit is."

Technus flew through the green and purple mists of the Ghost Zone at breakneck speed. His eyes flickered from island to island, discarding each as it got close enough to see. He wasn't terribly familiar with this part of the Zone. He knew what he was looking for, but not exactly where it was.

More specifically, he knew who he was looking for.

He had done something terrible, and she was the only one who could offer him absolution. It didn't matter that he hadn't known, hadn't believed, he had still caused that terrible thing.

Technus' memories of his life were sporadic and vague, a result of the method of his death, and the disease that had ravaged him in his latter years, but he had been a father once. A grandfather. He remembered his daughter. Her eyes, as rich as honey, her hair, as golden as the dawn, whip smart, sharper than he was, at any rate, always a little bit of bite in her comments, but what was life without a bit of excitement? He remembered his sons. The older one was fierce. Combative. Technus had never really understood him, his interest in sports, in the physical, but he had tried. Had always tried. Would always try. The younger one had been more like him, but better with people. He'd become a doctor. A surgeon. Technus remembered his grandchildren. Each one sugar sweet and perfect. He would never, ever have done anything to endanger them.

Technus had never thought of himself as a villain. He had never hated Phantom. To Technus, their battles had been a contest, a game of wits and skill. It had never occurred to him that, for Phantom, something more might be on the line.

But look! There! That island, with that building, with the stately white pillars, and the manicured lawns. That was what he needed. That was what he was looking for. He landed on a paved path, next to a fountain. The building was so tall from this angle, the steps that led up to it's doors, so steep, so formidable, so intimidating. This was only appropriate. Here, Technus was a petitioner, a penitent. It was only right that he should supplicate himself, lower himself to climb those steps, instead of floating, feather-light, over them like some innocent.
He ascended the steps, core heavy with dread. He passed the pillars and into the darker shadows of the porch, stopping before the tall, heavy, dark, wooden doors. Each door had a series of pictures carved into the surface. An arrest. A trial. A judgment. On the right-hand door, the final picture was of a release, the man going free. The last left-hand picture was of an execution.

Technus pushed the doors open, and strode in, his footsteps echoing in the high-ceilinged room. A young woman was sitting at a desk just in front of the doors, while the rest of the room stretched to the left and right, doors punched into the walls every few meters.

The woman looked up, smiling. Her eyes were glowing white except for black lines delineating her irises. She had four arms. Her hair was black, and tied back in a waves reminiscent of Greek statuary, with glowing, star-shaped hairpins. She wore a neat suit and skirt, and a pin shaped like a pair of scales on her lapel. Her skin was as white as marble, her teeth sharp and even. A nameplate on the desk declared her name, in a number of writing systems, to be Astraea Iustitia.

"Hello!" she said musically. "Welcome to the Hall of Justice! My name is Astraea. How can I help you today?"

"I am Technus, Master of Technology! Master of all things electronic and beeping! I..!" Technus faltered. "I am here to report a crime," he said, more quietly. "A violation of Taboo."

Astraea pulled a pad of paper closer to her, and picked up a pen with her other hand. "Please, continue, Mr Technus."

Technus did, giving the young woman every detail. Once he got to the part where he dove through the Fenton portal, leaving Amity and returning to the Ghost Zone to look for the Hall of Justice, he wrapped up with, "... and so I, Technus, Master of all electrical devices, have come to throw myself on the mercy of the courts!"

Astraea frowned. "I don't think that's necessary, sir," she said. "At least from your account, the," she consulted her notes, "Fentons are the ones to blame. Although you really shouldn't be harassing a child like that. How old is this Phantom, anyway?"

"Fourteen and two," said Technus, miserably.

"Alright," said Astraea, making a note. "I'm going to have to make some inquiries regarding this. In the meantime, I'm going to call someone to take you to one of our waiting rooms," she said pressing a button on the desk. "I'm going to ask you to stay until this matter is satisfactorily resolved. For your own sake, I hope that you do so. Adrestia can be rather overzealous when it comes to retrieving witnesses."
Chapter 24: Window

"It can't possibly be that easy," protested Ricky.

"I didn't say that it would be easy," said Danny, rolling his eyes. "Besides which, we still need food, water, sleep, and even if they can get us to the door, they aren't going to be able to guide us beyond that." Danny whistled a few bars of a winding, questioning melody. The wisps sang back at him, a dozen symphonies. Danny made a quelling motion with his hands, and asked them-

"Daniel," interrupted Mr Lancer, "is that... their language?"

Danny winced. "Um. Yeah?"

"How did you learn it?"

"How does anyone learn any language? It wasn't that hard. I'm not exactly fluent, mind you. I don't typically change color." Wow. That was a lie, a serious lie, right there. He changed color all the time. "Do you mind? I've got a conversation going on."

"My apologies," said Mr Lancer.

Danny was able to finish his question and Leader, flashing green, answered. Danny smiled, and thanked him.

"Okay, so they do know where the door is," said Danny. "But they said that it's a long way off, and that the way is... strange." He tilted his hand back and forth. "At least, I think that's the best translation. It could also mean circuitous, or convoluted. Or possibly stormy, or that there's a lot of wind. Or... You know. A bunch of things that don't translate well."

"I don't get it," said Paulina. "Those are all, like, totally different things."

"Well, it's like, uh, there isn't a direct translation for quinceañera in English, because English speakers usually don't celebrate a person's fifteenth birthday like that. These guys are really light, so something being windy and something being windy would look the same to them." Danny blinked for a moment, visualizing how that sentence would look on paper, and suppressed a smile. "Also, I'm not super familiar with this dialect. The wisps who hang out in Amity Park use different indicators for adjectives and... you know what? It doesn't matter," said Danny, rubbing his face. He hummed. Leader hummed back, and bobbed up and down brushing against Danny's arm. Maddie started, and glared at the little ghost as if she would like nothing better than to fight it with her bare hands. Never mind that that wouldn't work. "They also think that there might be human food on the way, but, well, they aren't experts. So that's good. But these guys are fast, so them saying the door is a long way off means that it's a really long way off."

"Then we should start immediately," said Mr Lancer. "Lead the way."

"Right," said Danny, looking towards Leader. Leader bobbed, then zoomed over the crowd to hover over the stairwell.

"No," said Mikey. "No, I am not going back underground."
"Come on, Mikey," cajoled Mia, "I'm sure that it'll be fine. I mean, nothing really bad has happened here so far, right? We're all in one piece."

"Except for the horror movie monster threatening us all and the demonic snow!"

Rude. The snow wasn't demonic. It was affectionate, and comfortable. It was just trying to make sure everyone got enough sleep, because staying up like this wasn't healthy...

Danny shook his head. He needed sleep, too, apparently.

"Mikey, I know that things have been weird here, but... You trust Phantom, right? I mean, I know that you were in that one fan club."

"Yeah," admitted Mikey, grudgingly.

"Well, this whole place is Phantom. Kinda. What happened before was a knee-jerk reaction to being shot at. This is just a dream right now. Nothing here is after you."

(Some things might be after his parents, though. The shadow was not happy with them.)

There was some more grumbling, and some outright whining. Surprisingly, Paulina wasn't one of them. Instead of being upset, she was excited to be going 'inside the Ghost Boy.'

It was becoming increasingly difficult to recall that he'd once had a serious crush on her. It was almost unbelievable that they'd been friends in grade school. If he couldn't switch forms, he'd be seriously looking into restraining orders. As it was, he'd spent some time looking up methods to discourage stalkers.

(Wasn't Danny supposed to be the creepy one, anyway? Seeing as he was the ghost?)

Danny went down the stairs right after the first wisps, despite his parents' protests. He reasoned that he was the only one who could understand the wisps (for some reason, he hadn't felt the need to mention Tucker's translation program), and that if they were to shout (sing?) a warning, he was the only one who could react quickly enough to make that warning worth anything.

The stairs gently spiraled down and down and down. After a few turns, the iron banister was replaced by a stone one, and then by a solid stone wall. The steps, and the spiral, became wider. There were delicate carvings on both walls, flowers, clouds, and hidden faces, their curves highlighted by crystals embedded in the stone.

Then there was a window.

It was a tall, narrow thing with no glass set in it. More like a arrow-slit than a proper window. Bright stars shone through it, and a soft breeze licked at Danny's fingers when he held his hand up to it.

Logically, it should not have been there. They should be deep underground. Several people pointed this out while crowding around it, and trying to see if the stars it showed were some kind of illusion. Danny let them, it didn't hurt anything, and he needed a moment to rest. Also, the wisps thought that it was hilarious. They kept chiming, periodically, like little silvery bells. It was their version of muffled laughter.

Danny withdrew from the window, fading back until he was among his friends again. No one else was paying attention to anything but the window. Even the adults had gotten distracted.

"So," said Tucker, "do you know how there's a window down here?"
"Come on, Tuck," said Danny, rolling his eyes. "We're in a pocket universe located behind a floating door in the Ghost Zone, which itself is a parallel universe filled with, among other things, the unquiet dead, portals to other time periods, and areas- can you even call them that?- with extra spacial and temporal dimensions. Did you really expect this place to be topographically consistent? This is Phantom, we're talking about."

Jazz gave him a very strange look. "Are you feeling alright?"

"No. No I am not."

Jazz made a face. "Sorry. I shouldn't have asked. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know," said Danny, his fingers drumming on his chest. "I think- I think that last thing really damaged Phantom," he said. It was best not to say anything out of line with their official story. Someone, his eyes darted to first his parents, then Valerie, and then Mr Lancer, might be listening. "I'm worried," he admitted. "This... I know what I said to Mikey, but people do things in dreams that they'd never do awake." He clenched his fists as he remembered some of his nightmares.

(Remembered what he did in them.

_Gone, but not forgotten._

_Inevitable._

Standing over his own broken body, fire licking his skull, greedier than ice could ever be.

A city in ruins and laughing, laughing, laughing.

A family trying to hide. He could hear all of them, their breathing was so loud compared to his silence, but he thought it more amusing to bait them into revealing themselves visually. It was so easy. Just break the mother's legs, the one who hadn't hidden fast enough, make a new cut every few minutes... They didn't deserve a mother. Not when he didn't have one.)

Danny was shaken out of his reverie when his sister put her arms around him, giving him a hug.

"Danny," said Jazz, whispering directly in his ear, "I know what you're worried about. But this isn't exactly a dream. It's your subconscious, yes, but dream and subconscious are two different things, even if the later is often represented in the former. Your nightmares are things you fear, not things you want."

"But what if I do want it? Deep down? He had to come from somewhere."

"He's not you, Danny. You made this beautiful place. You made sure there was light, and food, and that the temperature was good for everyone. I know you like it colder. You've been worried about us this whole time. You've been taking such good care of us."

Danny relaxed a little more with each of sentence. When Jazz finally pulled back, still murmuring reassurances, he felt much better. He was still tense, of course, but the tension was closer to his normal levels. "Thank you," said Danny. "I needed that." He looked at his friends. Even if he felt better, there were other things he still had to say. "There's something I need to tell you. Do you remember when Phantom first got his ice powers?"

"Considering everything that happened when he got them? Yeah," said Sam, raising an eyebrow. "Is this about the snow?"
"Not exactly," said Danny. "You remember that freak snowstorm a couple months later?"

"Yeah," said Sam, slowly. Tucker nodded. Jazz made a concerned face. She already knew where this was going. He had told her when it happened.

"That was Phantom." Before his friends could say anything, he continued, "There was- There was that accident, the week before. I- He was upset, and not thinking straight. There was a lot of other stuff going on, too. I- He- I guess he thought that if everyone was snowed in then there couldn't be any accidents like that. That everyone would stay where they were, and they would all be safe, and everything would just stay the same, otherwise, which in retrospect isn't rational, but, well. It made sense at the time." He took a deep breath. "I'm worried that... something like that will happen here. It's just, here, it makes a lot more sense, logistically."

"Okay," said Sam. "Okay, I can see why that looks like a problem, but I don't think it is."

"Why?"

"You- Phantom can't stay in here and get to the Far Frozen at the same time. Also, if you try to leave us, sneak off by yourself and go through the GZ in your condition..." Sam let the threat hang in the air. Then her face crumpled, and she gave Danny a quick hug. "I will hunt you down. Got it?"

"Got it," said Danny.

"Besides," Sam said, "even if we're delayed, that's not the end of the world. Not to mention, and I know you don't want to hear this, but this isn't on you. Jazz and I aren't totally useless."

"Hey!" said Tucker.

"We can help," continued Sam. "We will help. We've dealt with ghost weirdness before, and we're more than happy to deal with this. This won't even be the weirdest thing we've encountered, even if Phantom's subconscious decides it wants us to stick around. I mean, just look at that," she said, hooking her thumb over her shoulder.

"Hey!" said Tucker. "She's right, though," he added. "Even if you're out of commission, we can do this. I mean, don't stop what you're doing, but, your health should be top priority, okay, man?"

Danny made a face. "I'll try to keep it a priority but..."

"It's okay," said Jazz. "You can only do what you can do."

"Right," said Danny.

He returned his attention to the group by the window just in time to hear Jack exclaiming about "Inconsistent internal topologies!"

His lips quirked up.

"Okay, guys," he called. "We should really keep going now!"
They passed eight more windows on their way down. The moon (not-moon?) was clearly visible through each one, except for the last. This in itself wouldn't have been too odd, except that a) the moon had been overhead when they came down, and b) it was shown in a different phase in every window.

It was really too bad that the windows were too narrow to lean out of. (Well, Danny could have managed it if he tilted himself sideways, but 'get beaten up by overprotective friends' was not on his to-do list). Danny would have liked to see the outside of the structure they were in, and whether or not there was anything outside, other than the stars and moon. There was no guarantee that the window wasn't simply a frame floating in the ether, from an outside perspective. Tucker, Mikey, and some of the other students who were interested in video game design, were getting into a conversation about sky-boxes and whether or not the stars really 'existed' in this world.

Then they reached the bottom of the stairs, and Danny walked into one of the strangest rooms he had ever seen.

Most of the room was made of the same dark stone as the stairs, carved in various, fantastic patterns. To the left, the wall was a gallery of airy arches that let in bright, blue-white moonlight and lead to what looked like a wide balcony. Directly next to those arches, sitting in front of, and parallel to them, was a long, stone table that seemed to rise, seamlessly, from the ground. Arrayed around it were stone benches and chairs. In the center of the table, there was a vase full of those glowing blue flowers.

To the right, there was another long stone table, this one taller, solid, more of a counter. An island. Against the right-hand wall, there was another long counter, this one with open-faced cabinets both above and beneath. There was a gap in the center of the upper cabinets, where water ran along the wall from the ceiling to a basin in the counter. Another set of counters stood to the side, these without shelves beneath them, but instead had balls of pale gold fire. Next to these, there was a dark cavity in the wall, a relief of flames carved into the stone around it. On the other side of the shelves, there was a narrow doorway, that lead into a dimly lit room that Danny thought contained more shelving.

The shelves themselves were stocked with jars and plates, cutlery and bowls. Forks, knives, spatulas... This was a kitchen. A rather odd kitchen, and Danny couldn't quite tell how the stoves and oven worked, but it was definitely a kitchen.

In between the kitchen and what Danny was tentatively labeling a dining area, there was a sitting area. A set of couches and armchairs grouped around a stone coffee table with another vase of flowers on it, this one a little more elaborate. In addition to the glowing blue poppies, there was something that looked like baby's breath, and what looked like especially vivid forget-me-nots.

Farther along, on the opposite end of the room, there was balustrade, overlooking what appeared to be a larger space. There was a gap in the railing, perhaps signaling a stair descending, and another gap nearby, with a stair going up. It looked like the balustrade had a walkway next to it that extended left and right beyond the room, as well.

What earned the room the label of 'strangest,' however, was what hung from the ceiling. Fixed to the
ceiling were dozens, no, hundreds, maybe even thousands, of wind chimes. There were all kinds of chimes. Some were shiny metal, copper, bronze, steel, silver, and gold. Others were dull, or even rusted. There were all sorts of ceramics up there, terracotta, china, bisque, raku. All sorts of shapes, too. Danny thought he spotted bones and bells as well.

The wisps immediately began to play among the chimes, setting them off. Danny desperately wished that he could float up to join them, but even if his class and parents hadn't been there, his ghost powers had been completely offline since the thing with the shadow. He hadn't even been flickering around the edges. In some ways this was a good thing, it kept people from asking untoward questions, but Danny was scared. His core was curled so tightly in his chest that it was physically painful... At least, it felt like it was curled. Danny wasn't sure whether or not a core could curl. Cores were crystalline structures, so curling would be a bit difficult for them.

It was getting a bit loud up there, with all the chimes, and Danny absently noted that some people were complaining. People did tend to get more irritable when hungry and tired, and he didn't doubt that some of them were nurturing stress headaches. Still, he wasn't inclined to ask the giggling wisps to stop. They were so happy. So he didn't.

Instead, he walked, slowly, his legs were burning from the long descent, to the kitchen part of the room. His eyes scanned the carvings next to the stove-tops and oven. There were words etched into the wall alongside them, cleverly hidden in the larger carvings. (Did all of this really come from his mind? It was a good thing he was too tired to be embarrassed.)

He examined the counters, and then the shelves. The jars and boxes were neatly labeled. Most of the labels were in English, but others were labeled in Latin, Greek, or Esperanto, a few were in French, one bottle of red pepper was labeled with Chinese characters, and several labels were written in ghost languages. Many were items were labeled twice. The salt, interestingly, was labeled almost a dozen times. Danny tilted out a container labeled 'pancake mix.'

They could make pancakes.

Danny pushed the container back onto the shelf, and kept walking. He passed the doorway on the other side of the counters, and smiled absently as he felt the chill that emanated from the room beyond it. A refrigerator, then.

There was something on the other side of the room that drew him. He walked to the balustrade, and looked into the space beyond.

He blinked, then smiled. "Wow..." he said, awed. Thrilled.

The balcony he stood on looked into a space filled with stairs, hundreds and hundreds of stairs, that connected stone platforms and walkways, many of which were set at impossible, or at least, uncomfortable, angles. Every surface was covered with windows that revealed a starry night, complete with dozens of moons. The silver light from the windows provided more than enough light for Danny to see clearly, although it might be dim for the others, and some of the angles were odd. At irregular intervals, lanterns full of ghostly fire hung on chains, dangling in every direction, showing that gravity really was that strange here, and giving more light. There were no doors that Danny could see, but there were doorways, archways, and paths that bent tantalizingly out of sight. A river wound along one floor, only to jackknife upwards into a waterfall. Elsewhere, a walkway full of fountains spiraled and corkscrewed. Danny could see a set of Penrose steps in the distance, and another pathway seemed to twist into a Mobius strip.

This was so cool!
"Oh my gosh."

Danny looked away from the tableau to examine Sam. "You don't like it," said Danny, wilting. "What?" said Sam, looking at him, wide-eyed. "No!" she denied. "No, no. It's cool." She looked back over the balustrade. "I'm just surprised, that's all."

"Yeah."

Danny turned around to look at Tucker. "Are you okay?"

"Just a bit of vertigo," Tucker said, waving Danny off. "But, yeah, surprised. I mean, dang."

"No, no," said Jazz. She was standing just to the other side of Tucker. "This all makes perfect sense."

Everyone (really everyone, the other students and the adults had also made their way over to the railing at this point) stared at the young woman as if she was on drugs.

(Hey! Maybe they were all on drugs! That would make much more sense than what was actually happening.)

"Think about it, what with everything that Phantom deals with on a daily basis, he must feel that he's made of contradictions. He fights ghosts to protect humans that are always persecuting him, he's friends with the children of the people who hunt him most often... And I've always said that he's more complex than most people think." She frowned. "This is Relativity, isn't it? At least partially. The Escher print. That makes even more sense... perspectives..." She trailed off mumbling.

"How the hell is that supposed to help us get home?!" exploded Rebecca suddenly. Everyone flinched away from the dark skinned girl. "Do any of you see this mess? It's a damn maze! We're never going to get home!" She burst into tears. Her friend, Ashley, tried to comfort her, but it was clear that she was upset, too.

"Hey," said Jazz, softly. "Rebecca, look at me. We're going to take this one step at a time. We have food now," she gestured at the kitchen, "and the wisps said that there were beds around here, too, right, Danny?"

"Um, yes," said Danny, shaking off his momentary paralysis. "Yes." He whistled up to Leader. Leader whistled back. "Yes," he repeated. "Off that way," he pointed along the balustraded walkway. There were some doorways set into the wall, there. A few were covered with curtains. "They also said something about 'small rooms with lots of water.' I guess that could be bathrooms?"

"Bathrooms?" The word was uttered by a dozen voices.

"Yeah. Maybe."

There was a rush in that direction.

Danny sighed, rubbing his eye. He didn't feel the need to go, and he could wash his hands in the kitchen waterfall just as well. Maybe he could start on pancakes, too. That would probably cheer
everyone up.

"Daniel?"

Danny looked at his teacher, startled. He hadn't noticed Mr Lancer staying behind. "Yes?"

"Can I talk to you privately for a moment?"
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Ha! I managed to figure out how to make the italics and the bolds work properly! Yes! From now on, everything should be just the same as FFN. Remember, if you want to read the whole thing until now at once, go to FFN.

Chapter 26: Punch Reality

“Talk to me?” echoed Danny. “Privately?” He glanced at the knot of people around the (potential) bathroom doorways. “B-but what about ev-everyone else? Won't it be risky to leave them alone? Sh-shouldn't we stay with them?” There was a noticeable tremor in his voice as he asked the questions. What did Mr Lancer know? What did he think he knew?

“We'll stay within shouting distance,” said Mr Lancer. “Not to mention sight. In any case, it was my impression that you thought we were safe here. Was I mistaken?”

Danny shook his head violently. “No!” he said. “Of course not.” He glanced towards Sam, Tucker, and Jazz for support. They hadn't run off to investigate the (potential) bathrooms.

Sam gave him a minute shrug. She would go along with whatever he decided. Tucker frowned, but only tilted his head to one side. He didn't like this, but he wasn't going to stop Danny if he chose to talk to Mr Lancer. Jazz gave Danny a tiny nod. She wanted him to talk to Mr Lancer, but she was still worried.

A little calmer now, Danny examined his teacher. Mr Lancer looked worn. More than worn, really. He looked as exhausted as Danny felt (almost). But underneath that exhaustion, and a careful mask of neutrality, there was concern. Concern and... Was that calculation? Yes. Calculation, like he was trying to put together a puzzle. Calculation, but not suspicion. Between his frequent 'bathroom' breaks, his occasional academic shenanigans, and general odd behavior, Danny had been on the receiving end of Mr Lancer's suspicion often enough to tell the difference.

This was not good. In fact, it was something like the opposite of good. Mr Lancer was not an idiot, for all that he had been stuck as the vice principal of Casper High for something longer than forever. If Mr Lancer knew, he could destroy Danny's life within minutes, seconds, once they got back to Amity Park. It would only take a sentence to the GIW, to the news, to Valerie, or even to his parents, if he was being honest with himself, and just like that, his life, his human life, would be over. What was left of it, anyway.

Beyond that, considering Danny's current, physical condition (aka bad), even an overweight, sedentary teacher like Mr Lancer was a potential threat. Not a serious threat, Danny had more than a passing familiarity with martial arts, but still a threat.

On the other hand, Danny couldn't detect any hostility. What's more, although Mr Lancer had not necessarily always been kind to Danny, he had always been supportive. Danny knew that he deserved far more detentions than he received, and Mr Lancer went out of his way to give him extra
credit assignments, and to help him understand lessons that he missed. Danny liked Mr Lancer.

“What you want to talk about...” started Danny slowly. “Is it okay if my friends stay?” He included Jazz in his gesture.

Mr Lancer blinked, but Danny got the impression that he wasn't surprised. “I suppose Mr Foley and Miss Manson know all your secrets?”

“Most of them,” admitted Danny. “Jazz is the only one that knows all the embarrassing ones from before I was five.”

“Alright,” said Mr Lancer, sighing through his nose. “Earlier, you said that your role on the team was that of a record keeper?”

“Um. Yes. I also do some of the, um, science,” said Danny, wondering where this was going. “And Jazz and I both do equipment.”

“I also do psych and psyops,” said Jazz, helpfully. “That is, I cover for the others, when they have to go, and analyze our enemies.”

“I do tech,” said Tucker. Apparently they were going the 'swamp Mr Lancer with information and hope he gets confused' route. “That is, normal, non-ghostly tech, and anything to do with programming and signals. And I've got first aid training. Well, we all do, but Phantom says that I'm the best at stitches.”

“Stitches?” said Mr Lancer, looking faintly ill.

“Well, yeah, even with superpowers, those fights are brutal,” said Tucker. “He doesn't get off scott free. Not all ghosts are made of putty.”

“And you Miss Manson?”

Oh, good, it looked like the distraction technique was working. With any luck, he will have forgotten his original intent by the time Sam finishes her answer.

“I'm backup combat,” said Sam. “I'm best with the weapons. Don't even try to argue, Tucker.”

“Wasn't going to,” protested Tucker.

“I'm also the occult expert, since I was kind of into that stuff even before the Fentons decided to punch reality in the face.”

“I really wish you'd stop describing it like that,” said Danny.

“They also punched common sense, and I think it's been avoiding the whole family ever since.”

“Hey,” complained Danny, halfheartedly.

“Don't fret, Danny. She's just jealous of our uncommon sense.”

Despite himself, Danny snickered. Even Mr Lancer smiled a little. Gosh, that was a terrible pun. Not that Danny had any room to talk.

But then Mr Lancer's expression faded back into that half-concealed concern. “Daniel,” he said, “if that's all you've been doing for Phantom, why are you, more than Miss Manson and Mr Foley, always skipping class?”
Well, heck. There it was. The thread. The thing that he had been forgetting. The flaw in their otherwise brilliant (note: sarcasm) lie.

Perfect.

“Phantom needs backup, sometimes,” said Danny.

“From the team record keeper?”

“Hey, he's kind of scatterbrained. Forgets who he's fighting half the time.”

Mr Lancer looked skeptical. “Daniel,” he said finally, “I know that you don't want to hear this, that you don't want to answer these questions, especially when they're coming from me, but as a teacher, I have responsibilities to my students.” He took a deep breath, as if he was steeling himself. “How long have you-?” He paused, seeming to reconsider something mid-sentence. “How long,” he said more carefully, “have you been Phantom?”

Sam, Tucker, and Jazz drew closer to Danny. Closing ranks. They were ready to protect him. Heck, judging by the way her fists were balled, Sam was ready to attack Mr Lancer, if it became necessary. He hoped it wouldn't. He hoped that he could get out of this by playing dumb.

“You mean, how long has he been overshadowing me? Only since we've been here.”

Pity and guilt briefly rippled across Mr Lancer's face. “We both know that isn't what I mean.”

“Then what do you mean?” snapped Danny.

“You are Phantom,” said Mr Lancer gently. “The accident you had in the portal... I would say that it killed you, but...” His eyes flickered up and down Danny. “I know you have a pulse. I know you breathe. The school nurse isn't that incompetent. It changed you, somehow. That's what that shadow was trying to get at. How isn't important. Daniel- Danny. Jasmine. I need to know: are you safe at home? Do your parents...” Mr Lancer trailed off, clearly unsure how to phrase his next question.

For his part, Danny was unsure how to answer. Mr Lancer was the second human to find out (Danny didn't count Vlad or Danielle) and he wanted to know... What? If they were being abused? Neglected? What did you even count not realizing that your child has died as? Neglect, probably. Except that Danny was still walking around, and trying his very best to keep them from knowing. What did you count trying to capture and experiment on your child as? Abuse, probably. Except that they had genuinely not known that they were shooting at a sentient being, much less Danny. Danny hadn't blamed them for any of it, until the assembly.

But now... Actually, not realizing, or outright ignoring, that ghosts were sentient, sapient, feeling beings was pretty bad.

Making those two things, the Mortifier, and that hopefully permanently nameless abomination, was worse. Much worse.

Complicating this was the outright relief Danny was feeling. He hadn't expected to feel relief, but there it was. It was like a great weight had been taken off his shoulders. Mr Lancer knew. Mr Lancer knew, and he didn't think that Danny was an abomination, wasn't calling him a freak, was making an effort to understand, and help him, in his own, awkward way.

“They don't know,” said Danny.

“That's obvious,” said Mr Lancer. “That wasn't what I was going to ask. They hurt you, Daniel.
Badly. Even I can see that. How often do things like this happen?"

“Never,” said Danny, quickly. “This is the first time anything like this has happened.”

“This is the first time that something this bad has happened,” corrected Jazz, gently, “and that's only if you don't count the portal accident.”

Mr Lancer, whose eyes had turned to Jazz as she spoke, looked back at Danny. “I need to know,” he begged. “Are you safe at home?”

Danny's eyes darted between Jazz and Mr Lancer. He wished he could say 'yes' without lying. Before last summer (the number of inventions they had tested in July had been unreal), he could have, but even back then, he had probably been deluding himself. It would have been fine if he was fully human. Probably. Jazz did get hit with stuff, too. But he wasn't, and his parents really should have picked up on how some of their inventions did hurt Danny.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked finally. “You can't tell anyone about this. About any of this. The Guys in White would hunt me to the ends of the Earth if they knew about me, and getting child services involved... I know they do health checks, and not all of my vitals are, well, vital.”

Danny bit his lip. “Most of what we said before was the truth. Just... edited.”

“I'm not going to tell anyone, Daniel. I just want you to be safe. I-” He stopped, and smiled ruefully. “Perhaps this is not the right time or place.” He sighed. “Still, if there's anything I can do to help-”

“Can you make pancakes?”
This was clearly not what Mr Lancer had been expecting. He spluttered, but got his feet back under himself quickly enough. “Yes,” he said, finally, “I can but... Why do you ask?”

“We can take turns cooking while they’re all fighting over the bathrooms... I guess there really must be bathrooms over there. Otherwise they would have come back by now.” Danny looked at the... Well, he couldn't really call it a line. It was still a crowd, but a more organized crowd than before. “Anyway, I was thinking that we can do pancakes. I saw pancake mix earlier. You guys can find the other ingredients while I try to figure out how those stove tops work.”

Mr Lancer blinked. “You mean, that's a kitchen?”

“What else would it be?” asked Danny. He had thought it a little odd at first himself, but the more he looked at it, the more obvious its purpose became. Although, Mr Lancer likely hadn't been spending much of his time looking at the kitchen. “I mean, it has cabinets, counters, those are stoves, and that seems to be a fridge.”

“I suppose you're right,” said Mr Lancer.

“Great. So, we clean up, you guys find pancake makings, or anything that requires minimal preparation, I'll work out the stoves. Okay?”

“Ah,” said Sam, her breath misting, “Mr Lancer, you don't want those.”

Mr Lancer cautiously put the round red fruit back on the shelf. “Why not?” he asked, his own breath coming out white.

Sam made a face. “I don't know as much about it as Danny, but pomegranates aren't always safe, here in the GZ.”

“I suppose it has something to do with Persephone?”

“Maybe. I don't know. I've met some weird ghosts, but no one's ever said that Persephone is or was real. There are plenty of Greeks, sure, but not too many outright gods.”

“What would they do?”

“Hm?” said Sam. She was looking for soy milk, or almond milk. She didn't really have anything against normal milk, it didn't have a face on it, but she tended to choose the vegan option when it
was available.

“The pomegranates,” said Mr Lancer, picking up a jar to squint at the label. Was that Russian? “Was Mrs Fenton correct in saying that some foods could bind a person to the Ghost Zone?”

“What? No. Not exactly. Um. I guess that in some situations it could? Like I said, I don’t know a lot about that, but it's more like... If you eat it, it's like an obligation? And then some of them are Stygian, which adds a whole new complication.” Sam shrugged. “Nine out of ten times it's safe, but it's better not to take the risk.”

“Is there anything else I should be wary of?”

“Yeah. Lotus. But you'd probably be wary of that, anyway.

As it turned out, the stove tops were simple to use. Danny hovered his hand over the flat surface. It felt hot enough. He looked at the flame beneath. Somehow, the heat it was producing was constrained, directed upwards, not outwards. Danny would say it was odd, but after the windows, it was nothing. There was probably some kind of spacial distortion... An extra dimension that the heat was lost to, maybe? That would be interesting.

Danny walked past Tucker, who was pulling boxes from the shelf, then paused. “What are you even looking for?” he asked.

“Chocolate chips, dude,” said Tucker. “Toppings, you know?”

“I think you passed some nuts back there...” Danny stood on his tip-toes, and pulled a jar down. It was labeled 'noix.'

“What language even is that?”

“French,” said Danny absently, turning the jar over in his hand. “These are walnuts, I think.” He put the jar down on the counter. I'm going to see if they've found any butter yet.

“Cool. They're starting to come back,” said Tucker, indicating a handful of people who had come back from the bathrooms (that apparently did exist). “I might head over in a minute.”

“Okay,” said Danny. “I'm going to see if Sam and Mr Lancer have found any butter.”

He walked over and stuck his head into the fridge. “Butter?” he asked.

Sam threw a stick at him and he just barely managed to catch it. “There's some more in here,” said Sam, “but we'll take care of it.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Hey, I found the chocolate chips,” said Tucker. “You'd better use them, Danny.”

“I will,” promised Danny, rolling his eyes. He pulled a large ceramic bowl off a shelf, and placed it on the counter underneath. “Where's the pancake mix?”
“Here,” said Tucker, hauling the large box over to where Danny was standing. “Do you think it'll be enough?”

“Probably? I don't know how hungry everyone is. I mean, I was able to eat some apples earlier, even if I threw them up, later. I don't know how much everyone else was able to eat.”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “Well, the A-listers got into the food pretty fast. No one else got any, though. Some people actually appreciated the fact that we were stranded without food.” He paused. “As in, they understood it. Not that they liked it. Jeez, this is what studying for tests does. Stupid standardized testing,” muttered Tucker, darkly.

“Yep,” said Danny, pouring the mix into the bowl. He looked back into the cabinet, found a cup, and began to draw water from the sink waterfall. “Ah, wait, did you see a whisk anywhere?”

“There were utensils over there,” said Tucker pointing.

Danny went over to the indicated cabinet and pulled out a whisk. Just then, Mr Lancer and Sam walked out of the cold room, carrying their spoils.

“Awesome,” said Danny. He glanced at the small group milling around the sitting area and very obviously not looking out past the balustrade. Dash, Dale, Paulina, Tiffanie, Star... Of course the A-listers would somehow get to the front of the line. Whatever. Danny wasn't bitter about the popularity ladder, not anymore.

(Well, maybe a little bit.)

Danny started mixing the pancake batter. “You guys should go ahead and distribute what can be eaten as-is. I can handle this for now.”

There were pancakes. Lots and lots of pancakes. There were chocolate chip pancakes, and there were walnut and pecan pancakes. There was syrup, not maple syrup, unfortunately, but nice syrup nonetheless. Sam had found some strawberries, so those were there, and milk, and orange juice.

By the time Danny had finished making the pancakes, and had taken a detour to the bathrooms (which did exist, but were as exotic in construction as the kitchen), most people were already eating. Not everyone, though. Some had apparently taken Jack and Maddie's warning about the food to heart.

Danny slipped into an empty chair between Sam and Tucker, and pulled a stack of towards him. Gosh, he was hungry.

“Danny.”

With a sigh, he lowered his fork, and looked up at his mother. “What?” he said. He didn't want to deal with this. He wanted to eat.

“These laws that ghosts have...”

Danny groaned, loudly, and shoved a forkful of pancake into his mouth. “What about them?” he
“Details,” said Maddie. “What did we do, exactly, and what would the... Who or what would be in charge of enforcing the laws?”

“Um,” said Danny, rubbing his eye. “What did I already tell you?”

“You said that there were laws against murder, rape, and sacrilege.”

“Oh. Um. No, no, that's not quite right. Ghosts don't- Ugh. I shouldn't have translated it as rapine, it's so easy to take the wrong way. Maybe I should have said pillage. But that's not quite right either, and pillage in the English sense isn't Taboo... And it includes rape, but... Okay. Okay, I've got it, I've got it, just give me a second.” He stuck another bite of pancake into his mouth and chewed fiercely.

“Okay, so the problem here is that, originally, the Taboos were written- codified- by people who had a concept of existence but not of life. The first ghost societies. They had their own language, and it didn't have anything to do with English. Or any human language, for that matter. The categories they assigned what they considered crimes don't always make sense. Then, other things got tacked on to the original Taboos. The categories do still have... themes, I guess. So they're useful.” Danny fell silent, and ate some more pancakes.

“Danny.”

“Huh?” said Danny, intelligently.

“Sweetie, I understand that you've had some trouble finding translations, but-”

Tucker snorted. Everyone stared at him. “We didn't have any trouble finding translations,” said Tucker, rolling his eyes.


“What do you mean?”

“Seriously? You haven't noticed?”


“Come on, Danny. It's not like it isn't going to come out. It's kinda surprising that it hasn't already, considering.”

“Fine,” said Danny, going after his pancakes again.

“What are you two talking about,” asked Maddie, suspiciously.

“So, two years ago, Danny asked me to help him learn Esperanto,” began Tucker. “He picked it up super fast. Then this jerk tells me that it isn't his first second language. He's already fluent in Spanish, and he's getting all As in French.”

“Why would he know Spanish?” asked Paulina.

Of course everyone was listening. Danny felt himself turning pink, an uncomfortable heat gathering under his skin. He really preferred the cold.

(He had studied it, sporadically, in the last years of grade school and in middle school, mostly to impress Paulina.)
Tucker shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Anyway, after he devoured Esperanto, he decided to learn Latin, because a lot of ghosts know it. Then he picked up Greek. And when I say ’picked up,’ I mean that he just showed up at school one day and said, ’Hey, guess what? I know Greek now!’”

“I didn't say it like that!” protested Danny.

“You kind of did, actually,” said Sam.

“Not you, too, Sam.”

“So you speak six languages?” asked Mia, shocked.

“Seven,” said Mikey. “He speaks whatever it is these things use.” He indicated the wisps.

“They aren't things,” said Danny. “They're wisps. Will'o-the-wisps, and they're people.”

“He speaks way more than that,” said Tucker. “But good luck getting him to tell you how many that is.”

Danny put his head on the table. “You're awful.”

“What was the last human language you were working on? Russian? Chinese?”

“Chinese, yeah,” mumbled Danny.

“You speak Chinese?” said Hannah.

“That's great, Danny-boy!” shouted Jack. “Why didn't you tell us?”

Danny was about to answer, but Elliot, of all people, interrupted. “Y’know, this is great and all,” he said, “but there’s still the whole ’you could be executed’ thing that’s hanging over our heads. I’d like some clarification on that.”
“Right,” said Danny. “Right. So, three Taboos, Murder, Rapine, and Sacrilege. Those could be rephrased as serious crimes against the body, serious crimes against the mind, and serious crimes against the soul. None of which really gives you any new information... Great. Give me a second here.”

Danny ran a hand through his tangled hair. “So, crimes of against the body,” he began. “The basic crime would be destroying, or trying to destroy someone physically. Like, if you were trying to end a ghost, or murder a human. But, just like with humans, there are a lot of reasons that doing so might be considered justified. Loopholes. If you're at war, if they attacked you first, they attacked someone else first, and you saw them, if they stole your stuff, if they were trying to steal your stuff, if they were breaking or trying to break another Taboo, if it's part of your obsession, if they caused your death, if you have a persistent reciprocal rivalry with them, if you're defending your haunt, or a vassal, if you did it while you were still alive... The list goes on for a while, actually. Typically, humans are exempt from being tried for Acts of Murder, especially if they only killed other humans. But there are, like, reverse exceptions, too. Killing a relative is usually prosecuted, regardless of other circumstances, even if those prosecutions fall through. People who commit genocide while alive who become ghosts when they die are also often tried. Because, you know, a lot of their victims become ghosts, too. Also, putting one of the Dead through whatever killed them is usually considered an Act of Murder. Some people want it to be considered an Act of Rapine, but since it can happen accidentally, and not all ghosts are Dead...” Danny shrugged. “My understanding is that there were politics involved.” He looked down at his plate. His pancakes were probably only lukewarm now. “Can I finish my pancakes now?” he whined. He wanted to eat. Everyone else was getting to eat, and this wasn't important right now. It wasn't fair. To prove his point, he tried to shove an entire pancake into his mouth.

(It was childish. So what?)

(Regret was for losers.)

((People who shoved whole pancakes into their mouths evidently fell into that category.))

“I think that I can answer some of that,” said Jazz as Danny surreptitiously removed most of the pancake from his mouth. “Like Danny said, Acts of Rapine are crimes against the mind. Ghosts tend to take these seriously. Their mental state affects them physically, even more so than a human's. Threatening their mental state threatens their existence.” Jazz licked her lips and looked over at Danny. “Am I doing okay, so far?”

Danny paused mid-chew to look at Jazz. He'd been alternating eating pancakes himself with feeding them to curious wisps. They seemed to like it.

“Yeah,” he said, “you're doing fine.”

“Another aspect is that ghosts consider the mind to be more important that the body. I wouldn't go as far as to say that they don't care about the body, the first Taboo makes that clear, but it's much less important to them. Then, also, to make an effective attack on the mind, you usually need to be close to the person in question. There are exceptions, but not many. This makes violations of this Taboo
betrayals as well as assaults. I believe that talking someone into committing suicide counts as a violation of this Taboo. Right?”

“Right,” said Danny, shooing some wisps away so that others could get their turn at the syrup. Greedy, sugar-loving snowballs. They were lucky they were so cute. Like kittens. Or baby seals. Or some other cute little soft fuzzy thing. He sighed. “I guess that it's my turn again,” he said.

“Afraid so, little bro.”

“So. Sacrilege. There's a lot in that category that is kind of weird, that doesn't have very severe punishment, in and of itself. Some of the stuff is in there just to be a loophole for murder, as far as I can tell, so the punishment is mostly that they won't stop people from killing you. The rest of the stuff, though, is super serious. Super, duper, serious. That thing you made up there? That's in the second category. Unlike with the other two, they will go after humans for violating it. They go after anyone who goes after it. *Always*. Execution is the least of your worries,” grumbled Danny. He put a pancake in his mouth and chewed it angrily.

“But... Why?” asked Maddie. “I don't understand why what we did is considered to be so awful. We didn't even manage to do what we set out to do.”

“It's not about what you did,” said Danny. “Not really. It's about *how* you did it. That's why I had to ask about it. The metaphysical connection between a ghost and their lair.” He sighed, and explained, for the benefit of the other students. “If a ghost has a lair, and that's not a given, by the way, then they have a psychic link to the lair. Like you see in stories. The ghost can affect the lair, that much is a given, that's the point, but the effects can go the other way, too. There are other links like that, too, and because you can't control it, because it isn't something conscious, it's a point of vulnerability,” said Danny, trying to explain it in a way that his parents would understand. It was so much more than that it was a point of vulnerability. Messing with these links, these bonds, was called a crime against the soul. That wasn't meaningless. It wasn't just words. “What actually happened- The thing with the shadow. That's incidental. Comparatively. It's still not a *good* thing, and I'm not sure that it wouldn't be Taboo by itself, but some lairs do have shadows naturally. Not this one, though. Not according to these guys.” He gestured at the wisps, who were licking (Was that the right term? They didn't have tongues.) syrup off his plate. He smiled, and retrieved another pancake from the stack at the center of the table. They were almost all gone. It was good that they were all able to eat. Now they just needed to sleep.

“How worried do we need to be about that?” said Valerie, suddenly.

“Sleeping?” asked Danny, caught off guard. Valerie had been quiet since they started down the stairs. “Why'd we have to be worried about that?” He yawned, barely covering his mouth.

“What?” said Valerie, lips drawing back in surprise and confusion. “No, the shadow. How worried do we have to be about it? It sounded like it had a grudge against Mr and Mrs Fenton, and you said that it was still hanging around. How worried do we need to be?”

“Um. Not?” said Danny, tiredly. “It's not-” he yawned again. Even if he was used to pulling all nighters, this was above and beyond. “The shadow, he's still part of- of Phantom, he's gotta follow the same rules.”

“What, the Taboos?” asked Ricky, muffling a yawn of his own.

“No. Well, yes, but no. Like, m- his obsession. You can't act against that. Or, hmm, frailties, or natures, or stuff like that. Y'know. How are you guys all so awake?” Danny's last sentence had a distressed waver to it. He was too tired to be talking about this. He was starting to slip.
“We're all kind of tired, right now,” said Jazz. “I think that we should all try to get some rest, now. I think there were some beds in the room over this way...”

Jazz took control of the conversation. She slid out of her chair as she spoke, and stood behind Danny, pulling his chair back, even as he tuned out the beginning of a dispute. Something about not sleeping in ghost beds and who was going to stay up to watch.

Sam and Tucker steered Danny into a bed while Jazz and Mr Lancer herded the rest of the class.

Danny fell asleep almost immediately.

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The shadow picked one of the round red fruit off the shelf in the cold room. It had enough form to do that now, and it- no, he- was fascinated. He turned it over in his hand, watching as his fingers became progressively more defined. He raised a black-nailed finger to his lips. He had lips now, and sharp teeth. It was wonderful, he decided.

He lowered the finger to touch the fruit. Softly, at first, then he dug his sharp nail into the skin, digging his finger in, and then pulled back the rind to see the dark, purple-red seeds that filled the interior. He plucked one out, and popped it into his mouth, enjoying the texture. Flavor was a little beyond him, at the moment, but his shape was patterned after Danny's ghost form. A sense of taste would come eventually. He popped another seed into his mouth, and licked his thumb.

Just then, the boundary of his hand flickered, and the fruit fell through, landing softly on the shelf beneath it. He frowned. Clenched his fist. He hated having to wait. He hated being passive like this. He wanted to do something. He wanted to open their eyes and make them see.

There was a rise in the pitch of the conversation happening out by the bedrooms. The shadow tilted his head. It would be interesting once they were asleep.
Chapter 29: Rooms

It turned out that there weren't beds in the room. There was a bed. Luckily, there was more than one such room, strung out like beads on the walkway. There were enough beds if people doubled or tripled up, and the beds were more than big enough to do that.

The problem was that that required splitting up. Going to different rooms. Some people objected to that. Others thought that wasn't so bad, except that some of the rooms were a bit... odd. Themed. At least, that was what Sam had heard. She hadn't looked at them herself. Neither she nor Tucker were at all inclined to leave Danny passed out on his own.

Neither was Jazz, but, when it came down to it, Lancer wasn't capable of managing the class by himself under these circumstances, and Jack just added to the chaos. Jazz was needed.

The room that Sam and Tucker had claimed for themselves and Danny wasn't so bad. Really, it was normal, when taken in context. All the furniture in it was made of stone, grown from the walls. There was a huge, archway window, showcasing a full moon and brilliant stars. The vaulted ceiling was... Not painted. Inlaid. There were circles of blue, silver, and gold on the ceiling. They reminded Sam of old star charts, although they didn't match to anything that she could recall.

The bed itself, positioned under the window, was wide. Larger than king-sized. There were lots of cushions and blankets on it, and between that and the slight depression in the middle, it had a nest-like feel to it.

There was a desk with drawers up against one wall. Against another, there was a dresser. The bed was flanked by nightstands. The door was flanked by bookshelves.

The desk and each nightstand had a ball of cold, green-blue fire floating over it. Tucker and Sam had discovered entirely by accident (Tucker certainly hadn't meant to stick his elbow through the one over the desk) that the balls could be moved around and dimmed or brightened by touching them. Not that this was in useful at the moment. The wisps more than adequately illuminated the room, and they adjusted their brightness at a whim.

Only a handful of the books on the bookshelves were in English. The nightstand drawers contained tissue boxes (tissues optional) and a large amount of string. There were pencils, pens, and notebooks in the desk. The dresser was full of clean clothes in various states of wear, all approximately Danny's size, none of which Sam recognized as ever having belonged to Danny, and a large number of mismatched socks.

“Found it,” said Tucker, softly.

Sam turned away from the dresser. Tucker was on his knees, looking under the bed. Danny was on top of the bed, face down, his feet hanging off the end, dead to the world. More so than usual.

Sam glanced back at the doorway, towards where Danny's parents were standing. Arguing. Jumping
up and down and tearing their hair out. Well, not quite. It sounded like the main thrust of the argument had changed from 'Do we sleep in the ghost beds?' to 'Who gets which ghost bed?' with a little bit of 'I don't want to share my ghost bed!' on the side.

If it bothered them so much they should just sleep on the sofa.

Sam sighed, even as Tucker's hand twiched towards whatever it was that he had found under the bed. “Wait,” she said.

“I know,” said Tucker. His eyes were on the door as well.

Couldn't they pick somewhere else to argue over something so shallow? There was a sleeping person in here!

Tucker stood up, frowning. “Maybe we should get his shoes off, at least,” he said, looking at Danny. “Turn him over, too. He doesn't look very comfortable.”

Danny didn't look very comfortable. It almost looked like he was planking, to be honest, just laying there where he had fallen on the bed. Sam had expected him to move. To get into a better position. To burrow under the nearby sheets. That's what he normally did, when he was falling asleep.

“Have you ever seen him just collapse like this?” asked Sam. “I mean, going from being tired but talking, and doing stuff, to can't even stand up in minutes?”

“Yeah,” said Tucker, biting his lip. “Not often, but yeah.”

“When?” They were both sitting on the bed, now, on either side of Danny.

“When he's been hurt. After long fights at night. Just once or twice. I think he'd been trying to get home, but the fight was near my house and he needed help getting patched up. A few minutes after I got everything in place he just kinda passed out in my bed. I freaked out. I thought that he was dead. But he was still breathing and stuff, and he was 'fine' when he woke up. So.” Tucker shrugged.

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, Danny and his fine. Ready to flip him?”

“Yeah,” said Tucker.

Strictly speaking, they didn't need to coordinate like this. Each of them had, on separate occasions, carried Danny on their own. Not to mention the times that they had flung Danny across an entire room, again, on their own. Danny was light, even when he wasn't subconsciously tapping into the power of flight and was (literally) dead weight. Flipping him together, though, was easier on Danny. Like this, they wouldn't be putting too much pressure on any one part of him, and accidentally injuring him further.

It also mitigated the risk that Danny would wake up, react poorly to being touched, and try to hit them, or something. Not that it had happened more than once, but it paid to be wary when your friend has both superpowers and terrible nightmares.

However, all that happened was that Danny made a tiny sound of protest, not unlike that of a kitten, twitched, and went right on sleeping. Only now, he was on his back.

“He's not purring,” observed Sam, still keeping her voice low.

“Yeah, I noticed that. Do you think that it's just that he's uncomfortable, or upset, 'cause I know that I'd be, or that one of those things damaged his core?”
“It could be either,” said Sam. “But he was purring earlier, so it wasn’t the gun.”

“He was asleep earlier?”

“Yeah, we all got split up in the trees.”

“Does it have anything to do with the Mortifier being gone?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say that.” Sam started to give Tucker a brief rundown of what had happened as they each untied one of Danny's shoes. By the time they were done with that Jazz had (finally) gotten the others to move on to the other rooms. Sam made one last check of the doorway, peeking out to see where everyone was, before turning and nodding to Tucker. Tucker reached under the bed, and pulled out a first-aid kit.

Sam and Tucker had known that there would be a first-aid kit somewhere in here, especially after seeing how much stuff was in the kitchen. Not because they were psychic, or anything like that, but because they knew Danny, and Danny always kept a first-aid kit in his room, or any room he planned on sleeping in. For him they were a necessity. There was one in his desk in his room. Tucker kept one under his bed. Sam hid hers behind her stereo. Jazz had one, too, in plain sight on her bookshelf, labeled 'in case of ghost attack.' Anything labeled like that in the Fenton house was usually left alone, strangely enough.

Tucker snapped open the case. “Hey, Sam, check this out.”

“What?” asked Sam, peering over his shoulder.

“This is one of ours,” said Tucker, pointing to the words 'red/green' written on the inside of the lid with markers of the same color. “I think this is the one we lost a few months ago. The one that fell out of the speeder, remember?”

“Yeah,” said Sam. “That's weird. I wonder how it got up here.” She frowned, then shook her head, standing. “Just make sure that it's all still okay to use. You take care of Danny, I'm going to make sure that nobody sneaks up on us.”

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There was a torch-lit room full of velvety black flowers. The walls were draped with black curtains. The walls and their ornaments had a decidedly Gothic flair to them. The bed had four posts and a black satin canopy. No one wanted to sleep in that room.

There was a room that was painted in warm colors. After the all the cool stone, it was a bit of a shock. It was incongruous. A bit artificial, too. After all, the paint was applied directly to the stone. The blankets on the bed were stripped. Green, yellow, red. There was a desk, dresser, bookshelves, bedside tables... The bedside tables had lamps on them, each sporting a single, bare, incandescent bulb. Sitting on the desk was a rectangular sheet of glass, with a sticky note on it. The note read: 'Electronics still beyond me, sorry.' Piled around that piece of glass were piled batteries, remote controls, electronic key fobs, little, tamagotchi-type hand held games. The bookshelves were full of broken electronics.

There was a room that looked almost normal, except that there were books everywhere. Bookshelves
covered every wall, all the way up to the ceiling. There was even a bookshelf built into the base of the bed (the covers of which were a tasteful teal). Most of the books were in English, but some were in Esperanto. It looked like someone had tried to organize them according to the Dewey Decimal system, but had given up halfway.

There was a room that had a distinct ‘princess’ theme to it. Pinks and pale blues, and medieval architecture, complete with tapestries and murals depicting knights and dragons. This was one of the more normal rooms, except that once you looked more closely, the dragons were *winning*.

There was a room that was completely frigid, all the furniture made of ice, not stone, snowdrifts piled in the corners.

There was a room that had even more clocks in it that the first. The walls were decorated with gears and cogs. Instead of bedside tables, there were sundials to either side of the bed. Stripped candles were arrayed along the desks and tables.

There was a room that looked much like the first room, except that there was also a skateboard propped in one corner, and instead of clocks on the walls, there were photographs and postcards.

There was a room made up to look like a forest.

There was a room that, instead of an actual bed, there was bed, and instead of furniture, there were chew toys.

There was a room that looked like it would better belong in Ancient Greece.

There was a room that was full of pictures of cheese. But no actual cheese. Just pictures. The upholstery was red velvet.

The rooms were weird. But, once Jazz realized what, or rather who they were for, they started to make a lot more sense. This was Danny, after all. Of course he'd make guest rooms for his friends, and of course he'd try and make them as personalized as possible. Of course he'd go overboard.

Poor Danny.

She hoped that he wouldn't mind that she wasn't sleeping in her own room, but in Sam's.

Maddie, accompanied by Mr Lancer, walked back into the larger, communal room. Mr Lancer had come out because he was going to sleep in the sitting area. Maddie, who was planning on staying awake, and taking the first watch, was coming out for an entirely different reason.

She walked into the kitchen. It was such an odd thing to find in a ghost’s lair. A ghost shouldn't need a kitchen. A ghost shouldn't need food. Especially not human food, which was what the kitchen was stocked with.

Maddie spread her hands out over the counter, feeling the cool, smooth stone. It felt remarkably real. All of this did. She pushed down against the stone. There was no give to it. This was disturbing in the extreme. Ectoplasmic constructs should not feel so real.
There was the possibility that portions of this environment were constructed from real objects. Materials from the real world. From Earth. The food at least, had to be. But that possibility was frightening, to say the least. That a ghost could move this much material...

Then the question was, why? Why would a ghost go through this much trouble?

The only answer that Maddie could come up with, is that the ghost, that Phantom, wanted humans there.

They were here now.

Maddie was not at all inclined to let Phantom get away with his plan. It involved deceiving and indoctrinating her children, and possessing her son.

(Part of her wondered if he was telling the truth at all, if Danny was telling the truth, but she ignored it. It couldn’t be.)

But she’d had no choice but to go along with what he wanted. She was unarmed, and this was Phantom’s home. If the incident in the forest had taught her anything, it was that an attack here could come from anywhere.

So she had waited until the small ghosts were all distracted in the other rooms. Phantom could communicate with them, and she had no doubt that they would report her movements to him, if they saw her. That made it awfully dark in the kitchen, though. Luckily, she did have night-vision features in her goggles.

She glanced at Mr Lancer. The poor teacher was already sprawled out, unconscious on the couch. Maddie sighed, and began to search.

It took several minutes to find what she was looking for, made longer by the need to be quiet relative to whatever was going on by the bedrooms (She hadn’t heard any screams, so it was fine. Probably.), but she had at last found them. A block of knives. Not the best weapon against a ghost, but better than nothing at all, and if they were made of ghost material, then they should be able to cut a ghost even if it became intangible.

She set the block on top of the counter, and grasped one of the handles. A butcher’s knife slid out easily, smoothly, with a notable ‘ting’ as it left the block. Maddie examined the edge. It looked sharp.

“What are you doing?”

Maddie whirled, taking in the figure that had come up behind her so quietly. Stark white hair, dark clothes with white accents, luminous toxic green eyes.

Phantom.

Maddie buried the knife in his shoulder.
Maddie yanked the knife out of Phantom's shoulder, and started to bring it down for another blow, but he seized her wrist, and held it up in the air. Then he smiled, revealing a double row of razor sharp, white teeth, his eyes crinkling into luminous slits.

Maddie knew then, as a viscous green drop slid of the tip of the knife, and Phantom grinned up at her, that she had made a terrible mistake.

Then her feet were swept out from under her, and Phantom had her pinned on the floor. He slammed her hand against the floor, hard, and the knife slipped from her grasp, as she cried out.

“That wasn't very nice,” said Phantom, his voice echoing, amusement underlying every syllable.

“What do you want, Phantom?” hissed Maddie.

Phantom blinked, the smiled slipping off his face. “You really can't tell, can you?” he said, words dripping with disdain. “You can't tell at all.” He leaned in, so that his lips were almost touching her ear. “And you call yourself a mother.”

Maddie braced herself for what she knew must be coming.

But her shout had been more than loud enough to draw attention. Mr Lancer was up and leaning over the counter, gaping at the scene.

“Phantom?” whispered Mr Lancer. “But—”

Phantom looked up at Mr Lancer, and Maddie could see the edge of an angelic smile. “No,” he said. “But I understand your confusion.” He released Maddie and stood up, smoothly, all in one motion. “I would say to call me Shadow, but that name has been taken for a while.” He looked back down at Maddie. “Ah, yes,” he cooed. “You're starting to understand now. This is your fault.”

There hadn't been anything wrong with Danny that Sam and Tucker could directly see, so they had simply opted for making him as comfortable as possible. They had just finished tucking him in when they heard Maddie shout. They exchanged a look, shoved the first-aid kit under the bed before rushing out.

They reached the large, common room, and stopped dead. Standing in the kitchen, was someone who looked an awful lot like Danny.
Like- But not quite.

The person had white hair, and ghost-green eyes, and his facial features were the same as Danny's, but there were a number of small differences. He was just a little too tall. His mouth was just a bit too wide, the teeth a little too long, too sharp. His hair was a touch too long, too wild, brushed up at odd angles. His ears were longer, more pointed, than Danny's ever were. More expressive, too, if the way they pricked when Sam and Tucker entered the room was any indication. His weren't Danny's eyes either. His iris were flat, uniform in both color and shade, unlike Danny's, which, despite being perpetually obscured by a moving swirl of ectoplasm, retained the variety and depth of his human eyes. More tellingly, his eyes were not shadowed by lack of sleep, as Danny's always were.

This was not to mention his clothes.

They weren't entirely dissimilar to what Danny was wearing. But that was the point. Danny Fenton was the one who wore hoodies and jeans. Not Phantom. But this person, he was wearing a black zip-up hoodie, a pair of faded black jeans, a white t-shirt, and finger-less black gloves.

Nevertheless, he smiled as soon as he saw them, and, despite the teeth, his smile was so like Danny's that Sam had to stop and reassess the situation.

Of course, she didn't have time for that. Maddie's shout had attracted more than the two of them, and she, as always, shot first. The white-haired boy dodged Valerie's shot easily, his eye-roll visible even from across the room. The blast hit the shelves behind him, scattering plates and bowls in every direction. The boy half turned to look at the mess, and sighed heavily before vanishing from sight.

Valerie had started to lower her gun, when the boy reappeared in front of her. He swept the gun from her hands, disappeared, and then became visible once again behind her, kicking the back of her leg and grabbing her hair, forcing her to her knees and to look up at him.

“I don't understand you, Valerie Grey,” he said. Leaning down to look into her eyes directly. “You were offered such a simple bargain, and he gave you as much as he could. He would help you get home, he gave you back your weapon,” he twirled the blaster around in his hand for emphasis, “and all you had to do was not tell the Fentons about the relationship between him and their child, and not shoot people for no reason. For the first part, you went back on your word as soon as it was possible to do so, for the second, curse you, it hasn't even been a day yet. Why? Was his word not good enough for you, when he has always kept it before?”

“You-” said Valerie, gasping. “You aren't Phantom- ouch!”

“Faster than her.” He jerked his head towards Maddie dismissively, even as he twisted Valerie's hair. “Answer me.”

“You hurt Mrs Fenton, that's not no reason, Phantom.”

“She stabbed me. What was I supposed to do? Shake her hand? When it still holds the knife? Even Phantom would not be so quick to forgive. You certainly aren't. The real reason if you would.”

“As if I would keep a promise with someone who was possessing my friend!”

The boy laughed coldly. “Your friend. You haven't been much of a friend to him, now have you? Abandoning him, for what? So that you could hunt ghosts?” Valerie opened her mouth to protest, but the boy yanked her hair, viciously. “Don't try to tell me it was to protect him from the ghosts, Red. His parents,” the boy spat the word like it was poison, “are hunters. Don't be so conceited, so
arrogant, as to say that your choice made any difference, except that after it you could say that you weren't responsible for what happened to him.”

“I didn't-

“He thought you were changing, you know,” interrupted the boy. “After Danielle. He would have gone through with it. He was going through with it. He thought you were starting to understand, when you let him go. I guess he was wrong,” concluded the boy sadly. He vanished again, and this time he didn't reappear.

Valerie got to her feet, unsteadily.

“Ohmigosh,” said Star into the silence. “Val, are you alright? Did he hurt you? That was scary!”

“No,” said Valerie slowly. “No, I'm fine. Mrs Fenton-

“I'm alright,” said Mrs Fenton.

“Thank God,” said Mr Lancer, his legs apparently giving out, as he slid down the side of the counters.

“Mom? Where's Dad? Shouldn't he have come out?” That was Jazz.

Maddie waved a hand. “He sleeps with earplugs in. You know that.”

Sam stared at Maddie in disbelief. This was the wrong place to be doing that in.

Maddie frowned. “Where's Danny?”

“Dead asleep,” said Tucker. Sam elbowed him. “Hey!”

“Like father like son, I suppose,” said Maddie, rubbing her face tiredly.

“Hey,” said Nathan, “Valerie-

“I’m not going to the prom with you, Lester.”

“Hey!” said Lester.

“I'm Nathan,” said the other red-haired, bespectacled twin. “But that... guy. He called you 'Red.' Red, as in 'Red Huntress'?”

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The GIW propagandists worked fast. It hadn't even been a whole twenty-four hours yet, and already they had all the funding they needed, and the support of politicians from coast to coast.

What they had yet to gain: Access to the Fenton household and portal, and the approval of Mayor Vlad Masters.

Still, there was a limit to what even billionaire tech executive businessmen with political aspirations could do to block an operation meant to rescue American Children. Already, there was significant
pressure on the man from all sectors. Beyond the normal political posturing that came with an event like this, many civilians were agitating for a boycott of MasterSoft and all its subsidiaries. Vlad Masters' grudge against the GIW, his anger over how they had destroyed his castle home in Wisconsin, could only go so far, surely.

Well, that's what they thought. They didn't know Vlad Masters.

(Nor did they know Vlad Plasmius.)

As content as Vlad was to make use of the rather ineffectual enforcement arm of the GIW, letting them into the Ghost Zone unsupervised would be a recipe for disaster. Besides, Daniel had disappeared with the rest of his infuriating class. Vlad had no doubt that, given enough time, the young hybrid would return all the children to Amity Park safely.

Vlad sighed deeply, examining the papers on his desk. Normally, he would try to use the incident as a way to (at long last) get Maddie and Daniel on his side, Jasmine, too, if possible, and get rid of that bumbling oaf, Jack Fenton. Normally. But with the GIW's more competent members crawling over the town, Vlad had elected to keep ecto-activity at a minimum. Especially after he saw what they had done to that animal ghost they had caught early that morning. Vlad might be a villain, he might even embrace that title in his fights with Daniel, but he had standards. Standards the GIW did not live up to.

He was beginning to seriously regret that donation he had given them. Honestly, what had he been thinking, engaging in that ridiculous prank war with Daniel? Yes, Daniel had gotten the GIW to destroy his home, but considering what their previous encounter had entailed (namely the cloning and the death threats), it was a fairly reasonable reaction, and, in hindsight, Vlad had to admit that it was a rather brilliant one. Vlad hadn't lost all of his cloning research, but he had lost most of it.

The phone on his desk rang. Vlad frowned. Not many people had this number, and usually his secretary would say something on the intercom if she was putting someone through. He picked up the phone, and said, “Vlad Masters speaking.”

Then, “Governor! How lovely to hear from you. May I ask the reason for your call?”

A moment passed, and Vlad replied, “Why, that wasn't my intention at all. Of course I want all the children to be safely returned to their homes. I just don't think that the agents of the Group for Inter-dimensional Warfare are the people to do it.”

Another moment. “Governor, you haven't seen these people in action. They cause more damage to property and to citizens than the ghosts they are supposedly catching.”

Vlad sighed. “Yes, I did give them funding, but that was before I knew. Please, don't make the same mistake I did.”

This was not enough. “As I said, I do want all affected persons back in Amity Park.” With the exception of Jack Fenton, but the governor didn't need to know that. “I would just be more comfortable if, say, the members of the army, or the National Guard were being sent.”

A sigh. “Yes, teaching them how to use the equipment would take time, but-”

Vlad clenched his jaw. “No. I understand perfectly, governor. I will take all appropriate actions to accelerate the process.”

The wood at the edge of Vlad's desk creaked ominously under his fingers. “Yes. I will tell the police to remove themselves from the Fenton residence.”
More creaking. “Yes. Thank you, governor. I wish you all the luck you deserve in the upcoming election. Good day.”

Vlad carefully placed the receiver back into its cradle, and unwrapped the fingers of his other hand from around the edge of the desk. He breathed out heavily through his nose. The governor would get what was coming to him. No one crossed Vlad Masters.
Chapter 31

Chapter 31: Signal and Noise

“I- uh- I- um,” said Valerie, flustered.

Jeez, thought Sam. She was even worse at this than Danny was, and she didn't even have the whole 'strapped to a lab table' thing to worry about.

Except... Maybe she did. Even though Valerie was human, she did have her suit, which was quite ghostly, bonded to her. There might be groups that would go after her. None of the people here would, of course, but. Still.

Sam sighed. “Look,” she said interrupting Valerie's stuttered attempt at an explanation. “I'm sure that this is going to turn into a thought provoking revelation, but I'm honestly too tired to process anything right now. Can this wait until morning? Please?”

There were murmurs of agreement, but also of dispute. A number of people, including the more rabid Danny Phantom 'Phans' (aka Paulina) wanted Valerie to explain. Now. Or they were going to tear Valerie apart.

(It was getting harder and harder for Sam to believe she had ever been friends with Paulina.)

But Mr Lancer waded in to the brewing fight (and Sam had no doubt that it would have turned into a fight, considering how tired and irritable everyone was) and sent them all off to bed. Sam was both impressed and relieved. She hadn't wanted to waste time with a fight. Not when she had a pretty good idea of where that boy (and she had an inkling as to his identity) had disappeared to.

From the way he looked at her and Tucker, she suspected that Mr Lancer was having the same, or at least similar, thoughts. She pulled Tucker swiftly along behind her, back to Danny's room, wanting to have a few private moments before the teacher was free to follow them. It wasn't that she didn't trust Mr Lancer, it was just that Mr Lancer was very new to all this. She didn't know how he'd react, and she wanted to be able to assess the situation without worrying about him.

It was a good thing she did, Sam decided when she saw the scene waiting for them in the room. There was the boy, sitting in the bed, Danny's head in his lap. He was combing Danny's hair, with an actual comb no less, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

“Who are you?” asked Sam, wincing when the words came out more harshly than she intended.

The boy smiled gently. “I am the shadow that Jack and Madeline Fenton created. I think you knew that, though.”

“Sorry, dude,” said Tucker, pushing up his glasses. “Had to make sure.” He frowned. “You aren't going to go crazy on us, like Poindexter's shadows do to him, are you?”

“Why would I do that?” said the shadow, sounding hurt. “You're his friends. Of course I wouldn't
do anything like that to you. That was horrible.”


The shadow blinked back, then looked at his shoulder. “Oh. Yeah. I guess so.”

Tucker went under the bed to search for the first aid kit. Sam stepped back to the door, to keep an eye out for pesky classmates and parents.

“You don’t have to do that,” said the shadow, cheerfully. “I'm part of the lair. I can tell where people are, mostly.”

“Oh,” said Sam, not sure what else to say to that. She moved to sit on the bed. “How did that happen, anyway?”

“Madeline stabbed me with one of the kitchen knives.”

“What?!” came the gasp from the doorway. Sam jerked her head towards it. It was just Jazz.

Sam relaxed, and turned back to the sha- Okay. No. Nope. That wasn't going to work anymore. “Do you have a name?”

“I've only been in existence for about four hours. You think I spent that time worrying about a name? When I'm still figuring out how my body works?”

“A 'no' would have been good enough.”

“So you are the shadow from earlier,” said Jazz, coming closer.

“That's me!”

“Why did Mom stab you?”

“Why does she do anything?” he asked, scowling. “Because she's nuts, that's why. I mean, look at what she put Danny through! Poor Danny.” He ran his hand through Danny's hair. “Poor Danny,” he repeated, sounding close to tears.

Tucker cleared his throat. “Uh. I'm gonna need you to take off your shirt.”

“The Corsican Brothers!”

Sam jumped.

“Hi, Mr. Lanier!”

Sam turned away from the door to glare at the shadow. “I thought you said that you could tell if people were coming.”
"I can. But Mr Lancer is cool. Right Mr Lancer?"

At that moment, Mr Lancer looked anything but cool. Actually, he looked as if he was about to have a heart attack. "I- I suppose. I- Who are you, exactly?"

The shadow shrugged, earning him a whack from Tucker, who was still trying to bandage the hole in the boy's shoulder. He rolled his eyes, and scratched the side of his neck with his other hand. "Again with the name thing." He sighed. "Like I said, Shadow is already taken. How about Echo? That's as good a description as any."

"So you are the shadow from earlier? But you... look different..."

The shadow, Echo, shrugged. "My body is currently based on Danny's, but when that machine forced it to coalesce, well, it wasn't something that had been expected."

"Hey, does that mean you can shapeshift? Because that would be cool," said Tucker, putting one last piece of tape on the bandages.

"Not really," said Echo, rotating his arm experimentally. "It's more... How should I put this? In the natural course of events, if that machine hadn't been activated, I would not exist. You would have encountered no shadows in this lair. The lair did not know how to make shadows." He had his hands on Danny again, softly brushing his fingers against the other boy's face. "I was forced into existence. After that, well, we do not discard useful things. The only template we have to use for a body is Danny's." He rubbed his own face, then pinched his cheek. "This is not a perfect copy, however, as I'm sure you noticed." His eyes flicked to one side, to where Jazz was raising her hand, "Yes, Jazz, I see you, what's your question?"

"How separate are you from Danny? I mean, how autonomous are you?"

Echo made a face. "Wow, Jazz, way to break out the fancy words."

"Don't give me that. If you have access to Danny's memories, your vocabulary is twice as big as mine, even if we limit the count to just English words."

"That's a gross exaggeration. Besides, you've got all that psychology terminology."

"Stop avoiding the subject."

"Fine," groaned Echo. "I am, like any shadow, part of the lair. Like the lair, therefore, I am subject and subservient to Danny's will. I do not have free will, and, in that sense, do not have a soul. As for whether or not I have my own mind, separate from Danny's..." Echo shrugged. "I don't have a core. Or, one could say, that Danny's core is my core. On the other hand," he tapped one temple, "Danny's core being what it is, I do have a brain." He seemed pleased about this. "Most ghosts don't, you see," he explained. "Their cores don't know how to make them, or most internal features of human anatomy, for that matter. But Danny's core retains a near-perfect memory of his human body."

"Human body?" asked Mr Lancer, faintly.

"That's right," said Echo.

Mr Lancer opened his mouth, as if to ask a question, but shut it again, opting instead to chew his bottom lip. Finally, he asked, "You are part of this... Lair?"
“That is correct.”

“Then you must know the way out.”

“Yes,” said Echo.

Silence, except for breathing.

(Which, Sam noticed, was something that Echo was doing, and not just to speak.)

“Could you... Tell us?” asked Mr Lancer.

Echo tilted his head all the way over to one side. “Why?”

“So- So that we can go home.”

A frown was added to Echo's face. “Why?”

Mr Lancer opened and closed his mouth several times. “I-” he said, “you- What?”

“What?” repeated Echo, clearly confused.

“Mr Lancer,” said Jazz, interrupting the meaningful exchange, “I think it's best if we stepped outside. Maybe I can explain things to you a little more clearly.”

“I...” Mr Lancer trailed off. “Maybe that would be... Yes. Let's.”

Jazz lead Mr Lancer out of the room. Sam wished her luck.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Echo, frown still etched into his face.

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Jazz lead Mr Lancer out of the room, and into the adjacent one, the one with all the black hangings, keeping an eye out for her mother, or other (late night? What time even was it?) wanderers in the hall (on the walkway, whatever, whichever). Once inside, she turned to face Mr Lancer, trying to figure out what to say. He seemed to be having a similar dilemma.

“You know why- why Echo doesn't want us to leave.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I have a- Call it a suspicion.” She resisted the urge to rub her eyes. She was too tired for this. “You know- You know he's not entirely human, right?” she asked, hesitantly, not at all sure that Mr Lancer had made that connection.

“It had crossed my mind, but I thought that he would still want to go home. I'm not sure how his... life status changes that.”

“It doesn't really, it's just... I'm sorry I'm not doing this very well.”

“We're all tired,” said Mr Lancer. “I'm sorry for pushing this, but I need something, here.”

“Okay,” said Jazz. “Have you heard of ghostly obsessions?”
“In passing,” allowed Mr Lancer. “They’re what binds a ghost to the Earth, correct? Unfinished business, or something like that.”

“Kind of. It’s more like a purpose. A reason to exist. Danny told me once that an obsession is why a ghost exists. Most ghosts have more than one. I don’t suppose you can hazard a guess at one of Danny’s?” asked Jazz. She wasn’t comfortable telling Mr Lancer Danny’s obsessions, that would be beyond rude, but if he could guess, that would be fine.

Mr Lancer blinked, and ran his hand over his face. “Protecting people, I suppose, considering what he spends his time doing.”

Jazz sighed in relief. “Yes. Now, usually, Danny filters his obsessions through, uh, I guess you could call it a human perspective. But Echo isn’t human at all.”

“So you’re saying that this is what Danny’s ghost side wants?”

Jazz grimaced. “Saying it like that makes it sound like Danny has DID. He doesn’t. It’s more like... Look, for one of the Dead,” Mr Lancer flinched, and Jazz realized they hadn’t really touched on the subject of Danny’s death at all, but she pressed on, “their obsessions have to come from somewhere. Danny’s been hurt. Hurt really badly. For him, this is a safe place. A place to heal. A place he controls. This feels like home to him. Add in his obsession, and the mess we left back home...”

“He feels like we’re safe here, too,” concluded Mr Lancer.

“Right. And it doesn’t matter if, consciously, he knows that it would be better if we were all back in Amity Park, because this, the lair, and Echo, and any other shadows we might encounter, they’re all governed subconsciously, and by his more ghostly impulses.”

Mr Lancer frowned. “This isn’t going to become... Daniel... Echo isn’t going to try to keep us here, is he?”

“I doubt it. He might try to convince us to stay, bribe us, somehow, maybe even lie to us, but he won’t use force.”

“What happened with your mother-”

“She stabbed him,” Jazz snapped, suddenly annoyed. “Valerie shot at him. You notice he didn’t actually hurt either one of them. I’m sorry,” she said, the anger draining out of her, “I’m tired. You’re tired. We’re all tired. I need to sleep.”

“I’m sorry, Jasmine. I’ll get out of your way,” said Mr Lancer. He paused in the doorway. “Other shadows?”

“When my brother learns a new trick, he uses it,” said Jazz. “Goodnight, Mr Lancer.”

Mr Lancer’s reply was distinctly haunted. “Goodnight, Jasmine.”
Echo had no need to walk. He could fly. He could fade into the moon-silvered walls of the lair, sink into them like so much water, merge with them, simply appear at his destination, and skip this whole 'traveling' nonsense altogether.

But there was a rhythm to walking, poetry, a heartbeat. His thick boots tapped and clicked against the stone floor. It was new. Novel. An experience for a person who had a dearth of experiences.

Novel. Heh.

That was an appropriate turn of phrase, considering his destination. He reached a wall, and walked up it, then walked along the wall's gentle curve to a descending staircase. He reached a platform, then walked along the platform to a walkway that corkscrewed up around a waterfall. Up farther, and farther, and farther. He trailed his hand along a banister twined with stone roses and real morning glories, and licked drops of water from his lips.

There were other paths, and he knew them. Not that he had ever walked them. Not like he was walking this one.

Briefly, he leaned over the railing, looking down into the heart of the lair, with all its staircases, twisted pathways, and hidden rooms. He gazed at the windows, the starlight, and the flowers.

He might resent Jack and Madeline Fenton, might even hate them, but he was enjoying existing. He was enjoying seeing this from the outside.

(He wondered if Danny was dreaming through his eyes.)

He continued on, walking up, and up and up, the path growing steeper, and steeper, before it suddenly flattened out, and turned into a spiraling staircase. There weren't too many stairs before they let out on another balcony.

The balcony, in turn, became a large, airy room, lined with pillars. Moonlight cast bright trapezoids on the floor. He reached the back wall, and passed through an archway into a larger, much better-lit room.

Bookshelves of wood and stone morphed into dark trees that reached up to the dark and diamond sky. The floor was carpeted in moss, grass, and pin-head sized star-shaped flowers. Ladders leaned against the shelves. Desks and armchairs were illuminated by balls of ghost fire. A library.

It was nothing so grand as Ghost Writer's library. Not that Echo had ever seen Ghost Writers library, and not like he ever would, but he had Danny's memories of the place, Danny's impressions.

Jazz would like it anyway, he hoped.

A mewling sound from up ahead made Echo's ears twitch. He picked up his pace. He reached the
end of a shelf, and turned to face the armchair at the end.

Curled in the armchair was a inky, liquid shadow. It twitched and rippled. Echo sat in the chair set against the opposite bookshelf, bringing his feet up in front of him, and resting his chin on his knees. He watched avidly, fascinated by the process.

If Danny was here, he would be beside himself (figuratively, more than literally, as Echo was), trying to help. But Echo wasn't Danny, not entirely, and this wasn't so much akin watching another person in pain, as it was watching a video of himself getting a bone reset.

It was strange, knowing what that felt like when he had only had bones for, eh, call it ten hours. Certainly not more than that, and for at least one of those hours his 'bones' had likely had more in common with cartilage than anything else.

The shadow in the chair shivered and moaned again. A deeper darkness spread out from its center, rendering the larger part of it opaque.

This was going to take awhile.

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When Tucker woke up, Echo was gone. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but, well, he wasn't exactly surprised. Tucker stretched, rubbing his eyes, and went to sit up, but came up short. Danny had part of Tucker's shirt clenched in his fist.

Tucker settled back down on the bed, and gazed at his friend blearily. Danny was frowning, his brow furrowed, lips parted slightly. He'd somehow wound up half on top of the sheets, face down, turned slightly towards Tucker, one leg thrown over Sam's. Dozens of faintly pulsing wisps cuddled against him, which was a very odd effect.

Tucker groaned. He had to use the bathroom. But he didn't want to wake up Danny. Heck, considering how hard he had fallen asleep earlier, he wasn't sure he could wake up Danny. Maybe he could take off his shirt...

He was attempting to retract his arm into the armhole of his shirt when Danny opened his eyes. Tucker froze. "Hey, dude," said Tucker. "How're you doing?"

Danny blinked, managing to convey an infinite weariness without using words. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to get out without waking you up," said Tucker. "But, uh, I guess you're awake now."

"Huh?"

"You're kinda holding on to me, dude."

"Oh. I'm sorry," said Danny, releasing Tucker.

"It's fine, I just kinda have to go."

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Danny struggled to sit up. He was stiff. Sore. Bruised. He managed to get up on his knees, but had to blink static from his eyes, and swallow to control his nausea.

He raised a trembling hand to his chest, prodding his core with a mental finger. He hissed at the sudden pain. This wasn't good, even if he had half expected it. He'd hoped, though, that his core might have healed at least enough to access basic powers, as it had been before that thing that had made the shadow.

The... Echo.

Danny pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the headache he could feel building behind his eyes. Echo echo echo. Was there an echo in here?

His mother had tried to kill him.

Again.

A knife, descending.

But... Had this happened? He couldn't...

When a sound of distress rose in his throat, he swallowed it. He didn't want to wake Sam. Sam didn't do mornings. Regardless of whether or not this counted as a morning, disturbing Sam would be a mistake.

He crawled out of the bed and laid on the floor. The relative coolness of the floor felt good. Wisps floated down to join him, their touch icy. Did he have a fever? It wouldn't surprise him. He felt awful. He sat up again.

Where were his shoes? He didn't remember taking them off. Heck, he barely remembered hitting the bed. Looking back, he had basically collapsed after giving what must have been the most threadbare explanation of ghost law possible. He hadn't even gotten to enforcement, and the courts, and the Observants... Although, he hoped that no one asked about those now. He didn't want to give any more long explanations. He didn't want to give any explanations. Mr Lancer had already seen through his story, he didn't want to give anyone else more hints. Despite appearances, his classmates weren't stupid. Most of them, anyway.

Nor were his parents, if it came to that. No matter how hard they tried at it. They were scientists and inventors, and they lived off of their patents. They were just... He didn't know how to describe it. Willfully ignorant?

(Incredibly bigoted?)

(Racist?)

(Were they the enemy now?)

He didn't want to think about it. It made his head hurt. (Not to mention his core. But that hurt anyway.)

Where were his shoes? He really wanted his shoes back.
Actually... Maybe he should go use that bathroom first. Change his clothes, too. If there were any
clothes to change into. There was a dresser. He pulled out one of the stone drawers. It was heavy,
but slid smoothly. As if it was resting on wet ice. Or robust rollers. The latter was more likely.

There were clothes in the drawer. Nice. Nothing he'd seen before. He wondered at the logistics of a
full dresser of human clothing in the Ghost Zone. If it was just socks and underwear, he would
understand that, but shirts and jeans were a bit larger. It was harder for them to fall through the small
intermittent portals that formed in washing machines, the backs of drawers, and other out of the way
places.

He blinked slowly, dully, at the clean clothes. Maybe he should take a shower first. He felt
disgusting. Sweaty and gritty.

Yes, a shower sounded like just the thing. He made sure that Sam was still all tucked in before
leaving the room.

The shivering shadow in the armchair had skin now, smooth, pale, paper-white flesh that did not
flake and smoke when it brushed against the fabric of the chair. It had arms and legs, hands and feet,
and fingers and toes. It likely had more than that, but curled in on itself as it was, it was hard to tell.
Right now, it was working on growing hair.

Echo didn't remember having this much trouble when his body was forming, but he supposed that he
had already existed as an idea, a point of view, if you would, before he had tried to exist as a
physical (if ectoplasmic) construct. The thought crossed his mind that, perhaps, Danny had taken all
the strain of his creation. It wasn't a thought that Echo liked.

He preferred to think about how to mess with the Fentons. And Valerie. Why did Valerie have to go
and do something like that, anyway?

Wondering what the other shadow would look like when it was fully formed was also a good
distraction. Like Danny, probably. Like Echo. Its face was well hidden, though, behind its arms and
those of the chair, so Echo couldn't tell for sure.

He watched the hair grow in, soft and snowy. It grew longer than Danny's. Longer than Echo's. It
was cut differently, too, square and even on the bottom, with bangs. Echo stood up, and stepped
towards the other chair. He frowned as he realized that the cut wasn't all that different from Maddie's.
He leaned down, to rub a few strands between his fingers. Almost immediately, he was distracted by
how soft and silky it was. He ran a hand through his own hair, in comparison. It wasn't quite the
same. He buried his hand in the other shadow's hair, smiling. It wasn't quite like Danny's either, but
this was nice. Very nice. He hummed.

Then the shadow stirred. It wasn't a shiver. Echo withdrew his hand and stepped back, giving the
other shadow some space. After a couple of minutes, the new shadow managed to wrench itself into
a sitting position, breathing heavily, trying to get used to the whole 'having lungs' thing, its eyes still
screwed shut.

“Hello,” said the new shadow.

“Hi,” said Echo. The connection they shared through the lair wasn't perfect. Some communication
was necessary. “How is it?”

Very slowly, the other shadow opened his eyes. They were ice blue from lid to lid, with a slightly darker area in the center suggesting iris and pupil. He blinked, and one eye *dripped*, a thick, pastel tear running down the side of his face. He reached one hand up to touch the tear, smearing his cheek with the color. He squinted at it, his eyes luminous slits.

“There appear to be some flaws,” said the shadow, finally. He smiled up at Echo, eyes still narrow. “Not bad for a first time, though, hm?”

“Practice makes perfect,” agreed Echo. “We should get you clothes. Also, a name.”

“It will be the first thing they ask,” said the shadow, standing. He blinked, and another bit of eye oozed out over his lower lashes.

“I think there are some glasses around. Somewhere.”

“That might help.”
Chapter 33: Prove Me Wrong

Astraea Iustitia knocked on her mother’s door. Once, twice, three times. The door creaked open, and Astraea stepped, unfazed, into the pitch-black room.

She was, like her mother, and most of her family, blind.

She could hear the rustle of paper, the scrape of stone tablets, the *swish* of fabric, the *tap tap tap* of her mother’s fingers on her desk. This was more than enough for her to navigate the room. More than enough for her to picture her mother in her chiton and himation, her sword and scales resting on the table, head propped up by one of her four slender arms, ends of her blindfold barely brushing the table.

“Mother,” she said, thereby announcing her presence.

“Astraea,” said the woman, tilting her head up, and leaning back in her chair. “What brings you to my office this afternoon.”

“I have a case you'll want to take a look at.” She offered the woman a sheaf of papers.

The woman took the papers, and ran a finger down the first page, frowning. “An act of murder committed by humans? You know we don't prosecute those.”

“Look at the victim, the method. I think you'll change your mind.”

A moment of near silence. “Their own child? In such a way? Your witness is reliable?”

“I believe so. But that is what a trial is for, is it not?”

Danny walked out of the bathroom, wearing clean clothes, still shaking water from his hair, towel in his hand. He felt a bit better now. (He'd say a bit more human, but overall he doubted that was a good thing.)

So the next thing to do was breakfast. Then, gathering supplies for the journey. He doubted that leaving his lair would be straightforward, even with the wisps guiding them, not to mention after leaving his lair. (His lair was safe). The Ghost Zone could be dangerous. Deadly. There wasn't going to be too much human-edible food just lying around in the Zone either.

As he walked towards the kitchen, he peeked into each of the rooms, checking on his sleeping classmates. The rooms were nice. If the lair opened up somewhere convenient, he might invite some
of his friends here.

He didn't see his father, though, or Mr Lancer. He didn't see Tucker either. Surely he had emerged from the other bathroom at this point. So where-?

Danny reached the larger, open room, and had his question answered before it was fully formed. Mr Lancer was sleeping on the couch. Jack was sleeping in an armchair. Tucker was in the kitchen, frowning at the label on a jar. He looked up as Danny padded in.

“Hey, man,” said Tucker, quietly. “You feeling better?”

“A little. What are you doing?”

“Thinking of breakfast. Do you have any meat in here?”

“Not that I saw yesterday,” said Danny.

“Darn. I guess I knew that, though. Well. I was thinking of doing some cinnamon toast.”

Danny curled his lip. He didn't like toast. It was just so dry. And scratchy. He leaned around Tucker's shoulder to read the label on the jar. He frowned. “You don't want to put that on it,” he said.

“Why, isn't this cinnamon?”

“That's cumin, dude.”

“Oh, gross.”

“You have to learn how to read cursive, Tucker.”

“You need to stop writing in cursive.”

Danny paused. “These...” He lowered his voice even more, glancing at his sleeping father. “This is my handwriting, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Didn't you notice?”

“No. Not really,” said Danny, troubled. “You don't think that anyone else did, do you?” The way he emphasized the word 'else' indicated that he meant people who weren't on team phantom.

“I think Lancer might’ve, but, you know, he didn't see them until after, so, yeah.”

Danny stared at the label for a few more minutes. “Let's do French toast instead,” said Danny. French toast was, in Danny's opinion, the only acceptable kind of toast.

“Sure. We have eggs?”

“Yeah. Let me get them.”

The smell of food slowly drew the others to the main room. Tucker was eating as they went. Danny hoped that no one minded having breakfast twice in a row, but he wasn't the best at cooking, and breakfast was easy. They could have just done cereal or oatmeal or something like that, though. There were plenty of cereals here. Also oatmeal. Also raisins. Also cinnamon. Raisins and cinnamon were necessary for a good bowl of oatmeal, in Danny's opinion. They were also relatively unlikely to animate when exposed to ectoplasm, unlike sausage. Or most things in the Fenton household.
“Thank you for cooking us breakfast, Daniel, Mr Foley,” said Mr Lancer. There was a smattering of half-hearted agreement.

“No problem,” said Danny. “Um,” he said, “we should probably talk about what we're going to do next, though. Like, we should carry as much food with us as possible, because we don't know how long it'll be until we can get more, and stuff like that...”

Thankfully, Danny did not have to micromanage the preparations. Mr Lancer went camping and hiking frequently as a hobby, and Maddie had survival training. (So did Jack, but. Well. Jack.)

Things were going well. Of course they had to go wrong.

Danny wasn't sure what started it, but he became aware of what was happening pretty quickly. It was hard not to, although several people somehow managed it.

“-think I'm gonna take crap from you, Swamp-boy, just 'cause we're lost-”

“Back off, Dash!”

“Mr Baxter! Let go of Mr Marsh immediately!”

“And what are you doing about all of this, Lancer? Huh? We're just running around, following this freak,” he gestured at Danny. “How do we know he isn't lying about working with Phantom? I haven't seen any proof!”

“Jeez, Dash, you think Danny just magically knows how to speak that weird ghost language?” Ricky pulled his shirt out of the larger boy’s hands. “Grow a brain al-!”

Dash took a swing at Ricky. It didn't connect. It didn't connect because Danny was there.

“The hell, freak?!” demanded Dash.

Danny touched his lip where it had split. It came away bloody. He licked it. It was salty, but under the salt there was the sweet-sour-spicy tang of ectoplasm.

“Wooow.”

Danny turned his head so quickly that he put a crick in it. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw a few other people rubbing their necks, so he knew he wasn't alone.

A boy was sitting on the counter, leaning back on the palms of his hands. He looked a lot like Danny, actually, except for the white hair and green eyes, and a half dozen or so smaller details. He wore a black, zip-up, hooded sweatshirt, and a white t-shirt. His jeans were faded black, and his boots were thick-soled and steel-toed.

“Stay back, kids!” shouted Jack, interposing himself between the boy and the class.

Many of the students backed up uncertainly. Danny noted that Sam, Tucker, and Jazz seemed unconcerned. Mr Lancer also stayed put, although he was visibly nervous.

Maddie stepped forward a knife held in her hand. Since when was she holding that?!

“Shadow,” said Maddie, “what do you want?”

“And- what? If I don't tell you, you'll stab me? Again? In case you hadn't noticed, it didn't really work the first time.” Maddie only glared. The boy shrugged. “First off, I explicitly said that 'Shadow'
wasn't my name. Call me Echo. As for why I'm here...” His eyes drifted lazily to Dash. “I'm kind of curious as to what you think you're doing. I mean, are you an idiot?"

“Don't talk to him, Dash,” instructed Maddie.

Echo rolled his eyes. “Please. You think that I haven't heard everything you people have been saying. But back to the topic at hand. Dashiel Baxter. What are you doing hitting someone here? I mean, even you must have noticed how much he- Excuse me. How much Phantom objects to people being hurt. He does spend a copious amount of time making sure that it doesn't happen, after all. Then you have what happened to Madeline Camilla Fenton when she decided to menace my friends, here.” A pair of wisps alighted on his shoulder, as if to make his point. “So, I'm just wondering what you thought would happen if you did hit Richard Marsh. Here. In this place which, you have been told, more or less explicitly, caters to Phantom's needs and desires, regardless of social niceties or inhibitions.”

Dash spluttered incoherently.

“Then again, I suppose that you weren't thinking at all, were you?” Echo vanished, then reappeared directly in front of Dash. In a moment, the taller boy was on the ground, his arm bent painfully behind him. “Do say otherwise, I would love to be proven wrong.”

It was not, Danny was ashamed to admit, not Dash's cry of pain that shook him out of his stupor and spurred him to action, but his parents' purposeful movement towards Echo and Dash.

“Stop!” he shouted, arm stretched towards Echo. The boy smiled up at him, as if he knew exactly what was going through Danny's head, and, Danny realized, he very well might. Danny didn't know enough about lairs and shadows to be able to say one way or another.

In a single, fluid motion, Echo released Dash, stood, and was behind Danny. He put his hands on Danny's shoulders, and rotated him to face his parents. His right hand lightly grasped the outside of Danny's right shoulder, but the left was tight against Danny's neck, his index finger outstretched, resting gently against Danny's carotid.

Danny's breathing became shallow. His head tilted back, both to follow the direction of that outstretched finger, and to rest his head against Echo's shoulder. His eyes unfocused ever so slightly. He felt himself relax, almost unwillingly, his muscles going ever-so-slightly limp. This was different. Surprising. Different. Good? Maybe. Hopefully it wouldn't be bad-different, like so many of the other changes his life had suffered thus far.

It was like Echo was borrowing his will, which wasn't an entirely ludicrous preposition.

He wondered if Echo would still be taller than him if he wasn't wearing combat boots.

Danny blinked, eyes still refusing to focus. He was vaguely aware that a- He hesitated to call it a conversation, when the tone of it was so venomous and vitriolic- was going on. He gave up on his eyes as a lost cause, he was only looking at the ceiling anyway, and redirected his attention towards his ears.

“-if you hate ghosts more that you love your children,” Echo was saying.

“Those two things are entirely unrelated,” said Maddie, sharply.

“Be careful what you say,” Echo half-sung the words. “He's listening now. And what do you mean,
'unrelated?' Do you have any idea how often his life has been endangered by your inventions? How often he has almost lost his life? And your daughter, hounding her because you thought that she might be a ghost. Going after her with nets and guns. Did you think she had died?” Echo paused. “You intend to answer any of these questions? Hm?”

“We don’t answer to you, ghost,” said Jack.

“Perhaps not,” agreed Echo. “But don’t you think that you owe him one? At least?” Echo’s finger tapped gently against the side of Danny’s neck. Danny’s breath hitched in his throat, and black spots danced across his vision. Spots that contained spots that, oddly, looked like what Danny imagined Echo was seeing right now.

This was officially weird. Even by Danny’s standards. He wondered what quirk of ghostly (or, as the case may be, hybrid) physiology was making him react like this. Similarity between their physical makeup and ectosignature causing Danny’s brain to conflate signals from echo with signals from his own ghostly body? Echo’s lack of a core? Danny’s core damage? The lair bond? Something else entirely?

“Let Danny go, or we’ll-”

“Or you’ll what?” asked Echo, his laugh the radiance of sun on broken ice. “Even with little Miss Red there and her bag of tricks, there isn’t anything you can do to me. I’m not real after all. Speaking of, I think that she still owes all of you an explanation herself.” Danny felt him lean forward, so that his cheek ever so slightly brushed Danny’s ear. “But first, I want you to answer at least one thing for me. Do you love your children more than you hate ghosts?”

“Of course we do!” exclaimed Jack, angrily.

Echo leaned in farther, and adjusted his right arm, so that he supported Danny more securely. Suddenly, Danny was no longer looking up, at the ceiling, but over towards his parents. Danny blinked uncertainly at the teal and orange blurs. Then Echo tilted his head so that his face rested against Danny’s. Danny could feel the way the muscles in his face moved as his expression shifted. A tiny, surprised, sound escaped from Danny’s throat.

“I don’t believe you,” said Echo.

“Why you-” The orange blur moved towards Danny.

“Oh, ah, ah!” chided Echo, sliding his left hand up Danny’s neck. Danny was very glad that Echo was holding him up, because his legs were feeling very week. “I don’t think you want to do that. You know what, I’ll give you a chance to prove me wrong. Let’s play a little game. Okay? If either of you two can become a ghost, I’ll let Danny go. If not…” Echo’s hand tightened slightly around Danny’s throat. It was a good thing that Danny didn’t need quite as much air as a normal human. “I like Danny. I think that he’d make a better ghost than he makes a human.”
Chapter 34

“You... Want us to kill ourselves?”

“No, no. You can't become a ghost from suicide. It doesn't work that way. I'll take care of that part. Besides, you just dying wouldn't satisfy me at all. I want you to become ghosts. Prove that you love him more than you hate ghosts. Prove it. Or else.”

“But-” said Ricky. “Your boss is in Danny! If you hurt him-”

“My 'boss'? You mean Phantom, I assume? That just gives me another motive. You can't get stuck overshadowing a corpse, after all. Now, choose.”

Danny’s vision snapped back into focus. He wanted to see this. He wanted to know. He wanted... He wanted... He saw the hesitation on their faces. No. Maybe he didn't want to know.

“Too far,” he croaked.

Echo froze, not even breathing. Then he sighed, his cold breath tickling Danny's cheek and nose. “You think so, huh?” Then he turned a little, briefly nuzzling Danny's neck. Then he licked Danny, right along the jawline.

Danny jerked away, and glared at Echo, although Echo kept a hold on him. “The heck?”

“In my defense, I have no impulse control.”

Slowly, and very reluctantly, Echo let go of Danny, took a few steps back, flickered, and reappeared several feet away. Danny, for his part, felt like he had just run a mile. The sudden loss of sensation was a shock.

Echo smiled at the class, eyes almost shut, then tilted his head slightly, and said, “Consider this a warning, okay? I've been pretty lenient so far. I want you all to get along.” His eyes drifted to Dash, then Valerie. “All of you. Oh, and Danny? Your shoes are under the bed.”

He vanished.

“Danny, sweetheart, are you okay?” This was Danny's mother. She seemed hesitant to approach. Danny vaguely remembered yelling at her last time she had tried to touch him.

“Dunno,” said Danny. He blinked. “Just surprised, I guess.” His eyes flicked between Maddie and Jack. The question was at the tip of his tongue: Would you have let me die? It didn't matter that Echo's threats were utterly empty, less than smoke, less than fog, nothing more than a play of mirrors. He had to ask. He couldn't. He looked away.

Sam walked up to Danny, patted him on the back, and gave Maddie and Jack a glare that could
curdle milk. She was rapidly joined by Tucker and Jazz, and it was rather ridiculous, all of them trying to touch him. Heartwarming. Awkward. Ridiculous. A person could only take so much. (Danny wanted more.)

“Why did he keep bringing up the Red Huntress?” asked Danny, in a transparent attempt to turn attention away from him.

It worked, with all (almost all) heads swiveling to Valerie.

Danny, for his part, didn't listen to Valerie's stuttered attempt at an explanation (She was worse at this than he was. What was up with that?), and instead opted to sink to the floor.

“So,” he said quietly, “you guys didn't seem to be as surprised about Echo as I would have thought.”

“Yeah,” said Tucker. “He kind of showed up last night while you were asleep.”

“Really? That explains that dream.” He rubbed his shoulder. “Did he get stabbed?”

“Yes,” said Jazz. “Mom stabbed him.”

“Why?”

“Your guess is as good as ours,” said Sam.

“Yes! Fine!” shouted Valerie, suddenly. “I had a truce with him! So what? He was possessing Danny!”

“What do you mean, 'so what?' You can't just break a promise like that! Besides, it sounds like Danny was okay with it. Right, Danny?”

“Huh?” said Danny, as everyone turned back towards him. “Oh. Yes. It wasn't like it was his fault, anyway.” He was a bit surprised that Mia was the one leading the charge. He had expected Paulina to take a running leap off of the deep end, she was so obsessed with Phantom that it was almost ghostly, but apparently the 'more timid' personalities of the class had preempted her.

In Danny's opinion, this was great.

“He's still possessing Danny! You don't know what Phantom's making him say.”

“No one is making me say anything,” said Danny, irritated by this being brought up once again. “And before you start, Echo wasn't going to hurt me.”

“Danny,” said Maddie gently. “Surely you can see-”

“His goal was to get a rise out of you. He's not allowed to hurt anyone here either.”

“What about me then?” whined Dash.

Danny glared at him. “You opened the door for that by trying to hit Ricky.”

“Danny, he hurt you.”

“Did he?”

Maddie frowned. “I might not always be the most attentive person in the world,” she said, “but I can tell when there's something wrong with you.”
“Can you?” asked Danny, ice creeping into his tone. “Really? I would never have noticed.” He put his hand over his chest defensively.

“You didn't fight him, Danny,” pressed Maddie. “Your eyes went blank. You went limp. I know that you wouldn't do that normally if someone suddenly grabbed you.”

“I know,” said Danny, shortly. “I have a slowly starving ghost trapped in my body. If you think that isn't going to come with side effects you're in denial.”

“You knew-?”

“No. I didn’t know. It isn’t like I’ve had to deal with this exact situation before. I'm just not surprised.” Danny rubbed an eye. “Look, if nothing else, please, nothing else, “Echo’s right about one thing: He's been pretty lenient with us. There are a lot of ghosts that probably would have killed us for what we've done. For just being here.” He shivered.

“That's exactly what we've been trying to tell you, Danny. Ghosts are-”

“Stop it,” snapped Danny. “Unless the door out opens up right on top of our portal, and I'm pretty sure I would have noticed that, or Phantom would have mentioned it, then you're going to have to interact with ghosts without insulting them with every other sentence, and without attacking them unless they have a hostage. You, too, Valerie. You might as well get used to it.” Danny got back to his feet. “I'm going to go... do what I was doing.” He gestured vaguely to one side. Something to do with food? Getting food for traveling. Right. “You guys can keep on pestering Valerie, or whatever.”

That got things back on track, this time with Hannah haranguing Valerie about Area 51 and whether or not ghosts were actually aliens. Danny wondered if Hannah just made things up to mess with people, or if she was serious. Not that it mattered in this case. The truth, that Valerie had been given her suit by a half ghost to harass another half ghost, and when that first suit had been destroyed she had gotten another one from a full ghost, was way weirder than anything Hannah could come up with.

Hannah’s tirade about the government (somehow) segued neatly into the nerds' inquiries about the suit's technology, which, in turn, finally captured Jack and Maddie's interest enough for Danny and his friends to slip away, unnoticed, to a quiet space.

Or so they thought.

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Maddie watched Danny, Jazz, and their friends retreat to the balcony.

She knew that something was very wrong with her son. She knew that he had been hurt, somehow, between being at school and now. She didn't understand why he wouldn't talk to her.

No. That wasn't right. She did know. She hadn't been a good mother. She'd been too caught up in her work to notice even the most basic things about her children. To caught up to notice when Phantom had come into their lives. Jack was guilty of the same, but, well, Jack couldn't help it. Maddie was supposed to be the perceptive one. The sensitive one.
That's why she had been trying to give Danny his space. Her children clearly didn't trust her anymore, but she had hoped that, by showing them how much she cared, how vigorously she would defend them from any threat, she could regain their trust. But that seemed to have backfired.

She was a terrible mother.

Why did that ghost... She paused mentally. Should she make an effort to meet Danny... or Phantom... halfway? It... *He* had called himself Echo. Why did Echo have to ask that question? Of course anyone would be hesitant to agree to die... and become something they hated.

Oh, god, she really was horrible. She should have agreed immediately, what was she thinking? That... *Echo* was right about her.

Now, here she was, still avoiding her children. Listening to this nonsense.

(It was very interesting, though.)

She looked up at her husband, who was animatedly interrogating a flustered Valerie. He wasn't very good at picking up social cues, or being focused, but she could see a hollowness in his movements, an emptiness in his eyes, which flicked frequently towards the four insular teens who gathered by the balcony.

Maddie steeled herself. Clearly, her 'give them space' method wasn't working. She had to say *something*, do *something*, before she lost them entirely.

She extracted herself from the group around Valerie (and, really, it sounded like Valerie needed some parental help herself, but it wasn't like Maddie was in a position to give it), and walked slowly over to where her children were standing.

“... suicidal, Jazz.”

“So why did...” she lowered her voice, “... strangle...”

“... didn't actually... He just resents Mom and Dad. I know... problems... that isn't... them.”

“If you... so.” Maddie missed the next few words. “... better as a ghost?”

Danny sighed. “... sounds like. It goes both ways being... better human and being human... Like I said, I have a lot of problems, but... I like myself okay.”

“Alright... just worried... you.”

Maddie realized belatedly that eavesdropping on her children was not the way to regain their trust. All the same, it was good to know that Jazz didn't completely trust Echo either.

Maddie took a deep breath, intending to use her next words to get the children's attention, but Danny flinched and turned to face her, eyes wide.

“Mom?” he asked, no longer whispering. His voice was uneven, uncertain. “Are you... Is something wrong?”

“Danny I—” she didn't know what to say. “I'm so sorry. I'm so... You're right.”

Danny blinked, surprise evident on his face. “Uh. Cool. About?”

“About what we're going to have to do to get home. I've been... naive about our situation... and...
Oh, Danny. I'm so sorry. I should have answered faster and I-

“Mom, Mom, it's fine, he was being unreasonable and it just- He went way too far.” He was wringing his hands now.

“But it's our fault he even exists to do this. It's our fault we're even here... Oh, Danny.”

“It's- I...” Danny trailed off, hands still drawn defensively inward.

“And, Danny, Jazz, I- Did I- did we-?”

“Did we ever hurt you, Danny?”

Maddie hadn't even noticed Jack come up behind her. His voice was deep and sorrowful. Except for Paulina, Tiffanie, Dash, Dale, and Star (who was defending her erstwhile best friend from the others), everyone had turned away from Valerie. Family drama was, apparently, more entertaining.

“I- You- I-” Danny bit his lower lip, hard, dislodging the tentative scab that had formed over the split that Dash had given him. “You didn't mean to,” he said finally. He was crying (so was Maddie). “I know you didn't mean to.”

“Oh, my baby. Oh, Danny I'm so, so sorry. You must think that we- That I'm a terrible person. That I'm a terrible mother. You must hate us.”

“No!” said Danny, reaching out towards them. He was crying even harder now. “I don't hate you. I don't hate you. I love you. Please-”

He was clinging to her now. Jazz came up behind him, more hesitant. Jack embraced all three of them.

“We'll change, sweetheart,” said Maddie. “We'll change, I promise.”
“Okay,” snapped Sam, annoyed. “What the hell are you all looking at?” She interposed herself between the Fentons and the crowd, and glared at her classmates, even managing to spare an especially dirty look for Mr Lancer. Weren't adults supposed to be more perceptive about these things? Not that she had seen any evidence of that. “Don't you have other things to do? Productive things. I mean, you do want to get home eventually, right?”

Chastised, most of the students moved off. Most. Paulina, Tiffanie, Dash, Dale, Star, and Valerie were still wrapped up in their dispute. Sam was pretty sure that they hadn't even noticed what was going on with the Fentons. Jeez, they were self-centered.

Mr Lancer, on the other hand, approached her. He leaned down, keeping his eyes on the Fentons, to quietly ask her, “Are you sure this is... wise?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. But trying to stop Danny would be a bad idea.” She glanced backwards, to where Jazz had subtly inserted herself between Danny and their parents. “Danny's an emotional wreck right now. I don't think that Echo... Ugh. I don't know.”

“Was he really going to hurt Daniel?”

“Not a chance. Danny's got problems, but self-harm isn't one of them. I think that the point of that stunt was to get closure, that he really wanted an answer to that question, but Danny backed out. I think he still wants an answer.”

“Do you think that this is going to happen again?”

“I really hope not. I don't think this is healthy.”

“But..?”

“But this isn't about what Danny consciously wants. Look. Talk to Jazz. I'm not a psychologist.”

Echo, invisible, watched the unfolding events. He wasn't sure he liked them.

So what if Maddie promised? You couldn't trust human promises. They weren't worth the breath they were spoken with. And Echo didn't need to breathe. (Sam, Tucker, and Jazz didn't count. They were the best. When they promised something, they meant it.)
He frowned. Thinking. Something about that... Something about promises. Something he had overheard... Something Sam had said, perhaps? He thumbed through his memories. It was easy, he didn't even have a weeks worth.

His face lit up as he found the moment in time that he was looking for.

Before leaving to explore this newly remembered possibility, he closely examined the Jack and Madeline. He wasn't about to leave Danny with them if there was even the slightest possibility that they had retained or attained a weapon. He then cast an appraising eye at Valerie. She still had her suit, but she was off limits. For now.

The refrigerator room was just as cold as it had been yesterday. Echo glanced around the room, and then peered behind a large jug of milk. There it was. The pomegranate that he hadn't eaten.

After a hearty lunch (soup, courtesy of Rebecca and Kwan, who'd taken the culinary arts elective for the past two years), they finally, finally, set off. Down and in and away across the stairs.

Danny was already completely exhausted. Honestly, he was considering the merits of Sam's 'hate everyone' approach. Even though he knew that was basically a stylistic choice, lacking any substance. (He knew better than to suggest this to Sam. She considered shallowness of any kind to be a sin. Yes, she was a little hypocritical. Danny loved her anyway.)

Despite his exhaustion, however, he was leading the procession. The (mostly) human part of it, anyway. There were wisps scouting ahead of them. Danny carried Leader in his arms, and another pair of wisps rested on his shoulders. Dozens of smaller, pin-head- to penny-sized, wisps nested in his hair, others, in his clothes. His pockets were full of the little ghosts.

They were lucky they were so light.

Jerks.

Although, thanks to them, he had managed to beg off carrying anything more heavy.

He still had no idea why they wanted so badly to be close to him. The Amity Park wisps acted similarly, when no one else was watching, but he hadn't been able to interpret their answer. Maybe it was untranslatable. Maybe they were just being coy. Maybe the reason was sinister, or embarrassing.

For now though... He hugged Leader more tightly, and the smaller ghost wriggled and purred.

“But do you think it's possible?”

The other shadow closed his book with a snap and glared at Echo. Probably. It was hard to tell, between the thick glasses, the very nearly uniform color of the eyes, and the glow. “What part of 'I have the same information as you,' do you not understand? Are we really this neurotic?”
“You're supposed to be the smart one,” replied Echo, “and you have all these books.”

“If I'm the smart one, what are you supposed to be? You're acting like one of those crazy-obsessed manga characters.”

“We're ghosts.”

“Don't give me that, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, and you know it's just an act. Mostly. I just want him to be safe. I don't want them to hurt him again.”

The other shadow sighed. “I know. I get it,” he said. “But that doesn't change the fact that I don't have any special knowledge. I don't know what you expect me to do.”

“But the books, shouldn't there be something in one of them? I mean, these are mostly GZ publications, right? Obsessed authors chucking their books into every lair they come across?”

“Yes. That's true. What's also true is that all of these are in alphabetical order by title because we couldn't be bothered to actually figure out a logical system. Except for the left side, which is arranged by color. Why did we do that anyway?”

“Aesthetics, probably. It's near the balcony.”

“That makes sense. But my point is that trying to find a useful book on the subject would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Even I don't know what most of these are about. And they're going to be here any minute now.” The shadow ran a nervous hand through his hair, tucking it behind one ear.

“They're at least an hour off. Even if they ran.”

The shadow groaned.

“Give me your opinion, at least.”

“Fine.” The shadow licked his lips and adjusted his glasses. “I've got to wonder if this was some kind of subconscious self-sabotage.”

“Huh?”

“My eyes. The glasses. If I'm really supposed to be the 'smart one' or the voice of reason, or whatever.”

“I wouldn't be surprised. Ask Jazz if it's really bothering you. But don't change the subject.”

“Okay. So for the most part, pomegranates are symbolic, they're used as part of a larger action, formula, or ceremony, or as a supplement. Something extra. But but they do have Stygian properties. Some of them, anyway. The problem is, we can't tell if any of the ones we have have Stygian properties, or how Stygian they are, because we're Stygian. Or at least, he is. We keep our promises.”

“So...”

“So it's possible, it's just that it'll be really hard to tell whether or not it worked. If we had water from the Styx, that would work, and I'd say go for it, but unless you know something I don't...” The shadow shrugged. “On the other hand, you can use it as a kind of placebo. Tell them that it'll bind
them to whatever promise they make, and if they don't go through with it, then we'll know we can't trust them, and if they do, then we know that they're at least trying.” The shadow frowned. “Or that they've seen through us. Either way.”

“You mean lie to them?”

“Don't sound so scandalized. You've *been* lying.”

“No I haven't!”

“You told them that you were going to kill Danny.”

“No, *I implied* that I was going to kill Danny. I never said I *would*. All I said was 'or else' and that Danny would be better as a ghost. And you call yourself the smart one.”

“Would he be better as a ghost, though?”

“It's a matter of opinion.”

“I suppose. Actually, a thought just occurred to me. Go see if you can find any more pomegranates, and meet me in the workshop.” The shadow disappeared.

“Oh, come on, don't leave me hanging like that! What's the thought?!”
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 36: Katabasis

“Danny,” said Maddie.

“Hm?”

“Danny, don't you think that we should take a break?”

Danny stopped and looked back. They had only been walking for an hour or so. Maybe an hour and a half. For the past twenty or so minutes, there hadn't even been any stairs, and the wisps had been avoiding the more vertigo-inducing 'impossible' areas. They were in a wide, Grecian-styled corridor, that had a row of round fountains down the center. Many of the fountains, to Danny's amusement, contained a thin layer of coins on their bottoms.

Really, the more he saw of his lair, the more pleased he was by it. Beyond simple aesthetic appeal and comfort, it was so labyrinthine and unsettling that a would-be invader might be defeated by architecture alone.

“I guess a break would be okay,” said Danny, once he realized that he had been staring blankly at his mother for the past several seconds. He sat down heavily on the edge of a fountain, enjoying the cool spray.

Leader whistled up at him. Danny looked down, and hummed inquisitively. Leader sang back.

“He says we're about halfway there.”

“No. To the next, um. Nice place to rest.” He hummed a quick question, and Leader responded in kind. “They aren't entirely sure how far it is to the door. They don't go there very often, and-” Danny frowned. Had he heard that correctly? “And there's actually another clan living in that area?”

“What?”

“A different family group of wisps. They're from the same tribe, though, it sounds like...” Danny trailed off. “It doesn't really matter.” He freed a hand to rub the back of his neck. “Actually probably be better, they'll know the area better...” He trailed off, gazing up at the painted ceiling. Were those frescoes? They were nice.

“Hey, Danny,” said Jazz. “Are you feeling okay? You're all flushed.”
“I'm fine,” mumbled Danny, holding more tightly to Leader.

Sam sat down next to him. “You use that line so often that I'm almost certain that you don't know what it means.” She put her hand on his forehead, and frowned. “You're a little warm,” she said.

“Is he?” asked Maddie. She put her own hand on Danny's head, he flinched back, but stilled himself. “Hm. I think that you might actually be a bit cool.”

Ah. That wasn't good. He should definitely be cool. In both senses of the word. He probably did have a fever, compared to his normal temperature, which was just short of hypothermic.

Maybe he'd take a cold shower. Or a cold bath.

“See? I told you I was fine.”

“Before you were telling me that not expecting side effects from being possessed—”

“Overshadowed.”

“—was delusional. Tell the truth, Danny.”

Danny's eyes darted from Maddie, to Sam, to Jazz. He looked at Tucker who was examining his PDA as if he had never seen it before. No help there.

Sam and Jazz could have at least waited until they had a private moment. Really. He couldn't say, 'Oh, just, y'know, my core acting up, no longer really working with my body's homostasis, and I'm worried that the ectoplasmic constructs in my body might be breaking down or damaged. But, I mean, that's to be expected, what with everything that's been done to it recently.' That somehow managed to sound crazy even when he knew what was going on.

“I- I guess I'm kinda sore,” he said. He ignored a snide remark from Dash. “Tired, too. But everyone is, right? Um. A little dizzy, I suppose. Like when you stand up too fast.”

“You mean low blood pressure?” asked Maddie.

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Is that what happened when Echo,” she said the name with extreme reluctance, “grabbed you?”

Time for some creative lying! Yay! Not. He decided that he wasn't talking to either Sam or Jazz for putting him in this position. Then, he immediately decided that was too mean, and that he should be passive aggressive instead. But he wasn't very good at that. He always forgot what he was doing. Maybe he should just be mad at them.

He still needed a lie.

“Not really. It was more like, I couldn't move?” Argh, don't say it like it's a question! “I think that it might have been Phantom trying to wake up, but he couldn't.” Get the hint, Jazz, Sam.

“Really?” asked Maddie, clearly getting sidetracked by scientific curiosity. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don't know,” said Danny. “But if that's what it was, I'm kinda hoping that he doesn't do it again until we can fix this.”

Maddie frowned, clearly concerned. “You kids were telling the truth about there being things at
home that can fix this?"

“Yeah. But depending on where we come out of here,” Danny indicated the lair, “there may be some
ghosts that can help nearby, or on our way or whatever. Really, Mom. I'd prefer this not to last any
longer than it has to, and I'm pretty sure that you feel the same way. If we're lucky, they can help us
get back home, too, so there's that.”

Maddie nodded once, unhappily.

“I think we should keep going,” said Danny, standing back up.


Operation Katabasis had been approved.

FentonWorks was surrounded by white tape, white tents, and quarantine equipment. The two houses
to either side of FentonWorks had been similarly commandeered, as had the backyard and across the
street neighbors. Field agents and scientists had been pouring into the buildings for hours, as had
weapons, tools, rations, body armor and vehicles. The Specter Speeder had been considered, but it
wasn't regulation. It, most of the Fenton inventions, and all available Fenton blueprints had been
shipped to GIW headquarters.

There would be three groups in the expedition.

The one which would carry out Operation Katabasis' official, publicly avowed, mission would be
called Team Orpheus. Their job was escorting the students and their teacher back home. These men
would proudly wear the GIW uniform whites.

The second team, which had the putative duty of scouting and providing an extra screen for Team
Orpheus and their charges, was called Team Eurydice. These men would wear camouflage, and
carried powerful weapons which could injure, incapacitate, and even kill humans. The true task of
these men was to prevent the Fentons from returning to Earth.

The third team was to be called Team Inanna. Officially, it was to be a small exploratory force,
available to be detached in case the students had been separated from one another. Nothing special.
The only interesting thing about it had been the argument about its name. One of the GIW brass had
delusions of Greek-ness, and had insisted on a Greek name, as with the other two teams, but he had
been overruled by a higher-ranked individual who wanted to follow the theme of katabasis.

Unofficially...

These were the best GIW agents available. The cream of the crop. They hated ghosts, despised them
with every fiber of their beings. Many of them had lost family members and loved ones to
possessions and hauntings. They were willing, more than willing, to give up their lives to finally
destroy the undead menace that was the Ghost Zone.

The weapon they carried with them had been made from the tortured, starved remnants of a level
nine ghost, blood-blossoms, ectoranium gathered from a meteorite that had struck somewhere in
Russia decades before, space-age materials, and the ingenuity of generations of GIW scientists and
engineers. It was called Project Ophiotaurus in paperwork, but the good men and women of Team
Inanna called it the Bomb.
It was a weapon suitable for shaking loose the foundations of reality. It was a weapon that could kill gods. A weapon that could defeat Death himself if he dared show his face. Team Inanna would feel confident storming heaven with such a weapon in their hands.

It was more than sufficient to destroy hell.

Operation Katabasis was a go.

Chapter End Notes

So, a lot of mythological names and terms there, huh?
Katabasis: Basically, 'going down.' Can be used to mean going down to a coastline, or river, but in many cases means going down to the underworld.
Orpheus: A Greek tragic hero. His wife was murdered on their wedding night, and he went to Hades to get her back. Hades told him he could bring her back to life, so long as he didn't look back at her until they got back out. Guess what? He looked back.
Eurydice: Orpheus's wife. The one who died.
Inanna: A Sumerian goddess. Also called Ishtar. Main character of Inanna's Descent to the Underworld, one of the oldest written poems.
Ophiotaurus: A Greek monster whose blood is supposed be able to kill gods.
Chapter 37

Chapter 37: Fractal

Danny was not expecting a library. He wasn't a very studious person, nor a great reader, his status as a polyglot, and as a massive space nerd aside... Okay, yeah, that didn't sound realistic even to him. Still. Libraries were more Jazz's thing. He had thought the number of books in the bedrooms had been impressive. It was just... Where did they all come from? They couldn't have all fallen through natural portals. There were too many.

The way the tall shelves grew into trees did explain why the wisps considered the place a good resting spot. Wisps liked forests and wooded areas. He hoped that there were human-suitable rest areas as well. Other than the armchairs, which did look very nice. Still, they weren't really the kind of thing that you'd want to sleep on. At least, not for more than a cat nap.

The wisps were still leading the way, though, so they must have some other area in mind.

There was a noise, like a muffled protest. Danny turned. That didn't sound like it came from any of his classmates, or one of the adults.

“Did you guys hear that?”

Before anyone could reply, a white-haired figure stumbled out from behind a bookshelf, tripped over its own feet, and fell, face-planting on the mossy floor. Everyone stared as the person laid face-down on the floor for several seconds. Suddenly, the figure leaped up, covered his face, shouted, “No, no, no, I messed up, let me try again,” and then retreated back behind the bookshelf.

Everyone stared.

“That was a different one,” observed Sarah.

“Was it?” asked Mia, squinting. She had taken her remaining contact out last night.

“Yeah, this one had different clothes,” said Sarah.

“He could have changed. It isn't that hard,” interjected Tiffanie.

“Yeah, but his hair was different,” said Hannah.

“Stop pushing me!” came a voice from behind the bookshelves. “I'll go out when I'm ready!”

“Isn't this your thing, though?” asked another voice. “Like, why you exist? The whole less intimidating, more social thi-”

“More social doesn't mean much when I'm modeled after someone totally inept. I said stop pushing me!”
“You know, we can hear you,” said Danny. He wasn't terribly amused by being called totally socially inept by someone who a) fallen on his face immediately after appearing, b) was currently hiding behind a bookshelf, and c) was technically a representation of his subconscious.

The voices fell silent, then one of them snickered. There was a sound like someone being slapped, and the snickering stopped.

The person hesitantly emerged from behind the bookshelf. His hair was straight and white, cut in a square bob. A few strands of it were braided. He wore large round glasses whose lenses glowed blue. He was wearing clothes reminiscent of those worn in the Lands of Ice, a Realm near the Far Frozen, a pale blue loose tunic and wide pants decorated with spreading-ice patterns. He wore no shoes, which made the trip earlier even more impressive.

“H-Hi,” he said, bobbing his head nervously. “Um.” He blushed bright, fluorescent green. “I-I'm, um. I'm Fractal. It's nice to meet you?”

“Who were you talking to?” asked Maddie suspiciously.

“Um. Echo. But he’s not there anymore,” he added quickly. “I'm, um, I'm here to show you around. We thought that you might like it if you had someone to show you around who you could speak to? And to, you know, act as a guide? I mean, we would have had Echo do it, but that would have been a disaster, because he doesn't like you very much. You probably knew that though.” He giggled nervously. “So, uh. What do you say?”

Astraea had never been entirely sure how Adrestia was related to the family. The fact remained that she was. She possessed the family nose and hair, and was involved heavily in the family business, such as it was, although she had avoided the family curse of blindness. She also had four arms, but that was an exceedingly common trait among those ancient ghosts that the Ancient Greeks had called gods. Hardly worth mentioning.

Astraea knocked on the door to Adrestia's lair. The door was yanked open, Adrestia leaning on the lintel. She had her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and a pair of headphones hanging around her neck. Her clothes were tight fitting, and Astraea suspected that they were black. Her club hung heavy off her hip, and she had a can of lime soda in her left hand.

Adrestia grinned. “Well, if it isn't my favorite cousin? What brings you to my doorstep today?” She took a step back, waving Astraea in.

“It's work, I'm afraid,” said Astraea, a little sheepish.

“When isn't it?” asked Adrestia. She collapsed on the couch, while Astraea perched on an armchair. “So, who is it that you want me to drag in? Robber? Debtor? Someone who attacked the wrong person? Or a child? Or, heaven forbid, a murderer?”

“I know that things have been slow on the serious charges front lately, but, well,” she offered up the papers she was holding, “if this case pans out, that might change.”

“Oooh. So you want me to track down the perpetrators?”
“Not quite yet. I only have one witness right now. I'd like you to track down the people on page five, then, if and only if, their accounts lend credence to the initial report, the humans on pages six and seven, but only if they're on this side of the border. Remember, they're humans, and most of them are just witnesses, so be gentle. We don't want them dead and gone before they can testify.”

“But just dead is fine, huh?”

“No, Adrestia. Alive. We want them alive.”

“Oh-huh. Right. It's okay if I can bring my crew?”

“Which crew?” asked Astraea suspiciously.

“The Gracious Ones. This is their thing. Family disputes, broken promises, you know.”

“If you can promise that they won't rip the suspects to shreds, then sure.”

Fractal lead them. A few shelves in, they had gotten to a place where there were channels for water cut in the floor. They followed the channels up to their source, a waterfall that spilled down from a raised area. The books here were arranged to form vibrant rainbows.

Jack and Maddie were less than pleased about this whole arrangement. But they were trying. For Danny and Jazz.

“Fractal?” asked Jazz. “How do you you have these organized?”

“Y-you mean the books?” said Fractal, as he lead them over a footbridge and to a set of stairs leading to the raised area. “They aren't really organized at all, really. Really. Maybe you can help me out with them sometime? I haven't had a lot of time to work with this, and some of these don't even fall into a well-defined Dewey Decimal System class. I mean, what category would you put a treatise on how certain kinds poetry can physically affect both ghosts and the Ghost Zone? Psychology? Health? Science? Religion, perhaps? Should you just make a new class? Then there's so many of them, and I just haven't had the time to read them all. I only know what a fraction of them are about!”

“I don't think so,” said Maddie coolly, before Jazz could reply. “We won't be coming back.”

Fractal looked back, tilting his head quizzically. “Is-isn't that for Jazz to decide?” He turned back around and hurried on. “We just have the stairs left!”

“Danny,” said Maddie, “do you think that this is safe? Following him, I mean.”

“As safe as following the wisps.”

“And the nervous act?”

“It isn't an act,” said Danny crossly. “He's being nice to us, be nice to him.”

They climbed the steps to the upper level. There was a series of pools there, feeding into the waterfall, surrounded by leafy, tropical plants. There were a number of small, round tables scattered around, and, farther on, several small stone cabins. A razor-thin crescent moon hung low on the
horizon. All in all, it looked a bit like a resort. Except, like all the other rooms here, the cabins lacked actual doors.

Why was this next to a library?

“Hobbies,” said Jazz.

“What?” said Danny.

“You asked that out loud,” said Jazz. “He probably associates his hobbies with relaxation.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense,” said Danny.

“Feel free to take a swim,” called Fractal, before waving them off and disappearing into one of the houses.

A beat of silence. “He doesn't actually expect us to go swimming, does he?” asked Paulina. “We don't have swimsuits.”

“Also, there's a waterfall,” said Kwan. “That's, like, bad luck.”

“So,” said Echo, leaning against the cabin's inside wall. “They haven't brought it up yet.”

“No,” wailed Fractal, collapsing onto a table, “they haven't. Why is talking to other people so hard?”

“Don't ask me.”

“I don't think they like me very much,” said Fractal.

“Don't be silly. They like you. Who wouldn't like you? Except Jack and Madeline, but they're trash, so you shouldn't worry about what they think.”

“They aren't trash. And I'm trying to get them to do something, so I need them to like me.”

“Or you can just threaten them.”

“You sound like Vlad.”

Echo scowled. “I do not.”

Fractal gasped, and suddenly stood up. “The cookies.”

“Cookies aren't going to make them like you!”

Danny collapsed gratefully into one of the chairs, and was considering taking off his shoes and
socks, and dangling his feet in the water. He was having a fantasy about it, actually. He imagined that the pool farthest from the waterfall would be hot, and that the pools would become progressively cooler as they got closer and closer to the drop-off. He knew that real streams didn't work that way. Probably. They might if there was a hot spring, he supposed. But this was his lair, and streams should work the way he wanted them to. So there.

Nathan, Lester, Ricky, and Mikey had taken up pestering Valerie for her suit's detail again. They had been doing so off and on for the entire walk. They were the only ones persistent enough to keep at it. Even Hannah had given up after a dozen or so monosyllabic answers. (Are you government funded? No. Are you a secret agent for the UN? No. Have you ever met an alien? Have you ever been to space? No. Is your suit a spacesuit? No. Danny was annoyed by the last two, because the answers were lies and he knew it.)

Ashley and Rebecca were doing that thing where they hung onto the fringes of the A-List and nodded whenever one of the A-lister said anything. They'd been doing less of that since they'd wound up in the GZ, and Danny had begun to hope that the A-list was losing some of its customary power, but, alas, it was not to be.

Elliot was doing the same thing, but Danny hesitated to say that Elliot was 'with' anyone. The (compulsive?) liar had alienated almost everyone in the school at this point. Danny felt bad for him, but he had done it to himself. Continued to do it to himself.

The A-listers, Paulina, Tiffanie, Star, Dash, Dale, and Kwan, were in a little knot complaining. Danny supposed that he should be glad that they were now comfortable enough with their situation to be complaining, to be acting normally, after being so scared for so long, but some of their complaints were irritating. They didn't like the food. There hadn't been any soap, shampoo, or conditioner in the bathrooms. The water had been cold. The rooms had been creepy. The outside balcony that looked out over solid white mist was spooky. The stairs gave them vertigo. Paulina wasn't wearing shoes for walking. Tiffanie's hair needed to be straightened again. They missed their families.

Danny would give them the last one.

What Mia, Sarah, and Hannah were doing, however, was much more frightening. They were comparing notes. Not that they were getting anywhere. Hannah's interjections on the subject of her research into secret societies, the Bermuda Triangle, and alien abductions was more than enough to keep them from getting to any real conclusions. Bless her. Danny thanked his lucky stars that only his class had gotten sucked into the GZ. If Hannah's older cousin Wesley, who was equally invested in conspiracy theories, but much more grounded and focused on ghosts, had come along, Danny's secret would have been blown out of the water.

Mr Lancer was watching over the scene with the air of a person who would very much like to fall over, but kept themselves upright out of a sense of duty. Danny was much more familiar with that air than he would like to be.

Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were seated at the same table as Danny. Maddie and Jack, lacking chairs were standing behind them. All five of them were... Asking Danny questions? Heck. He hadn't heard a single one, and now they were staring at him with some concern.

At that moment, Fractal came back out of the cabin with a massive platter of cookies. Truly, it was remarkable. It was almost as big as he was, and Fractal was the same size as Danny. How in the world had he fit it through the door? Had he even fit it through the door? Maybe he had phased it through a wall, or teleported or something.
Yeah. That made more sense. Danny tried to recall when in his life teleporting had become a possible answer to 'how did that fit through that door?' (Before he was ten, at least, although Maddie had wisely banned the use of the teleporter in the house after it had cut the old couch in half, and it had never worked long range.) He gave up. Maybe it had always been a possible answer.

Fractal placed the cookies carefully on the nearest table and shouted, “I give you cookies!”

Everyone stared. Fractal began to fidget.

“Do you... not like cookies?”
Chapter 38

Fractal looked utterly miserable, standing there, looking at the giant platter of cookies, trying to figure out why no one was eating them. Like a kicked puppy. The lights behind his glasses blinked slowly, sadly. Something blue and chalky ran down his cheek from behind his glasses.

Danny, who had stood up and had been slowly approaching Fractal, froze. He was convinced that the liquid was not a tear, ectoplasm infused or otherwise. There was something wrong, terribly wrong, with the shadow, and Danny hadn't the slightest idea how to help.

Fractal looked up, wiped the blue ichor off his face with a handkerchief, and smiled at Danny. “It's nothing really, but thank you for your concern.”

“Excuse me,” said Sarah, who having been much closer to begin with, had reached Fractal before Danny.

Fractal looked at her hopefully.

“It isn't that we don't like cookies,” began Sarah. “But what we'd really like is a way to get home. If you're here as a guide, could you tell us the way out?”

“I...” Fractal looked cornered. “That's...” He sighed. “I know you want to leave. I can't say that I understand it,” he continued. “But I do know it.” He looked around, teeth set on his lower lip. “Your request is more complicated than it initially seems. Perhaps you should all sit down?” suggested Fractal. “This might take some time to explain.” He gestured, and a number of wooden chairs sprouted from the ground. “In the meantime, you can have cookies!”

“Maybe it would be simpler for you,” said Maddie, a threat in her voice, “if we made it a demand: let us go.”

“No. It doesn't,” said Fractal, his voice going cold and hard. “Please, sit.”

They sat.

“How- How much do you know about Obsessions?” Fractal asked, suppressing a flinch to look directly at Jack and Maddie, and somehow managing to capitalize the last word.

“They are what drives a ghost,” said Maddie. “Any ghost. It is an unhealthy, unnatural fixation on a single, specific, person, thing, or action. Everything that a ghost does is in furtherance of their obsession.”

“That description is just correct enough to be both misleading and offensive,” said Fractal. “I mean, considering that you established that theory working from third-hand accounts and minute quantities of ectoplasm, it's quite impressive, but it's still not right. It's akin to saying that, uhm... I don't want to offend anyone. It's like saying that because poor communities have lower education...”
levels, and that they have higher crime rates, and using those statistics to imply that the people in 
those communities are all thuggish criminals."

"Are you trying to say that ghosts don't have obsessions?" asked Maddie, disbelief obvious in her 
tone and posture. "Because now that we have the portal open, we've seen clear and direct evidence 
of obsessions."

"No, of course not. Evidence of obsessions are readily apparent to anyone who has encountered any 
but the most restrained of ghosts. What I'm trying to say is that obsessions can be more complex than 
you give them credit for. As a point: most sapient ghosts have more than one obsession. Actually, the 
more intelligent the ghost, the more obsessions they tend to have, although, generally speaking, there 
will be a 'primary' obsession. One that has higher priority when compared to the others." Fractal 
paused. "It might be better to say, in fact, that ghosts have a primary Obsession, a set of secondary 
obsessions, and a general tendency to obsessive behavior." He tapped his fingers on the table. 
"Ghosts are constructed quite a bit differently than a human would be. Compare a Hard Disk Drive 
and a Solid State Drive, they can contain the same information, but do so in somewhat different 
ways." Fractal noticed the blank stares of the 'popular' segment of the class, and shook his head. 
"Never mind. There are physiological components of an obsession, but getting into that..." he 
grimaced. "Forgive me if I don't want to give you more ammunition, Dr Fenton, Dr Fenton."

The Doctors Fenton glared.

Fractal looked away. "A-anyway, for child ghosts, not new ghosts, but child ghosts, either young 
Deathless and certain kinds of Neverborn or the ghosts of children, usually the obsessions are all 
tightly related." Fractal interlaced his fingers. "He- Phantom- falls in this category."

"And this is supposed to make us- what? Trust him?"

"Uh. No. That's not the point of this. I'm just trying to help you understand. A ghost's Obsession 
doesn't come from nowhere, you know. Not if they're one of the Dead." He licked his lips and 
sighed. "This is difficult. Obsessions aren't something that you talk about except in the most general 
of terms. It isn't polite." He addressed the next question to the entire group. "What do you think his- 
Phantom's- primary Obsession is?"

"Heroism?" asked Dash.

"Gosh, no," said Fractal, making a face that conveyed both disgust and offense. "If that was the case, 
the arguments of Dr Fenton and Dr Fenton might have a leg to stand on. Ghosts can freely choose 
how to fulfill their obsessions. Any obsession, even one that looks malevolent can be turned to good 
ends. By the same token an obsession that appears entirely benevolent can become problematic. A 
'heroism' obsession would be terribly prone to that. Can you imagine what would happen if the ghost 
attacks in Amity ever stopped? No. Try again."

"Helping people," said Mr Lancer.

Fractal favored the teacher with a radiant, sharp-toothed smile. "Yes. And related to that?"

"Considering what your... friend Echo said to us earlier, I would say protecting people from harm?"

"You could call him my brother, if that makes you feel more comfortable, but, yes. Now, do you 
start to see the issue?"

"You're saying that you can't help us find the way out, because you want to protect us by keeping us 
here?" asked Mikey.
“That's one facet of it. The GZ is dangerous. Beyond that, Amity is dangerous. Here you would be safe. But you're assigning me agency that I don't have. Remember, I'm no more an independent person than the chair you're sitting on. Nor can you blame this on him. Excuse me, on Phantom,” he said, cutting off Jack and Maddie. “This isn't something that he has conscious control over. These things that drive us shadows are the illogical half-formed fantasies of the id. We polish them somewhat, but there you are. Besides, I haven't finished yet.

“As I said, one facet of this problem is that we want you to stay. It really would make things easier if you did,” Fractal adopted a cajoling tone. “He wouldn't have to leave then. We can make so many things here, but we can't make real people, and you're the ones he wants the most. He could be safe, too. Finally. Any we could make anything here, anything you'd like. What we can't make, we can acquire. You'd be shocked at what is here already.”

“We are not staying her at your mercy. Or Phantom's,” said Maddie.

“We're going home, ghost,” grumbled Jack in agreement.

Fractal sighed heavily, leaning back. “I thought as much.”

“But wouldn't that be problematic for you, too?” asked Hannah. “Danny told us Phantom would starve if he stayed stuck.”

Danny suspected that if Fractal's eyes were visible, they would have flicked towards him. “Not entirely rational…” he muttered. Then, more loudly, “There are people in the Zone that can help with that. Danny is far more capable than he seems.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You're welcome,” said Fractal. There was a clear undertext: From one harmless nerd act to another. Even if it was technically the same harmless nerd act masquerading as two. “But… that's actually part of the issue: There are people in the Zone. People. Despite how you dismiss ghosts as sub-sentient manifestations of post-human consciousness, they are people. People who do not deserve to be tortured by you,” said Fractal very pointedly. “We have a duty to prevent that.”

“Then keep us,” said Jack. “Let the kids go. They don't deserve to have their lives destroyed.”

“I was hoping you'd say that, but I'm not finished yet. That's actually part of the balance. We want to help you, and there are different kinds of helping. We don't want you to be unhappy,” he said, turning slightly so that it was clear he was addressing everyone present. “I think that you could be happy here, but if you don't…” he shrugged. “He values choice. He also cares for Amity Park, which we understand, even as we are jealous…” he trailed off. “Sorry,” he said to no one in particular. “I mean to say, he is fond of the people of Amity Park. All of them, although you are the ones he wants the most. The ones he knows best.

“As it stands now,” continued Fractal, “we cannot, in good conscience, help you leave. Equally, we cannot force you to stay. We couldn't harm you, in any case. You may be able to find the way out on your own, or with the aid of the wisps. These ones are the Three Winds Clan, by the way. That's the best translation. The tribe calls itself Bright Harp. Just so you know. But you probably won't.”

“So this whole thing was to tell us that you won't help us?” said Ricky, annoyed.

“No. It was just to explain the… pertinent issues to. To tell you why I can't just let you go. Why I can't show you the . Not without you,” he was now looking back at Jack and Maddie, “doing something for me first.”
He pulled a roll of paper out from his sleeve, followed by a small, spherical bottle from his belt. He placed both on the table. The bottle was about an inch in diameter, and was full of dark red-purple, almost black, liquid.

“Ever hear of a Stygian Oath?”
“You mean like in Greek Mythology?” asked Ricky.

Fractal practically beamed. “Yes, exactly! Many ancient civilizations had access to the GZ at one time or another, but the Ancient Greeks were the best mortal cartographers of the Realms. They thought that the ghosts they met were minor gods. The Hindus did, too. Many polytheists did. Dike was sometimes called Durga, Pandora was called Kali... That doesn't really matter, does it? Um.” He scratched his ear. “Anyway. They knew the River Styx. This,” he tapped the bottle, “is extract from Stygian Pomegranates. This,” he tapped the roll of paper, “is what I want you to agree to. I don't feel like the terms are too much of an imposition, but if you have an objection to any of them, we can discuss it. I, of course,” he said, pulling a pen from his belt, “will also sign. He should as well, to bring him, that is, Phantom, into the contract,” said Fractal, nodding at Danny. “Then, once you sign, we each take a sip of this,” he tapped the bottle again, “which will bind us to our agreement. You can't break an oath made on Stygian waters.”

Maddie frowned. “How do we know that anything you're saying is the truth?”

“Yeah! You could be trying to poison us!”

“You've been eating our food with no ill effect for the past two days. Why should I try to poison you now?”

“Oh for-” Danny lunged over the table, grabbed the bottle, popped off the cork, and took a swallow. “Wow.” He carefully re-corked the bottle, and put it back on the table.

“Danny!” said Maddie, grabbing his arm. “Spit it out.”

“I've already swallowed it,” said Danny. He picked a cookie up off of the platter. “That was really... flavorful.” He stuffed the cookie into his mouth. “How did you extract it, anyway?”

“A press, then a centrifuge. There's a workshop on the other side of the library. Stygian waters are slightly heavier than normal water, but that means-”

“That all the sugar and stuff got pushed to the bottom, too. Right. Blah. But, see? No poison.”

“I know you're worried, but you've got to extend some trust or else we'll never get anywhere.” He took another cookie. “These are really good.”

“Thank you,” said Fractal. “You should read this. Take your time with it. Make sure that you understand it.” He pushed back from the table. “I need to go take care of something. I'll be back.”
The 'contract' wasn't much to look at. The person who wrote it either had not taste for complicated legalese, or lacked the time for it.

The text was as follows:

'Madeline and Jack Fenton agree to destroy all blueprints related to the Fenton Mortifier, and any other weapons or documents used to construct weapons that may be used to violate the Three Taboos. Further, they agree not to create any more such weapons or documents. In exchange, Phantom, in the person of his shadows, will lead Madeline Fenton, Jack Fenton, Mr Lancer, Michael Snow, Lester Spengler, Nathan Spengler, Richard Marsh, Dashiel Baxter, Paulina Sanchez, Star Thunder, Mia Battaglia, Sarah McAllister, Tiffanie Jones, Dale Gordon, Kwan Ishiyama, Valerie Gray, Hannah Weston, Jasmine Fenton, Tucker Foley, Sam Manson, and Danny Fenton, to the lair's door, and shall allow them to pass through unopposed.'

Jack and Maddie weren't pleased. Apparently, many of their more recent creations were in some way related to the Mortifier.

Danny was more than a little disgusted, as well as nauseated by some of the more... graphic descriptions. He therefore announced his intention to go explore the cabins. Jack and Maddie, as expected, immediately vetoed this, saying that they had to check to make sure that they were safe, first.

Danny responded to this by getting up and walking to the pool nearest the waterfall. He didn't want to hang around his classmates anymore. He didn't need the guilt. He was hot, and he felt dirty. Everyone had already seen him shirtless. He just didn't care.

“Danny, what are you doing?” asked Sam.

“Going swimming,” said Danny, peeling off his shirt.

“Is that safe, dude?” said Tucker, dubiously, eyeing the waterfall.

“There's a gate,” Danny said, nodding to a lacy, ironwork grate set over the end of the pool. “Doubt I'm going to slip through that.” Danny put down his shirt.

Sam gasped. “Danny! Your scar!”

“My-?” Danny looked down. “Oh,” he said, softly, before sitting down carefully on the grass by the pool, making sure to interpose a large leafy plant between himself and the tables. “Oh. That's not good.” His fingers traced up to the skin above his core. The scar tissue there, at the very center of his complex pattern of scars had gone dark, burnt green, almost black. It felt odd, swollen, and it fluoresced when he touched it, patterns of light bouncing and rippling against the surface, like from a stone thrown in water. “That's not good,” he repeated. Sam tossed his shirt at him, and he pulled it back on. “You have a knife?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Sam, pulling a pen-knife from her bag and offering it to Danny. Danny made a tiny nick in his arm. Red. That meant... What? Well, it wasn't traditional internal bleeding, at least. Was his core leaking ectoplasm? Or some supporting ectoplasmic structure hemorrhaging? Or some other reaction to being hurt? A healing process? He didn't know. He'd never been hurt like this. He just had to hope that his chest cavity wasn't filling up with ectoplasm, because he doubted that would go over any better than if it was filling with blood. He had been having a hard time breathing. He was having a hard time breathing.
And now he was having a panic attack. Well, this was lovely. At least he had gotten away from the class. He didn't think that he could cope with being the center of attention, the only source of entertainment.

“Danny,” Sam was saying, “breathe, Danny. Tucker, go get Jazz.”

Then, without warning, Echo and Fractal were there. Shadows or not, Danny didn't know Echo or Fractal all that well, so when they showed up, he startled quite badly, and when he Echo reached out to touch him, Danny bit him. Danny immediately felt terrible. Civilized people don't just bite one another, even if one of them is touching the others' face for some arcane reason. Echo, on the other hand, hardly seemed to notice.

“You aren't panicking anymore,” said Echo. “You're breathing. Focus on that.”

“And remember,” said Fractal, “you don't actually have to breathe to live, even as a human. It isn't the end of the world if you stop.”

That was not helpful.

(The incident that had lead to that discovery had been absolutely hellish, and the reason that Danny's first impulse upon seeing Observants was to run the other way. Not to mention, it was kind of like telling a normal human that they didn't need arms and legs to live. That they could survive quite well without any limbs at all.)

“Sorry,” said Fractal.

But it was true that he was breathing again. Shallowly, but still.

“You have a fever,” said Echo.

“You need to lower your temperature,” continued Fractal.

Danny's tear-filled eyes flicked between the two shadows. He didn't move.

Fractal sighed, and looked behind him. At Sam. Danny twisted to follow his gaze. And at Jazz and Tucker. They were scared. He wasn't processing things very well right now, but he knew that.

“Help us get him into the water, please,” said Fractal.

“Without them noticing,” added Echo, jerking his head towards the waiting class.

“That'll help?” asked Sam.

“Yes,” said Fractal. “We also have something else that might help... But it isn't ready yet. Not quite. It will be tonight, but for now.”

The problem was, what was frightening them? Was is Echo? Fractal? The water? Him? It was him, wasn't it? He made himself smaller, in a conscious attempt to appear less threatening.

They spoke to him gently, but he was very nearly beyond words. Even so, he let them guide him to the water. He had intended to go in earlier, didn't he? Maybe?

Even after he had sunk, chest-height, into the soothingly frigid waters, it took some time for rational thought to return to him. What even was that? His core overheating? His brain overheating?

“Oh my gosh,” groaned Danny, submerging himself even further, so that only his head was still
above the water. “What was that?”

“Panic exacerbating your fever and other health issues,” said Fractal.

“You need to be more careful with yourself,” said Echo. He was splayed out on the edge of the pool, playing with the wet ends of Danny's hair.

Sam was sitting on Danny's other side, cross-legged. Tucker was playing lookout. Jazz was a next to Echo, between him and Fractal. She seemed more at ease with the two shadows than the others were.

“Do you two know what's happening with Danny?” asked Sam, glaring at Echo. Specifically at Echo's hand.

“What's making my scar look like that,” clarified Danny. He noted that his voice was a little slurred.

Echo and Fractal looked at one another. “We do know some things that you don't,” said Fractal. But the things we know are because of our construction. Because of our connection to the lair, and, through it, to you.”

“We're more in tune with your needs than you are,” said Echo. “You pay more attention to others than you do yourself.” He leaned down so that his nose was very, very close to Danny's neck.

“Please don't do that,” said Danny. Echo sighed and leaned back.

“Anyway, we don't know what's wrong, but we have... impressions, I suppose?” said Fractal, tilting his head. “I think that Echo is better at interpreting them than I. But that is his purpose.”

“If I can even be said to have one, what with the mess of my creation. We can tell that you have something wrong with your core, that you are too hot, and that you are frighteningly low on energy. But these are all things that you can tell yourself. Even if you ignore it.” He moved his hand to stroke the skin behind Danny's ear. “You aren't exactly getting worse, though. Not overall. Your core was worse before, and it has recovered somewhat, but the rest of your body,” Echo traced his hand down the side of Danny's neck and into the water, to Danny's shoulder, “it isn't doing so well.”

“It's like when you sprain your ankle,” said Fractal. “You favor the hurt ankle, but then you strain your other leg, or your back. Or when a crick in your shoulder travels to your neck.”

“Your core is still injured,” cautioned Echo, “and it could still take a turn for the worse. But I don't doubt that it will get better if you just rest. Relax. Stay here, where it's safe.” He reached down further, brushing his fingers against the sensitive scar tissue, leaning into Danny, practically hanging off of him. He was balanced precariously on the pool's edge, effectively trapping Danny. If Danny moved, Echo would tip into the water.

Danny squeaked. Echo backed off. Slowly.

“But we aren't entirely sure what those other issues are, or even what they're caused by. We know that your scars are inflamed with ectoplasm, but we don't know why.”

“So I'm not bleeding internally?” asked Danny. That was a relief.

“Maybe a little,” said Echo, shrugging.

But, before dread could set in Fractal picked up the thought. “But not enough to be a problem. Besides, it would be ectoplasm, which is quite a bit different that blood, and an ectoplasm bath
would actually be beneficial to your core.”

“Ah, heck,” said Echo. “Jack and Madeline are gearing up to make a decision. Do you want to get out, or disappear for a bit?”

Danny sighed. The water felt so nice.

“I could distract them,” offered Jazz.

“No,” said Danny. “I've got to get out eventually.”

Echo and Fractal somehow had a towel and a clean, dry, set of clothes, almost identical to the ones Danny was wearing. Danny suspected some kind of teleportation. (Teleportation: the solution to all life's minor inconveniences.)

Now Danny was marginally more ready to face his parents once more.

Yay.
They slowly returned to the tables. Danny was very aware of how Valerie stared at them. He hoped that she didn't notice his change of clothes. He ran his hand through his hair. He had tried to dry it thoroughly, but it was still damp in places. She shouldn't be able to see that, right? His hair was already black. Water wasn't terribly visible in it.

Jack and Maddie were coming back from the cabins, deep frowns etched into their faces. Danny felt bad, making them go through all this, when they so clearly didn't want to, but if they hadn't made such a terrible thing, this wouldn't be necessary. He hadn't thought all of what Fractal had said through himself, at least not consciously, but when it was laid out like that, it was obvious. It really would be irresponsible to let them back out without some guarantee that they wouldn't hurt anyone else.

They sat down heavily by the cookies. Jack took one. Ate it. His eyebrows went up. He ate another.

“So how are the cabins?” asked Danny, once he got into speaking distance. “Find any booby traps or anything?”

“No,” said Jack, sullenly. Like he was disappointed by the lack of perfidy. “We didn't.”

“Danny, Jazz,” said Maddie, reflectively. “You trust these ghosts.”

“I trust the wisps, and Phantom,” said Danny carefully. “The shadows are part of him, so they're... I don't know. They're going to have to follow his rules. Like the whole no hurting people thing. They are a little creepy, though, aren't they?” He nibbled absently on a cookie.

“Do you think that we could get out with just the wisps' help?” asked Maddie.

“I don't think that it'd be impossible,” said Danny. “But the shadows will definitely have a better way, and the wisps' way may not be totally human-accessible. I mean, they are quite a bit different from humans.” He petted a fist-sized wisp that had landed on his leg. It purred, and nuzzled down into his flesh, so only it's top hemisphere was visible. It was a very ticklish sensation. Danny hummed, and fished a cookie off the table to feed to it.

“And you, Jazz?”

“I think that you should agree,” said Jazz. “Having those weapons is just asking for trouble. Sooner or later, someone will find out, and ghosts are going to be less than happy. They already go after us sometimes. I don't want it to get worse.”

“But we need those weapons,” said Jack. “To protect ourselves from ghosts.”

“There are more ethical ways to do that,” said Danny. “Blasters aren't going to pose the same problems. Nor are shields. Or most of the weapons you've made in the past, for that matter.”
“This is still an awful lot to ask, for just letting us go.”

“Then ask for more.”

“What?”

“Fractal did say that he was open to negotiation, right?” asked Danny, rhetorically. “So, ask to change something. Or ask for something more. I don’t think you’ll be rejected outright. They want you to agree to this.”

The wisp, who had been delicately nibbling on a cookie, bounced off Danny’s leg, into the starry sky, trilling. Danny frowned after it in concern. It had been talking too quickly for him to understand it. A few confused moments later, a huge cloud of wisps descended on the platter of cookies like a swarm of locust. Several startled humans took cover behind chairs and tables. When they cleared off, the cookies were gone. Completely.

(Danny was hoping that sugar wasn't harmful to wisps. Or addictive.)

“So, I understand you've come to something of a decision?” asked Fractal, hopefully. Wow, he was way sneakier than he looked. Or acted. Or actually was, considering his self-introduction. Teleportation it was, then.

Maddie and Jack both glared at the shadow, as if the wisps’ actions were his fault. They were. In a roundabout way. He had made the cookies.

Maddie pulled herself back into her seat. “You're asking too much and giving too little.”

Fractal spread his hands out to either side. “There isn't much else we can do. Shadows cannot exist outside the lair. Nor is there much Phantom can do, in his current state.”

“But he is coming with us, regardless,” said Maddie, glancing at Danny. “We'd like some guarantees on that front.”

“Guarantees such as?”

“We want him to help us get home. If he is truly so concerned with 'helping people,' it shouldn't be too much of an imposition?” There was a great deal of venom in Maddie's voice, and Danny was glad that everyone was focused on Fractal, and couldn't see him flinch.

“Well,” said Fractal delicately, summoning a chair for himself, “there are some issues with that.”

“I don't see how there could be.”

“How would you phrase such a requirement? 'Phantom agrees to do everything in his power to get us home as soon as possible?'”

“Yes.”

“Well. That's a problem.”

“How?” demanded Jack.

“'Everything in his power' covers a lot of ground, and includes things that he would consider immoral, unwise, or otherwise distasteful. 'As soon as possible' does not factor in his safety, or yours.”
“So let's change that,” said Danny, before either of his parents could respond with cutting words. It crossed his mind that arranging things like this was somewhat dishonest. He was actually on Fractal's side of this negotiation, not his parents’... On the other hand, he did want to get everyone home safe and sound, without agreeing to something insane. “Make exceptions. Like, he'll do that, unless it gets too dangerous, or if it interferes with his obsession.”

Fractal nodded slowly. “That's a good thought.” He hummed. “Let's say this. 'Phantom agrees to do everything in his power to get you home safely, unless it poses an existential threat to him, to others, if it is against his obsession, or if it puts him at odds with those entities charged with enforcing the Taboos.'”

“'The entities charged with enforcing the Taboos,'” echoed Maddie. She looked at Danny, frowning. “You never did tell us who those were,” she said. Her tone wasn't accusatory, like he would have expected, but curious.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. That hadn't been on purpose, exactly, but... He'd had bad experiences with one of those groups, and he didn't like to talk about it. Still, he needed to get his parents to agree to this. He needed those things to go away. He was tempted, highly tempted, to have Fractal explain. That was Fractal's job, wasn't it? But he doubted that his parents would be inclined to believe anything that Fractal said.

“There are three groups, organizations, that deal with the crimes when they happen outside a Realm,” said Danny. “There used to be more, I think, but right now there are three. They are each headed by, um, a judge, who was appointed by one of the old high kings. The most powerful group right now are the Observants, who are headed by Issitoq the Watcher. My understanding is that their power is waning, though, so they're pretty well balanced by the other two groups. Um. Appearance-wise, they're green, they're tall, they each have only one big eye, no neck to speak of, no legs, they use tails exclusively, and they wear cloaks and robes. It's kind of like a uniform? They all have to look the same. Also, they can see the future. Kinda. Most of the Dead ones were clairvoyants or fortune tellers in life. But they've got an oath not to act on their prophecies. Someone forced them to take it early on in their existence, because they'd had a problem with self-fulfilling prophecies. They don't care for humans. They also really, really don't like Phantom. Like, they'll use any excuse whatsoever to end him, and they won't care if they have to kill me to get at him.”


“Who could hate the ghost boy so much? That's horrible!” said Paulina.

“Uh. It's a long story,” said Danny. Also, there are two of them, but they didn't need to know about the other part.

“We have time, Danny.”

“Uh. The Observants aren't supposed to interfere with time themselves, but there's a loophole in that. They can get others to interfere. They do this whole predatory Faustian bargain thing. They con ghosts into agreeing to serve them, without putting a time limit on the service.”

“That's a bit of an oversimplification,” put in Fractal. “There are apparently a lot of loopholes in their oath. The whole thing is intensely sketchy. Even if you do discount the indefinite indentured servitude.”

“Right. But there are loopholes in those agreements, too. The Observants are legal authorities, so there are limits to what they can ask of their people. They can't break the laws themselves. Um. I don't know all the details. Or more like, I don't understand all the details... They said something
regarding Phantom to one of the people they had a hold over, and that let him ignore them when it came to Phantom.” He swallowed. “Now, the second group—”

There was a great sound of protest. Danny winced.

“Okay. Okay. Fine. So, at some point, they predicted that Phantom might—Might! Set off a chain of events that would, um. Basically conclude with the apocalypse. Kinda thing. I—uh. He isn't—hasn't ever been very eager to discus that... Sequence of events. From his point of view, anyway. I get that. Um. I was involved, too. I—Uh. I'm actually. Uh. More responsible? I guess I'd say. Or equally responsible. Don't know why they picked him over anyone else, I mean... I don't like to talk about it either. Clearly. Um.”

“Of course Fenturd'd cause the apocalypse. He's such a klutz that I'm surprised he hasn't done already.”

“Wouldn't it be 'again'?” asked Kwan.

“If you two imbeciles are quite done?” said Fractal, coolly. The glow behind his glasses was dim. He was leaned back in the chair, his arms crossed and his head tilted slightly. He smiled, lips tight. “Danny, if you want to go on?”

“Anyway, that happened. Or might have happened. Their thing, the future-seeing thing, it's based on probability. They usually are able to determine the most probable result but... You get things like... There are ninety-eight different good possibilities with one percent possibility, and one bad one with two percent possibility, and they see the bad one. So they went to one of the most powerful people who they had control over—”

“Who?” asked Maddie.

“His name is Clockwork,” said Danny, reluctantly. “They never had as much control over him as some of the others, but they still retained the,” Danny’s face twisted into a scowl. “right to call on him to prevent extreme violation of Taboo.' So they told him to get rid of Phantom. Except they didn't quite use those words, so he was able to out-loophole them, and not kill Phantom, and make it so that killing Phantom wouldn't... Uh. Solve the problem. And change the problem. So, no more apocalypse, so they couldn't tell him to kill Phantom anymore, 'cause it wasn't going to prevent 'extreme violation of Taboo' anymore. Um. Is this making sense so far?”

“Yeah,” said Valerie, “except for the part about you causing the apocalypse. No offense, but you aren't really...”
Chapter 41: Gracious Ones

“Yeah,” said Valerie, “except for the part about you causing the apocalypse. No offense, but you aren’t really...” She trailed off. Danny shrank as Valerie's eyes drifted over his body. What exactly ‘wasn’t he really?’ Mean enough? Important enough? Powerful enough? Smart enough? Interesting enough? Leading a comment with 'no offense' usually meant that whatever you were going to say next was offensive.

“It isn’t important,” mumbled Danny, studying the glittery, granite edge of the table.

“I think it is,” said Mikey. “I mean, this is something that affe-”

“No!” snapped Danny. “It isn't. It didn't happen. It isn't going to happen. It is private, it is personal, and you have no right to that information. You only know this much because I'm trying to make a point about what utter jerks the Observants are, and how dangerous they are. Got it?”

Danny took a deep, calming, breath, closing his eyes so that he could ignore the others' reactions. “Okay. So. It wasn't going to happen anymore. But then they said something to Clockwork along the lines of 'he's your responsibility.' I don't know if that's exactly what they said, because I'm getting this third-hand at best, but it turns out that if you're talking about child ghosts, then that means something more along the lines of adoption, and screwing with familial relations is a bad thing. Super illegal, apparently, although I couldn't tell you what kind of super illegal. Taboo, but heck if I know how it fits in. So. Yeah.” He opened his eyes. Everyone looked rather taken aback. ‘Everyone’ being everyone not Sam, Tucker, Jazz, or Fractal. (Fractal, incidentally, was still giving Dash, Kwan, Valerie, and Mikey dirty looks. Dash, interestingly enough, looked more intimidated than Mikey.)

“Fractal,” said Danny. He couldn't help the slightly petulant tone in his voice. “Do you have any, um, drinking water, or. Um. A drink? Or something?”

“I have something,” purred an echoing voice from behind Danny. Danny flinched, hard, almost lashing out before recognizing the voice as Echo's. The ghost leaned over Danny, to put a tall, green-tinted glass down on the table with a distinct clink.

Danny took hold of it quickly, sending rivulets of condensation down the side. “Thank you,” he mumbled, before taking a gulp of- not water. Really not water. Well, mostly water. But not entirely. It tasted of sour lime and sugar, salt and capsaicin. It was mixed with ectoplasm. Quite a bit of it. Excellent. He set the glass back down after draining it.

Echo had vanished again.

“So, that's the Observants. The second group is lead by Ma'at.”

“Like from Egyptian Mythology?” asked Nathan.

“Yeah. That's the one. They're called the Feathers. They're more. Um. Open, I guess. No one really knows how the Observants are organized, except that Issitoq is in charge. They're also more eclectic.
Ma'at picks people that she likes and trusts and deputizes them to act as judges and arbiters, but otherwise there aren't requirements. They get involved in stuff you'd consider civil disputes. They act as intermediaries and, um, disinterested third parties. Impartial judges. But only if one of the people involved ask, and everyone involved agrees. Also, they have a tendency to judge the whole person, rather than the crime. They're nice, though. Fair. The couple I've met, anyway. It's hard to tell whether or not a person is a Feather by looking, because they don't have a dress code or anything. But they all have feather tokens from Ma'at. They're kind of like police badges. Um. They also have an, um, appeals process. Is that the right term?"

"Yes," said Jazz.

"But no one uses it, or hardly anyone, because if you lose the appeal, then you get eaten, and that's no fun. Yeah."

"Eaten?"

"Yeah. By Ammit, Ma'at's pet." Danny sighed. "Then, the Feathers are allied with the third group, Libra. Libra's the one that most resembles human legal systems. Or the one that tries to the most, anyway. Trials are weird in the GZ. They're obsessed with justice. I mean to say, that's their entry requirement. They're largely run by a family. Themis, her daughter Dike, their children, cousins, whatever. They're an old family. But they're okay with letting other people in, and they like having lawyers around. A lot of them are blind. A lot of them have four arms. They usually wear, like, suits, or Ancient Greek stuff. And, uh, ninety percent of them are women. That's all I really know about them. I don't think Phantom's encountered any of them, has he?"

"Nope," said Fractal.

"Uh. Then, trials..." Danny rubbed an eye. "Trials are weird in the GZ. There are a lot of cultures here, and no one could ever really agree on how trials should go, so they didn't. There's a way to determine how trials go, and that's it. Basically, everyone with a stake in the trial gets a representative, or sometimes even two or three representatives, and they all argue about it until they agree on how it should be shaped, and the formalities. Like, what the judge gets called, who's lawyer gets to talk when, who makes the decision of guilt, is there a jury... There are some other... bits in there, but... Yeah. That's about it. That's the extent of what I know."

"So the reason Phantom doesn't have 'at odds with' these other groups is because..."

"Because one of them is out to get him, he's on good terms with the other, and the last one is comprised of people who are the direct inspirations of the Greek Goddesses of Justice and Vengeance. And all three groups are powerful enough to enforce the laws. They're scary. And you shouldn't want to get on their bad side either, because if they ever find out about..." Danny trailed off, not even wanting to talk about those things. "So. Is there anything else you want from this?"

Adrestia flew through the Ghost Zone, Ember's latest album blasting through her headphones, papers in one hand, her club, a nightstick, really, on her hip, her whip looped around her shoulder, a collection of handcuffs dangling, jingling, like an elaborate metal skirt off her belt. She was dressed for war. Some of the ghosts she'd be going after were fairly powerful. Not a match for her gang. They were the best of the best. They'd been hunting down Taboo violators since time immemorial.
She spotted their door, a little farther along its orbit than she expected, and flew down to it. She didn't bother to knock.

“Hey!” she shouted into the lair as she blew the door open. “My peeps! I've got a job!”

The Gracious Ones' lair was a strange combination of dark, blue-tinted forest, dripping cave, and cozy sitting room. Three figures barely visible behind the stalactite/trees detached themselves from the pursuit of a fourth (likely a Taboo breaker who had been sentenced to a term of years at the Gracious Ones' mercy.)

The Gracious Ones were three women. Sisters. They had wide, leathery, bat-like wings, blue skin, and their eyes were solid, bloody red. That was about all they had in common.

The first one, who wore what looked like riot gear, touched down on the stony ground in front of Adrestia, and gave her a high-five. “Sweet Addie, let us see!”

Adrestia held the papers teasingly out of reach. “Wait for your sisters, yeah? They'd tear me apart if you got 'em first.”

“Nah, no way, I'm the eldest, I'd stop them.” She brushed her hair (black, and done in dozens of tiny braids) back out of her face, and angled her nose haughtily.

“As if, Alex!” scolded the second figure, who had her braids gathered into a kind of ponytail. “You don't know which one of us is older, and we all know it.”

“Tess, Alex,” said the third, her hair done in a single long braid, “c'mon, don't fight.”

“Still playing peacemaker, huh, Meg?”

“Uh. Not doin' too well with the 'makin" part. That's not really our thing, y'know? But I try to keep them from ripping each others' throats out, or goin' after one another with the scourges.”

“Whatever, Meg,” said Tess, shaking out her red dress, and adjusting her leather jacket.

Meg flipped her hair back. She was dressed like nothing so much as a soccer mom, discounting the incongruous knee pads, and the very incongruous scourge looped through her belt. “Well, as the only one of us not fixated on who's older, I've gotta do somethin', don't I?”

“Okay, okay, we won't fight,” said Alex. “Lets sit down and look at the job, huh?”

“Yeah, can I get you anythin,’ Addie? Drink? We've got some chili infused vodka from the other side. It's green.”

“Nah. I'm good, and I'm sure you're all eager to see this,” she fanned the papers in front of her seductively.

The sisters snatched the papers from her. Tittering as they flipped through. Then they froze.

“Oh, ancients,” breathed Alex.

“What?” said Adrestia, thoroughly nonplussed. She hadn't seen a reaction like this from them in, like... ever.

“Addie,” said Meg, “you did read this, yeah? You didn't just, like, grab it offa one of your cousins, and run here full-speed, or whatever?”
“As if. You know how anal the Hall people are about proper paperwork. It's annoying. I mean, we still got things done way back when we didn't have any.”

“Right,” said Tess, drawing out the word. “But, like, you did read it?”

“Yeah.”

“So,” continued Tess, “you saw who the victim is? You see how that’s problematic?”

Adrestia's eyebrows went up, and then came down, hard. “What? Because he's liminal? What d'you have against liminals? That's uncool.”

“Nothing, dude,” said Tess, equally offended.

“Yeah, Addie,” said Alex. “I mean, I know your fam goes with the whole 'justice is blind, everyone is impartial, we don't keep up with the news,' thing, but you've got to at least recognize the name.”

“Yeah? What was it again? Fantastic?”

“Phantom.”

“Okay. Sure. And why am I supposed to recognize it?”

The sisters exchanged a glance. “Addie,” said Meg, “you do remember the thing a couple years ago, when ol' Pariah woke up?”

“Yeah. I fought his armies, like everyone else.”

“Well, this kid is the one who fought him. Like, he was wearin' some kinda high-tech magic armor and stuff when he did it, but he's still the one that did it.”

“And he's like, y'know, connected,” added Tess. “He knows the Ancients, and they like him.”

“The real ones,” clarified Alex, “and he beat up those two stooges Pariah put on the Council.”

“Ugh,” said Adrestia, taking the opportunity to flop down on the sisters' cheerful yellow couch. “So you're saying that this is going to turn into a circus. Everyone's going to feel entitled to send a rep to the pre-trial. Next thing you'll say is that he's got a beef with the Observants.”

“There're rumors,” confirmed Meg.

“This is going to be a headache.”
“Actually,” said Jazz, “there’s one thing that I’d like to add.”

Danny looked at his sister in surprise. He’d expected his parents to quibble, not his sister. Had he screwed up? Did he make a mistake somewhere in here, or push for too much from his parents?

“I think that we need a nonaggression pact in all of this.”

“What?” said Jack.

“That’s a good idea, Jazz,” said Maddie. “As this stands,” she continued, “this doesn't actually say that you people can't attack us, is there?”

“I suppose it doesn't,” said Fractal. “That was an oversight on my part. My only request would be to make it mutual.”

“Time limit!” shouted Jack, suddenly. “That story Dan-o told us. It sounds like a time limit would be good. I don't want to be stuck not attacking a ghost!”

“We can have the nonaggression pact end upon fulfillment of the one of the other terms, namely, you getting home.”

The final agreement looked something like this:

'Madeline and Jack Fenton agree to destroy all blueprints related to the Fenton Mortifier, and any other weapons or documents used to construct weapons that may be used to violate the Three Taboos. Further, they agree not to create any more such weapons or documents. In exchange, Phantom, in the person of his shadows, will lead Madeline Fenton, Jack Fenton, Mr Lancer, Michael Snow, Lester Spengler, Nathan Spengler, Richard Marsh, Dashiel Baxter, Paulina Sanchez, Star Thunder, Mia Battaglia, Sarah McAllister, Tiffanie Jones, Dale Gordon, Kwan Ishiyama, Valerie Gray, Hannah Weston, Jasmine Fenton, Tucker Foley, Sam Manson, and Danny Fenton, to the lair's door, and shall allow them to pass through unopposed.

'Phantom further agrees to do everything in his power to get the above listed persons home safely, unless it poses an existential threat to him, to others, if it is against his obsession, or if it puts him at odds with those entities charged with enforcing the Taboos.

'Finally, Madeline and Jack Fenton, and Phantom and his shadows agree to refrain from attacking one another until such a time as the other terms of this agreement are fulfilled.'

With extreme reluctance, Jack and Maddie signed the document, sipping the sugary Stygian waters. Fractal was a good deal more eager. Danny added his name more sedately.

This was a relief. Really. Until they got home... Danny blinked at the contract, and saw something that his parents had, apparently, missed. Until his parents destroyed their weapons, they couldn't hurt
him. Finally, he was as safe from them as they were from him. The corners of his mouth curled up.

Fractal smiled and rolled up the contract, tapping it happily against the table, and tucking it back into his sleeve.

“So,” said Fractal, still smiling. “We, we’ve done that now. Y-you should all take the rest of the day to rest up, because there will be a lot of climbing tomorrow. Would you like us to send someone to cook for you, or-?”

“We can handle ourselves,” said Maddie.

“Oh. O-okay, then.” Fractal, having completed the task of getting Jack and Maddie to take a Stygian oath, was rapidly becoming nervous. “Do, do you,” he included the class with his gaze, “have any questions? I’ve- That’s part of what I’m here for. To help you. With questions, and... stuff.”

“I have a question,” said Paulina. She pushed past Tucker and Sam, and perched on the table in front of Fractal.

Fractal went delicately green, his ears flicking back, angling imperceptibly downward. “Yes?” he said, timidly, sinking down in his chair.

“Why aren't there any doors? It's totally a drag, like, there's no privacy.”

Fractal froze, his eyes briefly going bright, laser-light green. Danny felt his heart plummet, and his mouth go dry with dread, and the atmosphere crackled with tension. Then the feeling vanished, and Fractal smiled.

“There are actually a couple of reasons for that,” said Fractal, voice carefully cheerful. “One has to do with the way a lair functions. In a lot of ghost languages, the word for lair is ‘room’ or ‘enclosure.’ Lairs are internally continuous, connected spaces. With sufficient power, you can put in doors, you can do a lot of things with sufficient power, some people will even externalize their lairs. But it's much easier this way.”

“Uh,” said Ricky, “what's the other reason?”

“None of your business,” said Fractal, cheerfulness becoming slightly forced. “Any other questions?”

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The cabins were nice and cozy. The tropical theme was continued, and there were carvings on the walls similar to what had been in the rotunda, back on the hill. There was a bedroom in each, with four twin beds, a little sitting room, and little bathroom. Two of them also had medium-sized kitchens.

Danny made the decision to let someone else cook, and parked himself in the shower. He was seriously overheating. The green discoloration in his scars was spreading, too. A thin tendril had nearly reached up his scar to his shoulder, and another was making good progress to his hip. The bathroom's mirror showed a similar discoloration on his back. It was very distressing, not knowing what was going on with his body... But that wasn't exactly uncommon for Danny, and he had gotten over the initial shock that had sent him into a panic.
So he sat himself under the waterfall that served as the bathroom's shower. The water was pleasingly cool, though not as cold as the pools outside.

Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were hanging out outside, in the shared bedroom. They had insisted that he take the first shower. They were going to regret that. Or maybe not. Jazz knew how long he could take in a shower.

He started to go over everything that had happened in his mind, giving himself time to actually think and process everything that had happened over the last couple of days.

This whole situation was a massive mess. But it had gotten better. Going back over the contract, Danny realized that Fractal had managed to get rid of the 'soon as possible' part by bringing it up first and then dismissing it. That was clever. Danny shuddered to imagine what might have happened if a clause like that had gotten in there. An image of him leading, or trying to lead, the class across the Burning Lands danced across his mind's eye. Ancients, that would be nightmarish.

Actually, not counting whatever was going on with his body, Danny realized that he was as safe as he had been since becoming half-ghost. That was a nice feeling. Being safe. Sometimes he forgot how much he missed it.

There were a few concerning things, though (Other than the fear that Technus was on his way to world domination.). Like, why had he and Fractal reacted so poorly to the door comment? It wasn't because of power concerns, and he couldn't imagine reacting like that because he just didn't know how to put doors in. Maybe it was symbolic? He had a Ghost Zone title that had to do with doors, on account of the portal.

He absently rubbed his left palm. His scars were getting irritated. He wondered-

Oh. That's why the door thing bothered him. He didn't exactly have good experiences with them, did he? And he guarded borders, but there weren't any in here, so why have a door that would close? It'd just get opened anyway. Like the portal.

Danny imagined that anything even resembling a jab at his death would go over very poorly with him at present. Probably for the next several weeks as well.

That mystery being solved, Danny's mind drifted back to his parents. Maybe...

“Maybe you should tell them,” said Echo.

Danny started, slipping, and almost knocking his head into the shower wall. Echo caught him before he could brain himself, though.

“How do you keep doing that?” demanded Danny, squirming away.

“Doing what?” asked Echo, all shades of innocence. Then, more seriously, “If you mean startling you, it's probably partially because I'm invisible to all your 'early-warning systems.' I don't register as a threat to your subconscious, because I'm part of it, but your conscious doesn't know what to do with me, so it freaks out. Like how Sam and Tucker can sneak up on you sometimes, but you know them consciously, unlike with me. And the reason I make you uncomfortable, is because you trust me too much for someone you don't really know, and that puts you on guard. You catch yourself relaxing, and you don't know why. Probably has something to do with human minds not being equipped to deal with personifications of their subconscious, too.”

“Okay,” said Danny, “that makes sense.”
“It should. About ninety percent of that was going through your head anyway. You just weren’t processing it properly.”

He blinked. “Okay. Fine. So why did you feel the need to freak me out while I’m in the shower?”

“Because,” said Echo, taking off his boots, “you’re thinking about something important, but you’re having trouble thinking things through right now. You aren’t at your best. Not after everything that’s been done to you. So, I’m here to help you talk it out.”

“If talking to yourself fixed crazy, we wouldn’t need mental hospitals.”

“That might be true. But this isn’t like you’re talking to a voice in you’re head. I am as real to you as I am to anyone else.” Echo sat down on the edge of the tub, and swung his legs over so that his feet were in the inch-deep runoff from the waterfall-shower.

“I feel like there’s something wrong with that argument. I don’t know what yet but...” Danny trailed off. “Okay. So. You think that I should tell Mom and Dad?”

Echo shrugged. “If you’re ever going to tell Madeline and Jack, now is the safest time and place to do it. You’re safe here. This is your home. Your lair. You are in control.”

“Am I?”

“Maybe not consciously, but yeah. And you’ve got the contract. They’re bound by a Stygian Oath not to hurt you. So if they react badly, you’re protected.”

“Right, and then I can make plans on the way back to Amity.”

“And then you know.”

“What if they just fake acceptance?”

“I don’t think they’ll be able to do it for long, and once your powers are working again, you’ll be able to tell.”

“Oh. Right. Excess emotional energy. But... I don’t have any proof.”

Echo scoffed. “How’s this?” His hair rippled, and went charcoal gray, almost black. It held that way for a few seconds, then turned white again. His eyes stayed toxic green throughout. “Not the best, I know, but...” Echo shrugged.

Danny nodded, but frowned, brushing wet hair out of his face. “You know, I thought you’d be the last one to be for this.”

“What, because I don’t like Madeline and Jack? Well, I don’t. But it’s only a matter of time before they use something that really hurts you. Permanently, that is. The stuff they used the other day, you know it could have been worse. They already have stuff that can cripple you. If you tell them here, or at least before you get back, you can control the fallout, be safe from their reactions. But you know as well as I that none of these are the real reason you don’t want to tell them.”

Danny nodded slowly, looking at his feet. He had curled into a comfortable little ball at the bottom of the waterfall. “Telling them will hurt them.”

“Having them find out some other way will hurt them more,” said Echo reasonably, “and you’ve noticed how strained all of your interactions are with them lately. It isn’t healthy for you.”
“If it goes badly, I'll be shut out of Amity Park. I won't be able to protect it anymore.”

“Please. If Boxy can get through, you can. You're as tied to Amity as you are to this place. Which you should probably name, by the way.”

“Is that a thing that people do?”

“You've noticed that Ghost Writer calls his lair Vidya. And Clockwork's tower is Long Now. Isn't it kind of hard to think about this as 'the lair' as if it were the only one?”

“Thought that names annoyed you,” muttered Danny, all but inaudible. (He frowned internally. How did he get that impression? When?)

“Yeah. I guess I just didn't get them before,” admitted Echo, shrugging. “But we're getting off topic.”

“I'd screw up Jazz's life. They know she's been helping me. They were mad at us. If they found out more... I don't know. They'd never trust her again, at least.”

“She could stay here, with us.”

“She wants to go to college, become a psychologist.”

“You've saw the way her eyes lit up when you described the University of Ys, Atlantis Academy of Arts, the Atlantaen Science Academy, Lyonesse University, the Palace College at Wyddno, Kitezh Institute of Applied Religion...”

“Why are you only naming stuff in the Drowned Quarter?”

“I don't know. There are a lot of colleges there though, aren't there?”

“I guess. Did I actually tell her about all of those?”

“Most of them, anyway. You told her about your visit to Ys, and mentioned the university there, and then she wanted to know if there were other colleges. You told her about a few in the Lands of Ice, too, and that one in Dis, I think.”

“Oh. Right. I think I remember that conversation.”

“Well, yeah. So, what do you think, will you tell them?”

“I don't know. I don't... I don't know. It's hard. This is just...” Danny trailed off.

“I know.”

“I should let Jazz take her shower now.”
Chapter 43

Chapter 43: The High Council

Vlad stormed down into his vault. He was furious. Livid. He couldn't recall the last time he had been so angry. The GIW with their idiotic white suits ordering him around? They'd learn their lesson soon enough. They'd all learn their lessons.

First, though, he had to find Daniel, Maddie, and their less intelligent associates. Having the GIW actually find the missing children, after he had been so adamant that they were useless would be a disaster. Then, he could deal with whatever morons the GIW had sent at his leisure.

(A slight sense of unease sat deep in his chest. What if he wasn't dealing with the run-of-the-mill morons?)

Vlad retrieved the artifact he used to summon his avian minions and paused to shoot a glare at what he had intended to be (literally) the crown jewel of his collection. The Crown of Fire. He had gone through an awful lot of trouble (he had put Danny through an awful lot of trouble) trying to get it, and now, now it was fading. Flickering. Dying. Vlad had tried everything to bring it back to it's former, fiery glory, taking it to the Ghost Zone, bathing it in pure, hyper-energized ectoplasm, heating it, cooling it, setting it in his fireplace, plying it with other artifacts, but nothing-

Vlad froze, his eyes widening, scanning and re-scanning the spot where the Crown of Fire should be resting.

But no matter how hard he looked, it wasn't there.

Clockwork was unhappy.

Clockwork was unhappy for a wide variety of reasons.

Clockwork was unhappy for a wide variety of reasons, most of which had to do with his 'employers,' the Observants.

To begin with, they had called this meeting, and any interaction with them made Clockwork unhappy. This particular meeting made Clockwork even more unhappy than usual, because they had failed to extend him even the threadbare courtesy that was their usual wont.

(When he was in a more sanguine mood, Clockwork might admit that he did not completely hate every Observant. The organization was too large for him to have a personal animus with each member and some of them weren't totally amoral.)
Secondly, the scar across his eye was itching. As the scar was the physical manifestation of the bargain he had struck with the Observants in his (relative) youth, this meant that the Observants were blocking his sight. Oh, officially they were only borrowing it, using his power to bolster their own precognitive abilities, but the last time this had happened, Daniel had burst into his tower, injured, terrified and babbling. Some of the ‘younger, less disciplined’ Observants had taken it upon themselves to attack and harass Daniel, using their knowledge of aborted futures to mentally corner the child, and their superior numbers to physically attack him with impunity. Daniel had gotten away with light injuries, but only because he had put all effort and energy into getting to Clockwork... Which he might not have done if he hadn't misinterpreted several statements by the Observants to mean that Dan was on the loose.

Clockwork wasn't sure what was worse, the block on his vision and his powers, or not knowing what was happening with Daniel. Of course, he had other responsibilities that he could not attend to as long as the Observants were tapping his temporal powers, but he had become accustomed to knowing where Daniel was and what he was doing.

Then there was this waiting. Clockwork was normally a very patient ghost, but this was excessive. If he hadn't made that oath so long ago...

Clockwork had originally been three separate, unrelated beings.

One was/is/would be/had been a barely sentient ghost that had both existed eternally, at all points in time, and at none of them A creature that existed in the moment. Every moment. Knowing all events, but understanding none of them.

The second was named Heru, and he had never been alive. He had, however, in his time been so obsessed with the nature of the passage of time that he had left traces in dozens of mortal cultures. He had been born a ghost in the same Realm as Ma'at, with wings, bright, blue feathers, and a falcon's head.

The third had never been human either, but once he had been alive. Or perhaps he would be. Clockwork had never been able to quite track him down, and rather suspected that he did not yet, and might never, exist in this time line.

The later two had, for entirely separate, divergent reasons, decided to contact the first. They succeeded too well. The result was a soul merge and madness.

Each mind was utterly alien to the other, each thought twisted and warped through three disparate, and sometimes antagonistic, points of view. The first had no experience with anything. No comprehension of the flow of events, of cause and effect. The others were adrift. Too much power, their body changing under them, twisting and rippling under their skin, which itself was changing. Worse than changing. Symbols and arcs and orrery blueprints on his skin, a pit in his chest, and aching. Something lost, that he couldn't even remember. A thousand futures and pasts stretching before and behind him, never knowing what was which, which was real, which was true.

(He had a great deal of sympathy for Daniel's troubles reconciling his two 'halves.')

Madness was the least of it. Confusion was the least of it. He had done horrible things.
It was in madness that he had learned of the Observants, but it was in a moment of lucidity that he had sought them out. They were seers, he reasoned, perhaps they could teach him to control his sight. He could see a path, tenuous, and thready, that lead to clarity, to finding balance.

Clockwork didn't regret putting an end to his madness, and the destruction it was causing, but he did regret not reading the contract a little more closely. And, perhaps, not picking some other, less shady group to trust with his sanity.

Not that he hadn't been grateful. But even the deepest gratitude had it's limits, and after many, many long years, Clockwork had found his.

So he resented the Observants.

Then, after their treatment of Daniel, who was his, he hated them.

Clockwork looked up from his musings as the door to the room he was waiting in (a lavishly appointed meeting room) was opened. He expected an Observant, a lower ranked one most likely, to arrive and tell him the purpose for which he was summoned, but he was mistaken. An occurrence rare enough to raise his eyebrows.

“Nephthys,” he said, addressing his fellow Ancient. “What brings you here?”

“Don't you know?” teased the dark-skinned woman, brushing her curly hair back over her shoulder. Clockwork's lips thinned, and twitched. “Sorry,” said Nephthys. “They're pulling that again, are they?” She continued, not waiting for an answer, “They called an official meeting of the full High Council. Ancients, Judges, Court Magicians-”

Clockwork scoffed. “A way to get more Observant votes to the table.”

“True, but there's no need to interrupt me.”

Clockwork made a face. “I apologize.”

“I know you're under a lot of stress,” said Nephthys, consolingly. “Anyway, Ancients, Judges, Court Magicians, even though they're puppets, Generals, I know you don't like them, Tigers, Ravens, Smith, everybody. The whole High Council. But beyond that...” Nephthys trailed off, making a negligent gesture. “I don't really know. There are a limited number of things that they can call the High Council for, and a smaller number of things that the would call the High Council for, but I've been busy lately.” She (unnecessarily) straightened the veil pinned in her hair. She issued a sound that could have been a name, but not a human one, “is having some kind of global nuclear war, and it's just a nightmare.”

“I have suspicions,” said Clockwork. “I know that Themis and Ma'at have been planning something lately. This may be a move on the Observants' part to disrupt that. Or,” and now Clockwork was voicing his fears, “it could be move against liminal spirits. To deny them the rights of ghosts.”

“Because of Daniel?”

“Yes,” said Clockwork shortly, voice tight.
“It won’t happen,” said Nephthys, reassuringly. “You can’t get enough votes to change the law. Most likely, they won’t even be able to find enough councilors for a quorum. No one’s seen the Generals since Pariah lost his mind, the Tigers don’t listen to anyone, and Smith doesn’t come to meetings unless he thinks there’s going to be a change in leadership. Although...” Nephthys smiled, wickedly, running her fingers along the blade of her bagging hook. “I know a candidate I’d not say ‘no’ to. And I think you might, too.”

The door swung open again, and two women walked in, whispering fiercely. They stopped upon entering, and the second scanned the room.

“So,” said Ma’at of Many Feathers, “Issitoq hasn't bothered to show up yet. Why am I not surprised?”

“He isn’t late yet,” said Themis, Most Honorable Lady of Scales and Sword. She was always fair. “We’re actually early.”

“I have been waiting for almost three hours,” said Clockwork.

“They told you to come that early?” asked Themis, frowning behind her blindfold.

“Yes.”

“That’s rude of them.”

The Court Magicians came next, all of them in a file, all of them, like Clockwork, unfortunates who had put too much trust in the Observants. They were powerful, clever people, but in many ways they might as well be thralls, all their will dedicated to serving the Observants.

Then Fright Knight, youngest of the Ancients, came in, muttering imprecations about the Panopticon’s stabling facilities under his breath. He sat down angrily. Fright Knight always wanted to bring Nightmare into Council meetings with him. The Council of Ancients allowed it. The Observants were a little more fastidious. Finicky. Ridiculous. Nightmare was at least as intelligent as any of them, and made no more mess than any other spectral creature.

Pandora came next, and she had felt the need to bring her spears with her. She spared one of her four hands to give a wave and brief greeting to Clockwork and Nephthys, and sat down next to Themis. They were related. Tenuously. Themis was one of Pandora's great-great aunts, although they were almost the same age.

Then, surprisingly, a Tiger came in, all black and white and electric blue, two green-eyed Ravens perched on his back. Lightning and fire made flesh. Times past, the Tigers had been made the representatives of four-legged ghost animals, and the Ravens had been chosen as representatives of those that had wings and feathers. The Tigers had laughed off the whole thing as a bad cause hundreds of years ago, but the Ravens always sent at least two to attend.

The next one to enter was Nocturne, Ancient Master of Dreams. He had his mask on at an angle, and was clutching a pillow, his starry mantle drawn close around him. He smiled sleepily at Clockwork and Nephthys, and sat down next to them.

“How has your grandson been?” asked Nocturne.

“Daniel has been well.”

“Not any more,” said Themis, licking her thumb and slicking a loose strand of black hair back into her bun.

It was a few more minutes before the doors opened again, and Undergrowth and Vortex were lead into the room in chains by Observant guardsmen. Those present who were possessed of eyes glared at the two ghosts. Those who were possessed of clothing pulled them away, as if they thought that their clothes might get dirty from mere proximity.

Undergrowth and Vortex had been appointed to the Council of Ancients by Pariah Dark. They were not well liked. They probably wouldn't be well liked even if they hadn't been sociopaths.

Only then did Issitoq deign to appear, another, less richly dressed, Observant following in his wake, carrying a wooden box.

“I suppose this is everyone,” said Issitoq, looking down his nonexistent nose at the gathered ghosts. Undergrowth and Vortex growled, deep voices echoing.

“I should hope so,” drawled Clockwork. “You do realize how late you are?”

Issitoq didn't even acknowledge the Ancient.

“Then-”

The door opened. Smith, with his brawny arms, curly beard and thick black apron, walked in.

It was too bad that Issitoq had centuries of experience hiding his emotions. Clockwork would have liked to see his shocked face.

Smith quietly walked to an empty seat, and perched himself on it with no fanfare. He gazed expectantly at Issitoq with bright black eyes.

“The High Council has been called to deal with an issue that affects all the Infinite Realms,” announced Issitoq.

(Well, if that hadn't been the case, he would soon have some very angry, very powerful ghosts on his hands.)

Issitoq nodded to his assistant, who flipped open the box. Nestled on the crushed velvet was a sharply-pointed crown. Green fire licked weakly up its sides. Ma'at and Themis looked pleased. On closer inspection, the box was set with symbols that Ma'at's people favored. One of them had likely retrieved it from Vladimir, and forced the Observants to acknowledge it. Clockwork knew that they had been watching Vladimir for some time now.

“We must find a way to restore-”

Issitoq was cut off with a sharp laugh. “Restore?” asked Nephthys. “A Crown once faded cannot be restored. There's only one thing left to do.”

“And that is the business of the Council of Ancients, not the High Council,” said Fright Knight, standing, as if to leave.

One of the Court Magicians said, “But we've spent so long without a reigning king... The people wouldn't accept it.”

Another said, “You would also need a candidate that fulfills all conditions, and there simply aren't
any available. Not that you'd all agree on.” His eyes flicked towards Undergrowth and Vortex.

“You'll note,” said Clockwork, “that the rules do not in fact require that we all agree.”

The Tiger purred. “You imply that a ghost has defeated one of you?”

“None of that,” said Issitoq, “matters. We are not here to choose a new king, we are here to prevent that becoming a necessity.”

Clockwork rolled his eyes. Issitoq was only delaying the inevitable.
Chapter 44

Mr Lancer was worried about Daniel.

Although, honestly, he had been worried about Daniel for quite some time. Sleeping in class, skipping class, the bruises hidden under long sleeves, skipping lunch, rarely turning in homework... These had all conspired to paint a sinister picture. Knowing the truth was...

Not as much of a relief as he had thought it would be.

Actually, Mt Lancer wasn't sure that it didn't make it worse. Knowing. Knowing that his small, timid, gentle, clumsy student spent all his time fighting ghosts, protecting the city, pulling people from fires and car wrecks, catching buses that went off cliffs, and, worst of all, running from ghost hunters. From the GIW. From those 'Extreme Ghost Busters' and 'Scaredy Cat' people. From his own parents.

Then there was this. This thing about causing the apocalypse. Mr Lancer honestly couldn't imagine Daniel doing anything like that on purpose. He had difficulty imagining Daniel doing anything immoral on purpose. The one thing that Mr Lancer knew about for certain that Daniel had done that could be considered morally wrong was cheating on the CAT, and he hadn't followed through on that. Actually, when he had confessed to it, he'd acted like the world was ending. Like he had expected to get a much worse punishment than having to retake the test. Like he had committed some kind of crime.

He looked sick, too. Ill. That might be expected, considering how his own parents had attacked him. With that weapon, the Mortifier, and whatever that other thing was supposed to be. But... Knowing now, reading between the lines, between the lies...

Mr Lancer had to wonder if Phantom- if Daniel- was really starving, really dying. He had to wonder if the way he kept zoning out, staring into the distance, and dozing off meant anything.

Mr Lancer was worried about Daniel.

And he didn't know what to do.

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Danny shuffled back into the cabin. As soon as he was full, he had started to crash. Again. He had been alright before dinner (did it count as dinner or a really late lunch), but as soon as he was full, he'd started dozing off.
He was tempted to lean into Jazz, or Tucker, or Sam, but they had to be just as tired as he was, and he didn't want to aggravate his temperature issues. Which, he suspected, were getting worse. He had waited until the spaghetti (courtesy of Rebecca and Kwan) was stone cold before eating it.

Danny yawned hugely, and rubbed his eye. At least he wasn't passing out while walking, like he had last night. (Night? Day? The clocks in that bedroom, while calming, hadn't been helpful in determining the time.)

Oh. Echo and Fractal were there, in the cabin. Sitting on the bed. With a bottle of something that glowed so brightly green that it was almost white. Wisps waited expectantly on every surface. Danny could taste the energy in the air.

“Uh, Echo, Fractal,” said Sam, “what's going on?”

“This is the thing we were talking about earlier,” said Fractal.

“The thing that can help,” added Echo.

“What is it?” asked Tucker, poking Danny in the back so he would move forward and Tucker could get into the room.

“Purified, high-energy ectoplasm,” said Fractal. “These guys helped us charge it,” he said smiling at the wisps.

“Is that safe?” asked Jazz, squinting at the bright bottle. “It isn't going to make him bounce off the walls, is it?”

“I'm sure that it's going to have side effects, if that's what you mean, but all medicine does.”

“Well, if it's going to help...” said Jazz, glancing on Danny. “Danny,” she said, “are you alright?”

Danny shook himself out of his daze. “Hm? Yes. Just a lot of... Calmness.” He waved his hand in the air. “Sleepy.”

“Oh,” said Fractal. “Yes. We asked them to do that. We were hoping that would counteract the hyperactivity.”

“Yeah, because this is literally an energy drink,” said Echo. “Closest thing to liquid energy in the Realms or on Earth. That we know of, anyway.”

“This isn't going to turn out like the caffeine disaster, is it?” asked Sam suspiciously, even as she stepped closer.

“Don't you trust us?” asked Echo, miming a blow to his heart.

“About as much as I trust Danny when it comes to his health.”

“Hey,” complained Danny. “I'm not that bad.”

“You're that bad,” chorused Sam, Tucker, and Jazz.

Fractal cleared his throat. “We aren't looking for a 'quick fix' with this. We're trying to give his core what it needs to repair itself.”

“Okay, okay,” said Danny. “Guys. Really. I've eaten ectoplasm before. I'm half made of ectoplasm. It'll be fine.” He made his sleepy way to the bed, sat down, and took the bottle. It seemed to flutter
under his fingers. It was *magnetic*. Attractive. It promised sustenance that the meal he had just eaten lacked. “Why can't the wisps give this to me directly, though?” he asked absently, turning the small bottle over between his fingers, humming a translation of the question to the wisps.

“They've been trying,” said Fractal. “You're not absorbing very well. This will go directly into your body.”

“Okay,” said Danny. He spun off the cap. “Hope this works.” He raised the bottle to his lips, tipped it back, and drained it.

“So,” started Sam.

“Oh wow,” said Danny, putting the bottle down with a shudder. “Oh. Wow.” He crossed his arms over his stomach, hunching over. His eyes were bright, swirling green.

“Danny, are you-?” Jazz reached out to Danny, but he jumped up, and started pacing, seemingly not even noticing her.

“Oh wow,” he repeated. “Oh wow. Oh no. Oh no. No no no no no...” The words morphed turned into a high pitched whine that cut out just before it got physically painful to listen to. The shadows had shrunk into little fetal balls.

“Danny,” said Sam, trying to get his attention. She put a gentle hand on his arm. He nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Little brother,” said Jazz. “It's okay, it's just us. You're okay.”

“Deep breaths, Danny, deep breaths,” said Tucker.

His next whine might have had their names in it. Then Danny sunk to his knees, withdrawing into his own fetal position. His next words were muffled. “I'm bad.” Echo made a strange, deflated sound, and then uncurled, clutching the edge of the mattress with shaking hands.

“Danny,” said Jazz, starting to rub his back, describing little circles with her hand, “you're not bad. Why would you think you're bad?”

“I'm bad,” repeated Danny. His thoughts were racing, spinning, oh, Ancients he was out of control, he should have known what he was doing was wrong, he had known, he had just *ignored* it, he was horrible, he was awful, he was bad, bad, bad. “I'm bad.”

“Danny, you're not bad,” started Tucker, uncertainly. “You're like the best person I know. Who else would forgive me after all the stunts I've pulled?”

“I'm bad,” started Tucker, uncertainly. “You're like the best person I know. Who else would forgive me after all the stunts I've pulled?”

“I'm bad, I did bad things. Bad, bad, bad things.” He sobbed. “I cheated. I'm *bad*.”

“Cheated..?” Sam exchanged glances with the other two. “You... You're not still... Danny, you didn't do it. It didn't happen.”

“I'm bad,” insisted Danny. “I cheated to get them to say yes, I *lied*. I...” He trailed off as wisps descended to land on his back and shoulders. Sam and Jazz worked together to untangle Danny's hands from his hair. Tucker awkwardly took over the back-patting. “I lied. I'm a liar. I'm a cheater. They trusted me and I cheated and I lied. And I- I couldn't even say what I did, I couldn't say anything I can't tell the truth when it's important, when it's not important when it- I *hurt people.* Ancients help me. Ancients... This is my fault because I-” he cut off.
“What, for dying?” demanded Sam, angrily

“Yes.”

“Danny, you're not a liar. You tell us the truth.”

“No I don't. I lie to you too. I'm bad.”

“About what?” asked Tucker, scandalized, before Jazz sent him a glare.

“The nightmares,” answered Echo in a strained voice, as Danny shuddered and moaned. Jazz wrapped her arms around her little brother, and he clung to her. “We lie about those. We lie about the blood and the pain. We lie about re-gifting presents. We lie about what happened in the futures that never happened. How much we remember. We lie about singing in the shower.”

“Oh, Danny, we already know about all of that.”

“You do?” asked Danny.

“It would be hard not to,” said Jazz.

“Oh,” said Danny. “I'm sorry.” He sniffed. “I'm sorry.”

“You don't have anything to be sorry for.”

“You shouldn't have to deal with me.” He sniffed. “I'm sorry. I'm a mess. You shouldn't have to deal with me and my freak outs and my craziness and-and-” He looked up at Jazz with wide green eyes. “Do you think they know?”

“Who?”

“Mom and Dad? What if they know, 'cause you know, and they just- and they hate me and that's why- They hate me oh, Ancients.”

“Breathe, Danny. Mom and Dad don't hate you. They just don't understand you.”

“Okay,” said Danny. “Okay. I'm sorry, Jazz.”

“You don't have anything to be sorry for. You're okay.”

“I'm sorry, Sam. I'm sorry, Tucker. I'm sorry. For- for making you deal with this.”

“Hey,” said Tucker. “It's like Jazz said, you don't have anything to apologize for. We want to help you.”

“Yeah,” said Sam. “That's what we're here for.”

Danny hiccuped. “You're too good. I don't- I don't deserve you.”

“No way, Danny, that's you.”

“Oh, heck,” said Echo suddenly. “Why now?”

“What?” asked Sam.

“They're coming.”
“Who?”

“Here, into bed, pretend to be asleep. Fractal,” said Echo to the shadow who was bleeding blue from under his glasses, “go somewhere else.” Fractal made a pathetic, crooning noise, and vanished. “Hurry,” urged Echo, lifting Danny up, and tucking him into a bed. He glanced at the door, grimaced, and then vanished himself.

Maddie and Jack appeared in the doorway minutes later.
Chapter 45: The Best Lies

“Uh,” said Jack. “We wanted to talk to Jazz and Danny.”

“Danny’s asleep,” said Jazz, defensively, glancing at the lump that was Danny. She saw Sam and Tucker moving inwards slightly out of the corners of her eyes, subtly protecting their friend. “He’s been tired. Is it something that just I can help you with?”

Maddie and Jack exchanged a glance.

“I think...” said Maddie. “Yes. I think that you can. Sam, Tucker, I'm sorry if we interrupted your getting ready for bed.” She gave Danny a lingering glance before turning around and walking out.

Jazz followed her parents out, shooting a glance at Danny herself. He was doing a good job of faking sleep.

Maddie and Jack lead her off to the side of the cabin. It was quiet out, but not silent. The hiss of rushing water, the rustle of leaves, and the faint strains of wisp's conversations filled the air.

“So, what's up?” asked Jazz, leaning against the wall.

“We wanted to apologize,” said Maddie, “to you and Danny. We haven't been handling this situation very well.”


“Does there have to be something else?”

“If that was it, you would have said it back inside.”

“We... Just, why, Jazz? Why do you and Danny really trust Phantom?”

“We told you,” said Jazz. “We explained it. It was gradual. He earned our trust over time.”

Jack and Maddie gave Jazz a sad look. “Jazzy, we know that's what you said, but there has to be more than that. We raised you better than that.”

Jazz raised an eyebrow. “Yes. You raised me better than to hate people for no reason, despite your hatred of ghosts.” Jazz sighed. “You are scientists, right? Try to think about this objectively. What has Phantom actually done? Really? We've explained everything, all of the bad things, already. Sam and Tucker saw most of it, directly. I've seen a lot of it. What more do you want?”

“We want you to be safe,” said Maddie.

“Then, believe it or not, you and Phantom want the same thing.”
“Jazz, your whole... Danny's whole... relationship with Phantom is built on a lie.”

“What do you mean?”

“Phantom said that he was a young ghost- a new ghost- when he came out of the portal. That's impossible.”

“That ghost was way too powerful, Jazzy! A new ghost would have fallen apart outside of the Ghost Zone! Melted!”

“Without the stabilizing influence of the Ghost Zone, he couldn't have formed such a complex form,” said Maddie, “and that's not even taking into account all the stories.”

“Your great-great- uh- great-great- um. Your ancestor John Fenton-Nightingale has a picture of Phantom from over three-hundred years ago!”

“I know you research everything, Jazz. You had to have known. There are records, clear pictures, of Phantom going back to Babylon. He's old, and powerful. So why do you trust him?”

Jazz bit her lip. She hadn't expected them to know that. What could she say? How should she say it? She couldn't tell them the truth. “I think,” she said, very cautiously, “that you should wait for Danny.”

“We can't, Jazz. We've signed a contract with this thing. It's inside Danny. We-”

“Don't call him a thing,” snapped Jazz.

“If we're going to trust... him,” said Maddie, “we need to know what you know.”

At that moment, Echo flicked into vision behind Jack and Maddie. He was holding a wallet in his hand, pointing at it, and nodding encouragingly. He looked better than he had back in the room. Still drained, drawn, and flushed slightly green, but upright.

Why was he-?

Oh.

Okay.

She could do that.

Echo could, apparently, see the comprehension blooming in her eyes, because he promptly vanished.

Jazz quickly returned her attention to her parents. “You're right,” she said, “there is something else.” She pulled her wallet from her back pocket, and opened it. There was a wad of pictures in one of the credit card pouches, and she thumbed through them, looking for one in particular. She found it, and pulled it free.

It was a small photo. Sam had taken it. It was of Danny. Danny and Danny. Jazz had been keeping as a sort of 'get out of jail free' card for Danny. 'Proof' that he couldn't be Phantom. It was from the time with the Ghost Catcher, before things had gotten weird. weirder.

Danny-as-Fenton and Danny-as-Phantom were standing side by side, leaning slightly in towards each other. They had identical, slightly surprised looks on their faces. Mirror images. Jazz frowned at it. This was a risk. She hoped that she was doing the right thing here.
“Here,” she said, offering the photo to her parents. “Notice anything?”

Maddie and Jack peered at the picture, each holding a corner.

“Time is strange in the Ghost Zone,” said Jazz. “You can fall through a portal and wind up in Ancient Egypt, or a hundred years in the future. Paradoxes are common.”

“This is... Oh, no. No,” said Maddie. The fingers of her free hand hovered, trembling, over the surface of the picture. “There are shapeshifting ghosts. This is just another one of Phantom's lies. We shouldn't have signed that-”

“Mom. Really.”

“That's the only explanation. He can't- He just looks like Danny.”

“How did we not see this before?” asked Jack. “They look so much alike.”

“They take pains to make sure they aren't seen together,” said Jazz. “It isn't like it's an easy connection to make, especially if you don't know about the time travel issue.”

“You're saying,” said Maddie, looking ill, “that he's- that Phantom's... Danny. From the future.”

“Honestly, we don't know how it works. If he's from the future, or an alternate time line, or what. He doesn't either. The portal or whatever did a number on him. And Danny didn't accept it right away. Not like you think he did.”

“Phantom's scar,” said Maddie, still looking at the picture, “it's the same as Danny's.”

“Yeah. We think that's what killed him.”

“He could be a copy,” said Jack.

“What?” said Jazz. This was going off the rails.

“An ectoplasmic copy of Danny,” said Jack. “It- He could have been formed in the portal, when it turned on, and Danny got shocked... Danny would have acted as a mold... And then Phantom would have formed on this side, and then... He would have gone back into the portal, into the Ghost Zone. Until a month later and then...”

“Then everything is consistent,” finished Maddie.

Jazz blinked. Sometimes she forgot how smart her father could be. But this explanation was really way too close to the truth. She hoped that it wouldn't cause any problems when Danny finally did decide to tell them.

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Once Jack, Maddie, and Jazz left, Sam dropped down by Danny, and touched his hand, which was clenched tight around the blankets. “Danny, are you okay?”

“That was weird,” muttered Danny. His eyes opened slowly. They were still green. His skin appeared to be glowing slightly.
“Yeah, no kidding. What happened?”

“Dunno. Everything just seemed so much heavier. I guess. I'm sorry I give you guys all this trouble. Always causing trouble.”

“Hey, Danny, don't go down that way,” said Tucker.

“I'm so sorry,” said Fractal. They turned around. Fractal had reappeared. His face was still streaked with blue, and he was holding his glasses in his hand. This was the first time they had actually, directly seen Fractal's eyes. Fractal seemed to realize this, and pushed the glasses back onto his face. “We didn't expect that.”

Danny pushed himself into a sitting position. “So you know what happened?”

“Sort of? I have a theory. Or some theories. The ectoplasm didn't reach your core all at once, I think. Or it didn't affect it all at once. Or it upset the balance between your core and your brain. Remember when you were separated? And you went to extremes on both halves? I think it might be like that. Maybe. But now you've adjusted, and we've adjusted, so we're all good. I think.”

“So you actually have no idea?” asked Danny, amused.

“Not really, no.”

“Danny,” said Jazz, walking back into the room. “Uh, Fractal. You guys look better?”

“I feel a bit better, anyway,” said Danny, rubbing green eye. He looked down at his hand. “Do my veins look like they're glowing to you?”

“A bit,” said Jazz.

“So what did Mom and Dad want?”

“Well…”

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“Do you think that Jazz told us the truth this time, Mads?”

“I think,” said Maddie, “that she was telling more of the truth than she has been.”

“But not the whole thing.”

“No,” Maddie put her head in her hands. “Jack, when did we go wrong? What did we do? Why don't our children trust us anymore?”

“I don't know,” said Jack, morosely.

“What are we going to do?”

“We'll just have to keep going,” said Jack. He sighed heavily. “What do you think the truth is?”

“Something bad,” said Maddie. “Something to do with Phantom, and how he's connected to Danny.
We shouldn't have signed that contract. What if he's hurting Danny?"

“Jazz wouldn't let that happen. She wouldn't work with Phantom if he was hurting Danny. There's-
There's something else going on. And we'll find out what it is.”
Chapter 46

Danny had nightmares.

He knew they were nightmares. He knew he was asleep, knew he was dreaming. He knew he was lying in bed, in the cabin in his lair. He could almost feel the sheets, Jazz trying to wake him up.

He hated this kind of nightmare. Well, he hated all kinds of nightmares, but being trapped like this was worse than he would think, if he had been told about it by someone else.

In the dream he was sitting on top of an open, freestanding doorway. Grey-green stone stretched beneath it in all directions. Above, the sky was overcast blue and beaten. Danny was wrapped in a long, dark cloak, and a sword was balanced across his knees. A long, golden arrow was plunged through his chest, and it stung with every breath.

As far as nightmares went, it wasn't especially disturbing. But, there were things to be done. Things he had to do. Here. Fire was on the horizon, the sky was burning. Dripping. Things were coming. Enemies in armor.

And he couldn't move.

Lairs did not have minds, as humans would recognize them. They did not have thoughts. Not anymore than a computer would have thoughts. But they did have processes. Systems. Functions.

One such function was 'looking' outside the door. It used this to identify and pick up things to furnish its interior. Objects that the lair itself could not duplicate. Food, clothing, clocks, knives... all things picked up from the void of the Infinite Realms.

But, right now, it was using that function, that ability, to watch something else. Someone else. Several someones else. It wasn't particularly pleased about this development, inasmuch as it could be pleased or displeased about anything. The men and women who now floated outside the door on odd, white and camouflage scooter-like vehicles were not ones that the lair intended, inasmuch as the lair could intend anything, to welcome.

"Agent Alpha," greeted began one of the men.
“Agent Beta. Report?”

“Phantom’s ectosignature is definitely coming from behind this door,” said Agent Beta.

“Agent Nu?”

“We are also detecting multiple ‘real world’ signals on our radar, sir. The targets are definitely inside.”

Agent Alpha nodded, and pulled a radio set from the dashboard of his vehicle. “This is Agent Alpha-Eurydice, calling Alpha-Orpheus, and Alpha-Inanna. Over.”

“Alpha-Orpheus receiving, over.”

“Alpha-Inanna receiving, over.”

“We have reached a door. We believe that the targets are inside. Alpha-Inanna, please advise. Over.”

There was a beat of silence. “Team Inanna will continue to target prime. Team Orpheus will join Team Eurydice, to set up camp at the door, then Team Eurydice will enter and eliminate secondary targets, then call back to Team Orpheus to acquire the tertiary targets. Agent Alpha-Orpheus is in command in event of radio-contact loss with Team Inanna. Over.”

“Understood, over.”

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He woke up and decided his name was Shade. This was a simple decision. Other decisions would be harder. Sharper. He sat up, peeling himself off the roof, and ran a hand through his hair. Short. He plucked a hair out. Black. Interesting.

Below, people walked the streets, in and out of the empty doorways. Peaceful. He breathed in, breathed out. A moment to savor. These were the people who had been welcomed. Who had come through the door, and lived in harmony. These were the people they should protect. Who had been protected.

Plane disappeared in Bermuda, hikers lost in the forest, people vanished from locked rooms. Danny had always wondered where they went, the people who fell into the Infinite Realms. Clockwork never told him. This couldn't be all of them, though. No more than a fraction.

Still. Shade was happy. Looking at them. He smiled, faintly, the expression foreign on his new face. The expression faded when he remembered the men outside. He would need more than his fists if he were to fight them off. He'd need weapons.

Well, there was a workshop in the lair. The weaponry that had been removed from his parents had probably made its way there by now, too. Perhaps he should find his own way there. He looked to his left. Another shadow was already forming there. Shade nodded, and blinked out of existence.
Anthony Trent, the mayor of Harmony, formerly copilot of AquillaAir Flight 221, stared up at the roof. Life in Harmony could be weird, as the last two years had shown him, his passengers, and all the other people who had wandered (or had been led) into the odd sanctuary. An unfamiliar naked teenager sitting on the roof of the Door Building was a different kind of weird.

But when he blinked, the boy was gone. Anthony frowned, and scanned the sparkling, rippling, midnight-fire sky, before returning his eyes to the roof. The Door Building was by far the strangest building in Harmony, what with the UFO perched on its roof, and the only one that lead to the twisting, green Outside. Maybe someone had come through? The Door was supposed to be guarded, though. Protected, in case something or someone unpleasant tried to come through. Anthony would have to have words with whoever had that duty today, and get someone to find that poor boy.

“Do we really believe that there's a workshop on the other side of this library?”

“We've believed so much else,” said Maddie, peering cautiously around a bookshelf. “Besides, if we obliged to him by that contract, he's obliged to us.”

“So?”

“So if we get lost, he has to find us.”

They hurried down another row of bookshelves. “I think I see it, Maddie!”

“Where?” asked Maddie, looking up.

Jack picked her up, and put her on his shoulder. “There,” he said, pointing.

Danny woke up with a start. “Heck,” he said. He rolled out of the bed, thumping into the floor. Jazz had fallen asleep in a spine-bending position next to his bed. Danny winced. Danny looked around, found Sam, and then Tucker, tucked into their own beds. Jazz's bed looked slept in. He must have woken her up at some point in the night.

He hated those kinds of nightmares. He hated the sensation of being awake and aware, but not really. He hated that feeling of being trapped. Not that he particularly liked any kind of nightmare.

Something about this one, though... He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to remember. He gasped as his memory of the second half of the dream coalesced. Oh, this was not good. Not. Good.

“Jazz?” he said, shaking her shoulder. “I need your help. Please.”

Jazz came awake quickly.
“What's happened?”

“Mom and Dad have gone to the workshop,” said Danny.

“What? How'd you know?”

“I had a dream. And Shade- There's a new shadow, and I don't think that he's quite as in tune with
the lair, and what's going on as the others and he was going there too, and- and he has black hair, he
looks like human me and there's just- They're going to run into each other and they're figuring things
out. What do I do, Jazz?” The litany was hissed at whisper-volume.

“Um,” said Jazz, blinking. “That's- Well. Do you want Mom and Dad to figure things out?”

“I- Um. I don't know, Jazz. I- I don't want to wake Sam and Tucker to wake up.”

“Okay,” said Jazz, getting to her feet, and cracking her neck. “Maybe,” she said, once they had left
the cabin, “you could get Echo or Fractal to stop them? Or tell the other one?”

“Not really,” said Fractal, pulling the appearing out of nowhere trick. “We can't make big changes to
the lair, and I doubt we could stop them otherwise without it turning into a fight. Which we can't do.
As for warning off Shade... What he's doing is important. He needs all the time he can get. I should
actually be there, helping him.” Fractal rubbed his arm, nervously.

“Why?” asked Jazz.

“There are Guys in White people in front of the door. At least, we think they're Guys in White. Some
of them are in camo.” He shifted uneasily. “I'm worried about the people in town.”

“What town?” asked Danny, aghast. There was a town?

“Oh, town? you're asking how?”

“After seeing the library made of trees, you're asking how?”

“Fine. Again. Why?”

Fractal shrugged. “They needed somewhere to go. We- The lair- could only give them a place to be.
So we did.”

Danny sighed. “Okay. Great. Good to know that there are potentially hundreds more people in here,
and also maybe the Guys in White. I'm going to go back to freaking out about the first problem now,
because it looks like that's the only one that I can do anything about. What am I going to do about
my parents?”

“I could bring you to them,” said Fractal. “Or to the workshop.”

“Okay, just- Let me think,” said Danny, rubbing his eyes. “Are my eyes still green?”

“Yes,” said Jazz. “A little.”
“Okay,” said Danny, squeezing them shut. He opened them. “How about now?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“No. Danny, are you going to tell them?”

“I- I think so,” said Danny. “I think I have to.”

“Do you want to.”

“I don't know,” whispered Danny. “I don't want to fight them anymore. I don't want to fight anyone anymore.” He sniffled. “I want to rest. I want a break.”

“Danny...” Jazz trailed off, her voice full of concern. “You know, we're here for you, right? Sam, Tucker, and I?”

“Not that kind of rest, Jazz,” Danny said with a weak smile. “Like I said, that's not one of my problems. I'm just... tired of being hated.”

“Okay,” said Jazz. “I just worry about you.” She looked at Fractal. “Can you bring me, too?”

Fractal shook his head. “I don't think that it would be healthy for you to travel like we do,” he said. “You aren't connected like we are, like Danny is.”

“It's okay, Jazz. I can do this. Really. I-” he faltered. “Take me to them, Fractal.”

They vanished.

Valerie Gray had been having trouble sleeping. She'd been lying awake for hours, tossing and turning in her bed. She'd finally summoned part of her suit, a combination ecto-scanner/listening device that was notoriously buggy, just to distract herself. It was supposed to pick up only ghosts, but it often homed in on humans, and, well, after accidentally eavesdropping on her neighbors one time too many, she had stopped using it.

She hadn't meant to overhear that whispered conversation. She hadn't even heard more than half of it. But what she had heard...

Well, it was more than enough to keep her awake for the rest of the night.
Chapter 47: Behind the Curtain

Danny was wrong. The shadows did not teleport. At least, they didn't use the same kind of
teleportation that Danny had managed once or twice before, or the kind Vlad forced on him now and
again. What the shadows did was less like teleportation, and more like merging with the lair, and
flowing through it. It was weirdly comforting, a lot like slipping into a tub of warm water had felt
before the Accident. Except he was made of water and ice, and he was clinging to yet more water.
Being pulled out was a shock. It left him gasping and shivering behind a bookshelf.

“Who's there?” called Maddie, harshly. “We can hear you,” she said, when Danny didn't respond.

With an effort, Danny pulled himself up off the floor, taking Fractal's offered hand. He walked out
from between the bookcases, hands raised. “Just me,” said Danny.

“Danny?!” exclaimed Jack and Maddie.

“No,” said Maddie, her eyebrows pinching together. “Phantom.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that you were right both times?” asked Danny, laughing
nervously. He had forgotten to hide his eyes, to pull back the glow.

“Why are you here?” asked Jack.

“Um. To talk to you. Why are you here?”

“Why do you want to talk to us?” demanded Maddie.

“Because you're my parents,” said Danny.

“So you're going with that, then,” said Maddie. “You expect us to believe that you're some kind of
copy of Danny?”

(It would be so easy to say yes.)

“No,” said Danny, “because that would be a lie.”

“I knew it!” exclaimed Jack.

Danny winced, hard, at the sudden exclamation, half-retreating behind a bookshelf.

“Do you really expect us to believe anything you say now?” asked Maddie.

“I hope you will,” said Danny, quietly. “I- I'm-” he swallowed. “I don't know where to start,” he
admitted finally.

“Start with why you're possessing Danny, and whether or not we've spoken with him at all since we
first got here,” said Maddie. Her voice was softer now, but still stern.

“I- Oh, gosh. Begin with that. Okay. Um. I'm not possessing anyone. I'm- I'm not overshadowing anyone, either. And you've been talking to Danny, to me, the entire time.”

“What-”

“The overshadowing thing was a cover. I- I had to explain why my eyes were green, why that- that thing you guys made affected me, and that was the easiest way, and then it snowballed and- I don't know. I didn't want to tell you like this. I wanted- I wanted to tell you right away, two years ago, but things kept happening, and then I got scared. I didn't want to hurt you. Please don't hate me.” This was going poorly. Danny was crying, his tears faintly luminous.

Maddie took two steps forward. “What are you talking about? What happened two years ago?” She took another step forwards, bringing herself within arm's reach of Danny. “Who are you?”

“I'm Danny,” he said. “I've always been Danny. The whole time I-” he broke off, sobbing, backing away. “I'm Danny. Do- Do you remember, when you tried to turn on the portal for the first time? And it didn't work? You were so sad. You were going to stop, give everything up. You- You spent a whole week just depressed. More than I've ever seen. You didn't even open the mail. And then- And then Jazz convinced you to go out, to cheer yourselves up, but while you were out-” He shuddered, his core vibrating in protest. He didn't want to relive this.

“How- Danny?”

Danny nodded convulsively, squeezing his eyes shut. “Sam and Tucker wanted to see the inside of the portal, but I told them to wait while I checked it out.”

“What do you mean, while you checked it out?” asked Maddie, horrified. “You told us you were outside the portal when it shocked you!”

“We lied. Sam and Tucker and I. We lied. I went in. There was an 'on' switch on the inside.”

“Oh, no,” whispered Jack.

“It- It hurt a lot. I- I died.”


“Yes,” said Danny. “But I'm also dead. They call it being liminal. Or liminality.” He opened his eyes. He phased his wrist out of his mother's grasp. “It's just me in here. It's always been me. The whole time.”

“But Jazz's picture!” said Jack.

“You know some ghosts can duplicate themselves,” said Danny. “I'm not very good at it, but...” Danny shrugged.

“No,” said Maddie. “No. That can't be-” She cut herself off with a gesture. “Prove it,” she demanded. “If you- If you and Danny- If you and Phantom- You look different. It's more than just- Phantom is ectoplasmic. He bleeds ectoplasm. He has an ectosignature.”

“You know your weapons and trackers always locked onto me,” said Danny. “Even the Ghost Gabber worked on me. I-” He stopped, and pulled off his shirt. “Look,” he said, pointing at the
florescent discoloration of his scars. “This is ectoplasm, right?”

Maddie laughed once, suddenly, sharply, without humor. Danny flinched back. “So, what? You’re trying to tell me that Danny has been, what, running around in a wig? Stashing a black and white HAZMAT suit away, like- like-” Maddie sobbed, then almost screamed, “Do you expect us to believe that?! With the way you- Phantom shows up everywhere?!”

Danny jerked back, hands going up to his chest. He could feel his core fluttering under his fingers. He was still sick, but the energized ectoplasm was working on him. Had it done enough? “It isn’t like that,” he said, finally. “It's more like, I can switch, from one side to the other. Right now, I'm mostly human. But I can switch. I can- I can become a ghost. Become Phantom.”

“Show us,” said Jack.


Danny squeezed his eyes shut and mentally tapped on his core. It hurt, ached beyond pain. Beyond words. But it was a different kind of pain than what had stopped him from changing before, and he wanted this. He wanted to know, finally.

(He could feel the shadows waiting, watching, ready to intervene if something went wrong.)

He tapped his core again, this time calling up his rings.

The world went gray.

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When Danny came back to himself, he was half-curl on the floor. He felt weak, but light. Sounds came back next, rising above the blood rushing through his veins, and the slow drumbeat of his heart. An argument?

Danny blinked, chasing away the gray fuzz that had obscured his vision. Echo was standing half over him, a sword made of ice in his right hand, a fistful of fire in his left, hurling invective at Danny's parents, who stood some distance away, shocked.

It was hard for Danny to pull himself up, but Fractal was there helping him. He grabbed a handful of Echo's sweater, and tugged on it. His hand was gloved, now, and clearly glowing. “Stoppit,” said Danny, voice slurred. “Don't fight.”

Echo moaned. Typical ghost distress signal. “But-”

“Izokay,” said Danny, overbalancing into Echo. The shadow bit his lip, but the sword and fire vanished. Danny nodded. “It's okay,” he repeated, making an effort to speak clearly. He looked up at his parents. “Do you hate me?” he asked, voice breaking.

“Oh, Danny, no,” said Maddie, sinking to her knees. “We could never- This is our fault isn't it? We did this.”

“No,” protested Danny.

At the same time, Echo hissed, “Yes.”
“These shadows-” started Maddie.

“But the records!” said Jack. “The Nightingale journals, you- Phantom-” He cut off, mouth still moving, no sound coming out.

“Time's weird in here,” said Danny. “In th' Zone. If y'know what you're doin' you can go anywhere, anywhen. Clockwork's been teaching my how to keep time.” Danny brought his hand up to his face. “Don' feel s'good.”

“Danny?” said Maddie, frightened.

Danny blinked. Maddie was suddenly right next to him. When had she managed that? Did she learn how to teleport, too? And why was Danny laying down again?

“Mom?” he asked, confused. His eyelids fluttered. “What..?”

It was fairly obvious that the shadow- Echo- didn't want Maddie or Jack anywhere near Danny. Still, when Danny's eyes rolled back the second time, he grudgingly let them approach.

“What's wrong?” demanded Maddie.

“He's over-strained himself,” said the second shadow, Fractal, as the first cradled Danny's head in his lap, and made gentle noises. “You shouldn't have made him change.”

Maddie took one of Danny's hands, and searched for a pulse in his wrist. She found it but- “It's so slow,” she said.

“No, it isn't,” said Echo. He was testing Danny's pulse, too, but at the neck

“It is slow compared to a normal human heart rate,” said Fractal, “but Danny isn't a normal human.” The shadow leaned over Danny, a ball of light floating over his shoulder. He carefully prised back Danny's eyelids. “It isn't a concussion. At least, not a bad one.”

“Of course it isn't a concussion,” snapped Echo. “He hasn't had a chance to hit his head on anything.”


“That's not good,” said Echo.

“What?” demanded Maddie.

“Mom?” groaned Danny, struggling to open his eyes. “What..?”

“Oh, good. Danny, you need to change back,” said Fractal.

“Change..?”

“Yes. You need to be human right now.”
“Why?”

“Your core is damaged. It can't run your body right now.”

Danny frowned, seeming to focus on something. Why hadn't Maddie noticed before now, that Danny and Phantom were practically identical, except in coloration? How had she not seen that Phantom's suit was so much like her own? Why hadn't she seen through Danny's increasingly transparent lies? It didn't matter that Danny was trying to keep this a secret. Maddie was his mother. She should have known.

“Not workin,’” mumbled Danny plaintively.

“What does that mean?” asked Jack.

Echo hissed. “You're probably overcharged,” said Fractal. “The things we do to ourselves,” he muttered under his breath.”

“Fr'm the...” Danny trailed off, hand making a lazy figure eight through the air.

“Yes.”

“Hm,” said Danny. “Wanna try something, gimme a sec.”

He closed his eyes.
Human-ghost hybrid biology (can you even call it that?) is strange. Complex. Each hybrid, or *liminal spirit*, to use the technical term, is different. Unique. Their bodies bend to both their minds, their personalities and self perceptions, and their genetics. Further differences are ensured by the *degree* of liminality they possess.

For example, Spectra possesses a very small degree of liminality. This is how she can fake humanity so well, despite being among the most inhumane of ghosts.

For example, the people of Amity Park all possess a very small degree of liminality. This is why, among other things, Spectra's plan to create a shell-body by extracting the best traits of the Casper High student body could work.

Danny is very, very liminal. One might even say that he is *fully* liminal.

His system is full of redundancies.

This is why he is so robust, so difficult to hurt, to take out of a fight. Danny could survive on just ectoplasm, or just human food, or quantities of both that would not be life (or after-life) sustaining by themselves. Danny does not need (for certain values of the word 'need') to breathe, even in human form, as long as he has stored sufficient energy in his ectoplasm. All of his human organs have ectoplasmic copies. All of his ectoplasmic organs have something akin to master blueprints stored in his core. This is why Danny can heal so quickly, even in human form. This is why Echo, Fractal, and the other shadows could have lungs to breathe with.

It also means that Danny has not one, not two, but *three* organs with which he thinks.

(It might actually be better to consider the whole arrangement to be one organ, one brain, with a unusually large number of hemispheres, as opposed to considering the components to be separate. There was only one Danny, after all, and, Ghost Catcher incident aside, he showed no signs of a split personality.)

(Although, it wasn't as if that really *showed*. Danny's grades hadn't been good since middle school.)

The first, obviously, is his brain, his human brain, the one he was born with. It had, until the accident, served as the sole seat of his consciousness.

Then there is his core, all but intangible and invisible, nestled beneath his heart. One could say that a ghost's core is analogous to a human brain, but, truthfully, it is so much more that that. A ghost can survive being reduced to their core.

(So can Danny. So has Danny.)

Finally, there is the ghostly copy of his brain. It serves (or served, before his human brain and core
learned to work together, and more intimate connections were formed) as a kind of interface between Danny's human brain and his core. It was like the corpus callosum, in some ways. It works in tandem with his human brain, is modeled on it, is, except for its substance, identical to it. It lets (or let. There are redundancies. There have been improvements.) information from his core be written to his brain, and vice versa, despite the vastly different formats.

This does cause a few problems.

(Some anxieties should not be soul deep. Some concerns do not translate well from lightning-struck flesh to immaterial spirit. There are things that the living were not meant to know.)

But there are also benefits.


Danny's idea was simple. It had to be. He was having too much trouble thinking for it to be anything but simple.

Here was his problem:

When Danny 'went ghost,' his core 'woke up,' became more active, more involved with the operation of the body, and his human brain leaned back, took up different roles in preparation for battle (which generally speaking, is what he transformed for). But right now, Danny's core was hurt. Damaged. It was healing, but it couldn't really deal with something as complex as Danny's body. It was trying, as hard as it could to curl up in a little ball of no.

What Danny should do, what he wished he could do, was turn back. Become human again, put his human brain back in charge. Unfortunately, because Danny had recently imbibed a large amount of energized ectoplasm (thanks Fractal, thanks Echo) that wasn't really working. Unlike with his ghost half, Danny's human side didn't have a convenient thing to grab hold of to kick-start the transformation. Usually, though, transforming back was beyond easy. He was dropping to his ground state, his lowest energy level, storing everything for later use. But with his core hurt (he did not want to think: broken) the energy he had taken in refused to be regulated. The fire, having started, refused to be put out.

His brain wasn't really cooperating either, even though it had (probably, Danny didn't, couldn't, keep track of this kind of thing) given him a potential solution. It did not like what was happening. It barely had the ability to control Danny's ectoplasmic body. It wasn't even detectable when Danny was in ghost form. (Danny didn't like thinking about what happened to his human body when he went ghost, mostly because he wasn't sure what happened to it. Injuries from his ghost form appeared on his human body, but the reverse didn't always happen. It was just... confusing.)

On the other hand, Danny's ghostly brain had a much better connection with his ghostly body, and it didn't have anything wrong with it. At least, it didn't have anything more wrong with it than usual. So using that should be fine.

Of course, this wasn't really a solution, more of a stop-gap measure, or a transition point, a step in a larger, still-unformed, plan. Also, the components weren't as disparate and disconnected as Danny made them sound. The system was a cohesive whole, just as a human brain, with its two hemispheres and the cerebellum, was a cohesive whole. The injury to his core had been affecting
him even when he was in human form. This was just a way of thinking that Danny occasionally found useful.

So Danny closed his eyes and tried to focus, tried to find the parts of his mind that physical (semi-physical) structure. It was hard. His brains (strange to think of those in the plural) weren't easily distinguishable from one another. That was the point. Or a point.

Knowing that his parents were there, watching him, wasn't making this any easier.

But Danny did find it eventually, and gently pushed on it until his human brain was following it, instead of the other way around. It was a weird sensation, but not completely foreign.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, and blinked tiredly at his parents.

“Okay,” said Danny. “I think I can work with this.”

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Maddie watched Danny sit up. There were so few differences. She couldn't get over it.

His eyes were green, his ears were tapered, his teeth were sharp, his hair was white, and his skin was darker. But his features, they were the same. Beneath the swirling green, his eyes were the same as they had always been. How had she been so blind?

“Are you okay?” asked Danny. “I know this is- I- do you- Do you hate me?”

“I should be asking you that,” said Maddie. “Danny, we- we've done such awful things to you. We hunted you. We-”

“It's okay. You didn't know. I never- I never blamed you.”

“He should,” said Echo, darkly. “You know what you've done. You made those things, and you made them to hurt, to maim. You designed them that way.”

“Echo-”

“You hurt him,” said Echo, throwing his arms protectively around Danny, and glaring at Jack and Maddie. “It doesn't matter that you didn't know who you were doing it to, you were doing someone, and you meant to do it.”

“The things we've made, they're only supposed to affect ghosts-”

“That doesn't matter,” snapped Danny. “They're people, too.” He hissed, suddenly, bringing a hand to his chest. “I need to focus.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

“No,” said Danny. His aura flared suddenly, splitting into two bright blue-white rings and washing over his body, leaving him human again. Then he went limp in Echo's arms. “Hmm. That was weird.”

“Clever, though,” said Fractal. “It was interesting.” He moved so that he was tight against Danny's
side, and brushed his lips against Danny's ear. He sent a glance in Maddie and Jack's direction that made it clear that he was taunting them. "We can use the data."

"Data?" said Danny. He blinked twice, hard. His eyes were still green, but less luminous. Then he shrugged out of Echo's embrace. "You probably have questions," he said. "Lots of questions." He pulled himself into a cross-legged position. "I can answer them. Or try, at least."

"Why wait until now to tell us?" asked Jack, a hand on Maddie's shoulder. If he hadn't been steadying her, she probably would have fallen over.

"I was scared. Not of you," he said quickly. "I just didn't want to hurt you."

"Hurt us?" said Maddie, incredulously. "Danny, our house is full of weapons that can hurt you. We were- We were making things specifically to hurt Phantom- to hurt you. You should have said something, anything."

Danny flinched. "I know, but..."

Both of the shadows shifted so that they were slightly in-between Danny and Jack and Maddie. "You do get that we aren't human, right?" said Fractal, his tone light.

"And don't be all like 'of course,'" said Echo. "You clearly haven't registered the implications of this yet."

"Echo," said Danny, a note of warning in his voice. "I didn't want to hurt you." He looked down, to where his ankles were crossed. "I didn't-" He bit his lip. "I have an obsession. This," he brandished his hands, although what he was indicating wasn't clear, "it isn't cosmetic. It isn't skin deep. This is me. I'm- I'm as much a ghost as I am a human. I- I've- I just want to help people and I don't want to hurt anyone."

"That's your obsession?" asked Maddie, carefully, cautiously, dropping to her knees and reaching out to Danny.

Danny nodded convulsively, but leaned back into Echo. Maddie let her hand drop. "Yeah," he said. "That's why you didn't tell us?"

"I- Partly. I guess. There were other reasons that made more sense, and there were always, you know, interruptions. Stuff. I guess. I'm sorry. Please, please, I know that I've screwed up, but..."

"Danny. Danny, we love you. You know we do."

"You're our son, Danno. Nothing is going to change that. Not whether you're a ghost, a human, or something in-between."

Danny sniffed, and then threw himself at Maddie. Maddie flinched a little, but Danny didn't appear to notice. He was too busy clinging to Maddie and crying. Jack patted Danny's back slowly with his large hand. His face was pale and shocked.

"Thank you," said Danny, just barely intelligible. "Thank you." It took a while for Danny to calm down enough to stop crying, but, finally, he calmed to mere sniffles, and occasional trembling sobs, and curled into Maddie's side. He was so tiny. So fragile.

The shadows were watching with huge, bright eyes. Maddie got the impression that they were prepared to jump in at any moment. Like predators. Ready to pounce.
“The shadows,” said Maddie. “They're part of you.”

“Necessary things,” mumbled Danny.

“What?” asked Maddie.

“He means that we serve functions, have purposes,” said Fractal. “You could say that we're parts of him. Under the right circumstances, Danny could act like either of us. But that's not really why we exist. If that's what you're asking.”

“Your purpose is to explain things,” said Maddie, remembering what Fractal had said earlier. “And his?”

“What do you think?” hissed Echo, sounding even more feral than before.

“Be nice, Echo,” said Danny indistinctly. Echo huffed and turned away, still watching them from the corner of his eyes.

“I wish you told us before,” said Jack. He had pulled Danny and Maddie into his lap, and was rocking them back and forth.

“Me too,” said Danny, sleepily.

“We could have fixed this,” said Maddie. “We could have fixed this ages ago.”

“Fixed what?”

“This... whole thing.” She looked warily at the two shadows, who were beginning to bristle. She leaned close to Danny. “We could have spared you all this,” she whispered. “We could have gotten rid of this right away. Right after the accident. We could have made you better.”

Danny was suddenly wide awake and staring at Maddie and Jack, betrayal etched into his face- and were his ears canted back? Like a cat's? They were.

“This isn't something that can be fixed,” said Danny.

“You don't know that, Danny, we can-”

“No. You don't get it. You can't fix this. That's like- You're saying that you can fix this, fix me, but I'm not broken. I like being like this. I'm not sick.”

“Danny, you've already said that this is affecting your mind.”

“You- You're twisting my words!” said Danny angrily.
Chapter 49: We're Okay

“You- You’re twisting my words!” said Danny angrily. He squirmed out of his mother's embrace. How could she not get it? Well, maybe he was being unfair. His core injury was affecting his mind. He stood up, tripped, and was caught by Echo and Fractal. Then he began to pace.

“Then explain it to us, sweetie.”

“Oh, Danno. We just want to help.”

Danny ran an angry hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. “But you're not listening.” He turned sharply. “Where do you think obsessions come from? They don't just show up from nowhere. This is- They aren’t- This would have always been important to me. Obsessions- They aren’t something you’d die for, they’re what you want to live for, even when you know you’re dying.”

“But you aren’t dead, Danny.”

“Do you not remember what started this whole mess? What that thing was supposed to do? Going through that- Burning and freezing and screaming and being torn apart and...” his hands skittered helplessly over his arms before seizing on his upper arms. “What do you think that was?”

“Oh, Danny-”

“No. No, no, no. No. I'm not- This isn't-” He took a deep breath. “Ghosts can be violent, territorial, possessive, obsessive. They hold grudges. Big ones, for a long time. There are few ghost communities that have more than a few thousand people. But murder- and I'm not talking about the Taboo, I mean the human conception of murder- is basically unheard of. Even people who say that they want to kill someone, they hardly ever follow through. They just haunt the person, and get progressively more petty. As for the Taboo, there are maybe a half a dozen murder cases tried between the three courts a year. Compare that to just anywhere on Earth, and it looks pretty good. And- And most conflicts, they never rise above, like, the equivalent of a- a playground dispute. Flashy, loud, lots of posturing, lots of tears, some injuries, but no hard feelings. Even with the ghosts that come to Amity Park, they’re not setting out to kill anyone. Most of them. Most of the ones who’re sapient, anyway, and they’re the only ones who can really ‘set out’ to do anything. Can't really say anything for non-sapient animal ghosts, or, you know, non-sentient blobs, and stuff. But who can? Actually, some blob ghosts are perfectly sentient and sapient, so maybe I shouldn't use them as an example.”

“You're rambling,” murmured Fractal.

“I know,” said Danny. “Theft is, like, barely a thing on this side, did you know that? When it is a thing, people rarely care. Unless it's some artifact, or sentimental something or other, or part of their obsession. Which is a lot of unlesses, I guess, but still.”
“I don't understand why you're telling us this, Danny.”

“So that you'll get it. Ghosts aren't evil. I'm not broken. They're just- I'm just different.” He shivered. He didn't always like his differences, and he especially didn't like the way his parents were looking at him.

“What were you going to do, then, when we got home?” asked Maddie, her tone that of forced reason. “Danny, how did that picture really get taken?”

Danny bounced in place. “There are- There are things that- that can- that can temporarily- But it's always temporary. Even if I wanted to be- to be 'fixed' or whatever, none of that would actually help. None of it would do what you want it to do.”

“What do you mean?”

Danny hugged himself tighter and bit his lip. “Before- Before I tell you, you've got to promise that you won't- won't try to fix me. You've got to promise.”

Maddie and Jack exchanged glances. “I promise, Danny,” said Maddie.

“Me, too, Danny,” said Jack. “We just want to understand, so that we can help you.”

“I don't believe you,” said Echo. He was behind Danny now, glaring over Danny's shoulder. “Humans don't keep promises.”

“Sam, Tucker, and Jazz do,” said Fractal.

“They're different. And they aren't ghost hunters.”

“They kind of are, though.”

“That's different.”

“Guys. Please.” He couldn't think when they were going at each other like that. “Stop.” He looked at his parents, who were still sitting on the floor. “The Ghost Catcher,” said Danny, “can split me in two, but it doesn't work long term. When I was split, I was always being- There was always something missing, and it hurt. Like, like I was always being pulled back in, towards myself, with a hook inside myself, and my personality? If that's what you want to fix me for? It skewed so far off normal because it was in pieces. Then the other way, that was worse. So, so much worse. My human body doesn't know how to work without ectoplasm anymore, my homeostasis or whatever it's called is shot. My other half was melting because it has trouble keeping form.”

“It is called homeostasis,” said Fractal.

“Oh, good.”

“We can work from that, though,” said Maddie.

“Do you even hear yourselves?”

“We won't do anything you don't want, Danny, but I'm, we're worried about you. Can you even live like this? Will you be healthy?”

“I'm not the first liminal person. I'm- I'm not even the first person that's this liminal.”

Maddie frowned. Scientific curiosity temporarily overtook the motherly concern in her face. “You
used that word before. Is this really common enough to have its own name?"

Danny shrugged. “Not, you know, exactly this. But there are lots of people with a little liminality. A little ghostliness, or a little humanity. I mean, basically everyone that lives in Amity Park is a little liminal.” He said the last part eagerly. Maybe this would help them understand.

“Wh-what?”

“Us too?” asked Jack.

Their expressions were nothing short of horrified.

Danny backpedaled. “You, um, you're actually less liminal than you should be. Probably because you were those suits, and do that purge thing every once in a while.” Danny swallowed. He could see them thinking, wondering, planning. How should they fix this new problem? Was liminality just an issue of ectoplasm contamination? Could they convince people to purge themselves of ectoplasm? To wear protective suits? To leave Amity Park? It made Danny's skin crawl, a thousand tiny razor sharp needles brushing lightly against his skin, teeth at the back of his neck. “I-I guess the order of who has it most would be me, by far, then, um, Valerie, because of her suit, then Jazz, Sam and Tucker, and you guys?” He was practically vibrating out of his skin now. It was a wonder that he wasn't clipping through the floor. “I don't know. I- I try to know about these things, this kind of thing, but I have a lot of other, you know, stuff going on all the time.”

“Okay, okay, it's okay,” said Maddie. “We aren't angry at you. We don't want you to be- to be uncomfortable. We didn't want to upset you. I'm sorry.”

“Okay,” said Danny. Was he crying? Yes, he was crying. He rubbed his eyes aggressively. They didn't understand. They thought he was broken. That he was sick. But at least they didn't hate him. At least his worst fears hadn't been realized. They still loved him. “I'm okay. Thank you. Are you okay?”

“We're okay.”

“Okay,” he nodded once, sharply. “Okay. I think- I think I should tell you. I think- I think that something bad might be about to happen here.”

“Here meaning?”

“Here. The lair. This place. I can feel things.” He freed a hand to rub a bookshelf. “Sometimes. Some things. I, um. Something's coming, waiting outside the door and I don't like it.”

“Wait- You know where the door is?” asked Jack, clearly confused. “Then why..?”

“Not really,” said Danny. “I don't know where anything is, or what's here, exactly. I'm just getting impressions. I didn't even know this place was a place until a couple days ago.”

“It's true,” crooned Echo.

“But, um, the workshop is being used right now. Because of that. That- That's why I told you. Because this was only sorta dangerous before, and now it might be seriously dangerous, and I didn't want you to get in a fight with another shadow.”

“There's another one?”

“Yeah.”
“How many?”

“I'm not sure. A few?”

Maddie directed a fraction of her attention towards the shadows. “Do you know?”

“Six, I think,” said Fractal after a moment. “For now.”

“You know what is,” she looked back at Danny, very briefly, “waiting outside the door?”

Fractal shrugged. “Not really?” He looked very uncomfortable. “We haven't looked, exactly. We don't want to invite them in. The lair can tell that they are there, but the lair doesn't think. Really all that we know is that they are there, and we don't like them.”

“And the one using the workshop is a shadow?”

“Yes.”

“Why? What is he making?”

“Something to defend ourselves with,” said Fractal. “We don't care for fighting, but we want to be prepared.”

“Weapons.”

“Yes.”

“Can we-?”

“No,” interrupted Echo. “You can't.” He leaned into Danny, who fidgeted and looked at his feet. “We don't trust you.”

“We should go back,” said Danny quietly. “We have a long way to walk, tomorrow.”

“Danny-”

“We can talk on the way if you want, but... I don't think you should go to the workshop.”

“You really don't trust us,” said Maddie, softly.

“Well, would you, in his situation?” asked Fractal. He tilted his head. “If it makes you feel better, it's not about your morals or personality, and more about how almost everything that you make hurts him, whether you intend them to or not.”

“Fractal,” said Danny.

“It's going to be okay,” whispered Echo.

“We could bring you back the easy way,” said Fractal quietly.

Danny shook his head, the walk back would be long and awkward, but running away from it wouldn't solve anything. “I think it was this way,” he said, “to get back, I mean.”

The first few minutes of the walk, with Danny leading the way, followed shortly by his parents, and all three of them... shadowed... by the shadows (Ancients, that wasn't even a good pun), passed in near silence. But then, inevitably, the silence was broken.
“Danny,” said Jack.

“What's up, Dad?” asked Danny.

“We still need to talk about this.”

“Mm,” said Danny.

“I know that I'm no good at talking, and serious things,” continued Jack, “but your mother and I, we're worried about you. And you shouldn't try to distract us.”

“I- I know,” said Danny, peeking over his shoulder.

Jack didn't seem to know what to say next, so he looked at Maddie, who sighed. “Danny, we need to know how much this,” she looked back at the shadows, “is affecting your personality and your health. Maybe- Maybe we can stop it from affecting you without removing your powers.”

“It isn't affecting my personality.”

“You said yourself that ghosts are violent.”

“That's- Argh. Humans can be violent too.”

“Don't you ever worry about hurting people?”

Danny froze, mid-step, poised over a channel of water. He carefully put his foot down. “All the time,” he said quietly.

“Wouldn't you like us to- to help you with that?” asked Maddie gently, clearly choosing her words with care.

Danny whirled, fists clenched. The trees above rustled ominously. The starlight seemed to dim. The already-faint auras of the shadows flickered and vanished. “You have no idea what you're talking about,” Danny hissed. He could feel his eyes start to glow, and he blinked, hard. “I don't hurt people.” His eyes sketched down to where his mother's jumpsuit was still damaged from the tree. “And when I do, I do my best to make it better.”

Maddie followed his gaze to her wrist. “Danny-”

“I'm sorry,” said Danny. “I'm sorry. I panicked and you were going to use that thing again, and I couldn't let you do that. I didn't mean to hurt you. Really.”

“But that's just what we're talking about, sweetie. Earlier you were worried about starting the apocalypse.”

Danny curled inward. “It didn't happen. It isn't going to happen. I promised. I keep my promises. All of them. Always.”

“Danny?”

“It didn't happen.”

“It's okay, it's okay, Danny. It isn't your fault. This is our fault, all our fault. We did this to you. We did this to you, but we can fix it, if you let us.”

“I'm not broken,” said Danny, wilting, shrinking further. “Besides, there isn't anything that you can
“do now, here.” He looked up. “What would you even do with my ghost half, if you separated me? Would you kill him? Experiment on him?”

“Oh, no, sweetie. Nothing like that. We'd have to lock him up, to make sure that he can't hurt anyone, but we'd help him move on, find peace.”

“Y'know,” said Echo, fluttering (how did he do that?) to Danny's side, “it's awfully bold of you to talk about that in front of us. I mean, without Danny, we wouldn't exist.” He slipped in front of Danny, one hand wrapped around Danny's, the other hand building a ghost ray. “It's kind of our job to protect him.”

Maddie took a step back, and Danny saw her hand going to the place on her belt where she usually kept her weapons. Danny leaned slightly into Echo. Hiding. This was all so confusing. Why were they acting like this? This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. This was scary.

“Don't forget about me,” said Fractal, pleasantly, still behind Maddie and Jack.

“Danny,” said Maddie, “how much control do you have over these things?”

“Oh, you hear that, little brother?” said Echo. “We're things now.”

“Stop,” whispered Danny.

“Are you sure?” asked Echo, surprised.

Danny nodded. “You can't fight anyway,” he said.

“Can't fight,” said Jack, something like relief in his tone. “That contract, it was real?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?”

“So-”

“So, unfortunately, our policy with you is going to have to be 'hands off.'” Echo sighed. “Here I was, having so much fun.”

“Scaring people isn't fun.”

“Yes it is.”

Fractal coughed. “Anyway,” he said, “this place is based on Danny. This Danny. The whole entire Danny. Splitting him in two is not likely to have a beneficial effect on either the lair, or any of the people in it.”

“We could work around that,” said Maddie. “We were able to manipulate the link your ghost half has to this lair before. We can set up some kind of decoy, give it a false signal.”

Danny's breath caught in his throat. “Is that a joke? Have you been listening at all? That- That stunt you pulled the other day, do you have any idea how much that hurt? Do you even care?”

“Of course we care!” protested Jack. “We don't want you to be hurt like that again.”

Danny shook his head. “What you're talking about, that's Taboo, a sin. By ghost standards, yes, and clearly you don't think too highly of those, but you've got to recognize that this is a thing that they put above murder in terms of seriousness.” He stared up at his parents.

“Maybe it would help if we gave them a demonstration,” said Fractal, who had flicked up next to Danny and Echo.

“A demonstration?” asked Danny, nervously.

“A demonstration about why messing with connections is considered Taboo.”
Chapter 50: A Demonstration

A chill ran up Danny's spine. “I don't know if that's a good idea.”

“It isn't,” said Fractal. He blinked slowly behind his glasses.

“But it could be fun,” said Echo in a singsong voice. He had gone back to hanging off of Danny, but he hadn't taken his eyes off of Jack and Maddie.

“Danny, don't listen to them, they're talking you into something dangerous,” said Maddie, urgently. “Come to us.”

“I can't,” said Danny. “Not while you still think that I'm sick or something. This isn't a disease. They aren't superpowers, either, not really. This is just me. What you want to do, separating me, it's like saying you want to lobotomize me. Do you not realize that?”

“This is ectocontamination, Danny. We aren't talking about cutting off part of you, we're talking about removing something foreign.”

Danny tsked and looked away.

“You aren't going to understand unless you're forced to, are you?”

“Demo time?”

“Ancients, you sound like a science teacher.”

“Sparkly.”

“Sparkly?”

“Demo?”

“Demo.

“Yes, demo.”
Maddie watched with apprehension as the two shadows separated from Danny, each taking two steps back. Echo, the more dangerous-looking of the two, sent a sly look at her, that slowly shifted to Jack, who tensed.

“Jack,” she whispered, “I'm going to make a run for Danny.”

“Don't bother,” said Echo. He smiled, more than wicked. “These ears aren't just for show.”

“Alright,” said Fractal. “Imagine that I'm someone who is, as you suggest, falsifying a connection to the lair.” He tilted his head. “I guess that's a bit weird, because I do have a connection.” He blinked slowly. “Danny, are you sure about this?”

“Yeah,” said Danny, clearly hesitant. “I want to do this.”

“Okay,” said Fractal. “So, we have a connection to the lair, and, therefore, to Danny,” said Fractal. “Which means, you see, Danny doesn't have any real defenses against us. He can't have any defenses against us.”

“So we can do whatever we want with him.”

It was hard to tell, behind his luminous glasses, but Maddie thought he might be rolling his eyes. He certainly took on the same stance that Danny did when he was rolling his eyes. “Of course, what we want is what he wants. But, the point of this is what might happen if we didn't.”

“Didn't I bite you that one time, though?” said Danny. “Sorry about that, by the way.”

“I let you bite me,” dismissed Echo.

“Anyway,” said Fractal, “we can walk up to Danny, and-”

“Just do this!”

A figure appeared from nowhere, as the shadows were wont to do, directly behind Danny. Maddie started forward, but there was Fractal again, stopping her and Jack. Danny crumpled, and the two, Danny, and what Maddie assumed was a third shadow, rolled around on the floor. There were shouts, thuds, frustrated squeaks, and giggles as they thrashed cartoonishly. Finally, they went still, both panting.

“I don't think that was a very good demonstration,” said one of them, and Maddie found, to her horror, that she couldn't tell which one was Danny. They were identical, from their ruffled black hair and tear-stained pellucid blue eyes to their scuffed sneakers.

“It isn't like we can cause any actual damage,” said Fractal.

“I don't think it worked,” said the second boy on the floor. They even sounded the same, with no trace of the odd reverberations that made Echo's voice so unique.

“Nope,” said Echo, popping the 'p.' “Looks like they hate us just as much as ever.”

“Do you hate us?” asked one of the boys on the floor, eyes wide.

“Danny?” asked Jack hesitantly.

The two boys blinked and looked at each other, before looking back up, and propping themselves into sitting positions. “You can't tell?” asked one of them.
“I don't think they can,” said the other.

“Which should maybe tell them something in itself,” said Fractal, folding his arms. “The point we're were trying to make, though, is that Danny couldn't effectively defend against Mirror- or, wait, are you the other one?”

“Nah, Mirage is off doing his own thing,” said one of the sitting boys, smiling. That must be Mirror, then. Danny was the other one.

“Oh. Good. Anyway,” said Fractal, as the new shadow reached over and started to rub Danny's back, “the point is, once you get a connection like this, you're a massive blind spot.”

Danny, who was leaning into what seemed to be turning into a full on massage, said something completely unintelligible.

“Yeah,” said Fractal, “that's a connection, too, and I suppose that's different, but I'm not sure how that would translate.”

Danny sighed, and looked back at Maddie and Jack. “You really can't tell the difference between me and Mirror?” he asked sadly.

“I...”

Danny made a face. “It doesn't matter. I guess there isn't much of a real difference to begin with. Mhm,” he said, leaning into Mirror. “That feels nice. There are lots of things that are connections. Metaphysical links. But they're all different, they're all important. I don't know if they're all Taboo to mess with, though. The lair one was given to me as a specific example. But they're... I don't think that blind spot is the right word. This isn't really what you're worried about, either.” He bit his lip. “I- I think we've gotten distracted, with technicalities and, just, the logistics and schematics of the whole thing, and I'm sitting here trying to find the right words, and I have no idea what they are. And I'm scared.”

This time, Fractal let Maddie walk by him.

“Danny, we love you, you don't need to be scared of us.”

“Don't I?”

Maddie sat down next to Danny. “It's just- I'm thinking back over everything you've said, and everything I've seen, of Phantom, of you, and it- it hasn't quite set in yet. We've shot at you, we've hurt you, I've seen you thrown into buildings, Danny, and it hasn't quite caught up to me that that's what I've seen.”

“I guess this is a lot of information to take in,” said Danny, drawing up his legs so he could rest his folded arms on his knees.

“I'm just worried. Worried about how this is affecting you, how it's affecting your mind, your health, everything. How it's going to affect you.”

“There are people here, in the Realms that are helping me, with the health side of things.”

“Ghosts?”

“Yeah.”
“But you're still human, Danny.”

“You think that there's never been a doctor that became a ghost?” Danny rubbed one of his eyes, sniffling. “There are lots, and other ghosts can learn. They aren't static. And Clockwork would tell me if there was anything really bad that was going to happen, health-wise.”

Maddie nodded. She was trying to understand. She really was. But she had decades of research behind her, telling her that, no matter what Danny was saying, this was a bad thing. She couldn't even begin to imagine what that much ectoplasm in his system was doing to his body, his brain. A small amount was harmless, but she couldn't help but think of this as analogous to possession. It was enough ectoplasm to bleach his hair and turn his eyes green, for goodness sake. He was certain that he was half-ghost, or something, and Maddie wasn't convinced of that at all. Then there was what Danny had said about having an obsession, of all things.

“Clockwork. You mentioned him earlier.”

“Ipse avus meus,” said Danny. “He's a friend. He's helped me a lot.”

“You trust him.”

“Absolutely.”

Maddie sighed. “Danny,” said Maddie, “I want you to trust us. I don't want you to feel like you have to be afraid.”

“But?” said Danny, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“But I'm worried, we're worried. You understand that, don't you?”

“Yeah,” said Danny, still hesitant.

“Can you at least let us, your father and I, confirm that? Independently make sure that this isn't hurting you, isn't making you sick.”

Danny shifted to hug his legs. “I don't know...”

“Danny, you at least have to admit that this... That your 'liminality' has been making you do strange things.”

Danny scowled. “What do you mean?”

“This obsession that you've been talking about, can't you at least see that it's been making you run into fights, getting you into trouble, into these situations?”

Danny let out a long, shuddering sigh. “That isn't how obsessions work, Mom. You get to choose how you're going to do it, what you're going to focus on. I could probably get by volunteering at the community center or something, if Amity wasn't under attack all the time. If you really want to know about what's happening in me head, though, you should talk to Jazz.”

“Honey, Jazz isn't a psychologist.”

“I know,” said Danny. “But she's been keeping notes on me since I was, like, ten. If you want to talk about obsessions...” Danny rolled his eyes. “They're not exactly unique to ghosts.” He sighed again. “I think that most of the things you're worried about, I've made sure they won't happen, that they're never going to happen.”
Maddie frowned a little bit. “Danny, you keep using those words, what-?”

“Okay,” said Echo, suddenly, loudly. “I think that's enough. Unlike us, you three have bodies that need sleep.”

“Echo,” said Danny, reprovingly.

“What, you really want to drag that out, on top of all this?”

“No, of course not,” said Danny, “but this isn't your conversation, and sometimes things need to be said even if I don't want to say them.”

“It wouldn't be good to let this fester in the dark, either,” said the newest shadow, arm easily slung around Danny's shoulder. “As long as we're telling secrets...”

“Might as well get through as many as possible,” finished Danny. “Then we can start to try to trust each other again. Because I can tell that you don't trust me anymore. I've lied to you too often.”

“We trust you, Danny,” protested Jack.

“Halfway,” said Danny, “which is just as good as not at all.” Danny was staring at the floor beside Maddie with such intensity that she wouldn't be surprised if it melted. “So I'm going to tell you about the time I caused the end of the world as we know it.”
"You were serious about that," said Maddie.

"You think that I would lie about that? I was trying to get you to like Phantom. Or, well, not hate him any more." Danny curled farther into himself. "Not hate me." He fell silent.

"Danny, if you don't want to talk about this, we can wait, it can wait," said Maddie.

"No. I don't think it can. This'll just keep bothering you if I let it wait, and you'll never be sure after if I told you the truth or not, or just came up with an inventive lie. It's just hard. It's hard to know where to start." He buried his face in his knees, and ran both hands through his hair. This was difficult. *Impossible*. Because he would have to lie, or at least make some pretty glaring omissions. He couldn't tell them about Vlad being a hybrid. He had promised not to, as long as Vlad left his family more-or-less alone. Danny didn't break his promises. "Time travel makes things weird. Like, I don't know if there's really a real beginning."

"Start from what was the beginning for you," said Maddie, helpfully. "You said something earlier about the CAT?"

"The CAT," said Danny. "Yeah. Okay. Around that time, ghost attacks were really picking up, and I was under a lot of stress, because Jazz hadn't told me that she knew yet, and I hadn't figured out how to balance schoolwork and, you know, everything else."

Jack frowned. "This was just two years ago, wasn't it?"

"About that, yeah," said Danny.

"I don't remember any increase in ghost attacks around that time."

"You wouldn't. The actual number of ghost attacks per day is something like two or three times more than what you record, even now, and the rate always ticks up when the weather starts to get colder. I was kind of freaking out, and I was causing a lot more property damage than usual, because of how worn out I was. Then, I had to deal with the CAT, and I had no time to study, and the Boo-merang kept hitting me in the head, and you just, well. It wasn't just you. It was everyone. Jazz and Mr Lancer, and all the other teachers... I didn't want to disappoint you. Especially since I was disappointing you so much already with grades and staying out late and all."

"We didn't want you to feel that way, Danny, we just wanted you to have options, for the future," said Maddie.

Danny nodded. "Then, in the middle of all that mess, a ghost showed up, a new one, who I hadn't ever met before. She said that she was from the future, she was the daughter of two of my enemies,
and she had come to kill me, because in the future I did something bad. Our fight wrecked the Nasty Burger. It was mostly my fault. I was focusing too much on beating Box Lunch, that was her name, and not on the, um, consequences of my actions and collateral damage. Mr Lancer was there with the answers to the CAT, and I found them in the wreckage after the fight.

"I- I honestly don't know if I would have used them. I think at that point, this time line, our time line, might have diverged from the other one, if things were left alone, but, like I said, time travel is weird. But I probably would have used them. I wouldn't have ever admitted to having them, regardless, so it doesn't really matter. I- I knew that using them would be wrong, but I didn't want to disappoint you, and I was doing so much. But then another ghost from the future showed up, and he was way stronger. Sam, Tucker, and I beat him, but it was a close thing." Danny fell quiet again, fiddling with a loose string on his jeans.

"Is that something that happens often?" asked Maddie. Danny smiled thinly.

"What, close things? More than I'd like, but most of the time no one is actually trying to end me, so it's less of a problem than you'd think. Um." The smile slid off his face. "Anyway, we knocked off the time medallion he was wearing, and we were all touching each other, so we all got transported to Long Now. That's, um, I still don't really understand how the time medallions work, but they have some of Clockwork's power in them, so if you're wearing them, you can use his temporal portals, and stuff." Danny rubbed his chest. He couldn't tell if the pulse of pain he felt was real, in the moment, or from memory. "But if you take it off, you either get sucked back to your own time, or to Long Now. Which is Clockwork's lair. Stuff happened, and we wound up going through one of Clockwork's temporal portals. Ten years in the future from then. I guess it would be about eight years from now, if it had happened. If it would happen? If it would've happened?" Danny shook his head. Now was not the time to get bogged down with tenses. "Anyway, we were there, then, and things were bad, and I got the impression that Amity was better off than most other places. We met Valerie, older Valerie, and she told me some of what had happened. Then He showed up. Sam and Tuck took off their medallions, and they went back to our time, thank the Ancients. I-" Danny shivered, hand pressed into his chest.

"'He?'" asked Jack.

"The one who destroyed everything. It was, it's my fault that He existed. That He exists." Danny took a deep, shuddering breath. "He called himself Dan. He was awful. He was a monster. I didn't stand a chance. But he didn't kill me, because if he did, then he wouldn't exist." Danny shivered again, shrinking.

"What did he do?" asked Jack.

"Wait," said Maddie, "he called himself Dan?"

"I'll tell you why. Just- Just give me a minute."

Mirror made a soft crooning sound, actually a word in a ghost language so old that its name was lost, and gave Danny a hug. The sound was picked up by Echo, who appeared on Danny's other side.

"Perhaps I should pick up from here?" asked Fractal, hands clasped. "I remember it as well as you."

Danny shook his head. "No. I've got to do this. He- Dan- He phased the time medallion into my chest and left it there, partially intangible and then- and then- um. I- I couldn't- couldn't take it out. S-So I couldn't come back. It hurt. It really, really hurt." He rubbed his chest. "Then he tied me up, and left me in the Ghost Zone." He paused. How much should he say? "Dan is- Dan was- Um." He set his head against his knees. "Fractal, help."
"Ghosts store memories differently than humans do. If two ghosts have similar enough ectosignatures, they can share memories via... a number of methods."

"I didn't know that until later, though. It didn't register. It, I- I was scared and hurt. He tied me up, and chucked me in the Ghost Zone a-and... It was bad. It was really, really bad. Even there, everyone hated me, wanted me dead. I..." He shivered again and hiccuped. "G-ghosts can... um..."

"Danny, breathe," said Echo. "Breathe, remember what Jazz says, in and out, slowly. Maybe Fractal should do this part? Or you should just go with what happened to you, instead of talking about that jerk?"

"Or I could guess what comes next?" suggested Maddie, gently. "You can just say yes or no."

"Okay," whispered Danny.

Maddie smiled, with difficulty, and patted Danny on the shoulder. It was as much contact as the shadows were going to allow at this point. "'Dan' was you," said Maddie, "or would be you."

Danny nodded, face still half hidden.

"Not exactly," said Fractal. "You really need to hear the rest of the story."

Maddie regarded the shadow coolly. "By 'not exactly' you mean that he was all Phantom? I'm not sure what you're trying to prove with this, but you aren't changing my mind."

"Yet again, you're wrong," said Echo, angrily, half-rising to loom over Maddie. (A feat accomplished more by sheer force of personality than anything else. Even with his boots, Echo was much smaller than Maddie.)

"Echo," said Danny, quietly, almost inaudibly. "Mom, you and Dad did some research a while ago, about whether or not ghosts could, um, combine."

Maddie nodded. "We'd seen some smaller ghosts eating one another," said Maddie, "but then we noticed that afterwards the surviving ghosts responded to stimulus similarly to how the eaten ghosts had."

"It's called a soul merge," said Fractal, "or a merger of souls."

"Th-that's what Dan is. B-But I'm doing this out of order, I think."

Mirror scoffed. "There is no 'in-order' when you're dealing with a paradox."

A small, shaky, smile crept onto Danny's face. "Right. I was able to get away, out of the Ghost Zone. Um. To a safe place. I went- I went and found Vlad, and he helped me."

"Of course he did! Good ol' Vladdy!" boomed Jack.

But Maddie frowned. "Why didn't you come to us?"

"I-I'm getting to that. Vlad, h-he told me what had happened, and I started to remember His memories. Some of them were from before he was... Him. I- In that time line, a different fight wrecked the Nasty Burger, and I still got the test answers, and I cheated. I cheated on the CAT. But, apparently, I suck at cheating, because I got caught, and Mr Lancer called you up for a parent teacher meeting." Danny paused for breath.

"I don't get it," said Jack, "what does a parent teacher meeting have to do with an evil ghost?"
"Well, Mr Lancer's a drama queen, so he had the meeting at the ruins of the Nasty Burger, and, um, Jazz came too, because, you know how Jazz is, and Sam and Tuck came for, like, moral support, but, ha ha, the Nasty Burger apparently uses napalm or something as one of the ingredients in its secret sauce, because the vat overheated and the whole thing exploded. You all died. So did a bunch of other people. Construction people and clean-up guys, and Mrs Bower."

"Who?" asked Maddie, feeling a little shocked.

"She's the attendant for the parking lot across the street. She got hit by some of the shrapnel. I was the only one there that lived." Danny laughed, without humor. "They said that it was a miracle. That I was lucky."

"It didn't feel like it," said Echo, sullenly. Mirror shuddered, and pressed closer to Danny, who pressed back.

"I blamed myself. It was my fault that the Nasty Burger was in ruins in the first place. I was the one who cheated. I was the one who was a freak. I was the one who hadn't saved you. If I blamed all of myself, it would probably have been fine. But I- I made the same mistake that you're making now. I blamed Phantom for everything." Danny sniffed. "Everything. I drove myself a little crazy, separating myself in my mind like that. Forcing all that blame onto the part of me that could least stand it, all because I couldn't face up to my own mistakes."

"There were other factors," added Fractal. "Both human and ghostly."

"But then I made the worst mistake of all. When you- When you had died, I went to go live with Vlad, because apparently, according to the government, Spitoon, Arkansas, isn't an appropriate place to raise a child. I told him about- about everything, and I- I asked him to help me remove my ghost half. Permanently. I didn't want the thing that had caused the death of my whole family, and both of my friends, and so many other people to be part of me anymore. I'm sorry."

"It didn't work?" asked Maddie, afraid to know the answer.

"No. It worked perfectly. This next bit is going to sound crazy. I was separated from myself, and I ran. I, Phantom, had screwed up, I had failed my obsession, so, so badly, that I didn't even want myself anymore, and you were gone, and everything hurt, and I was angry, with myself, and with Vlad, and I was scared. I couldn't face myself, knowing how much I was hated. While I was gone, I searched the Ghost Zone for you. I hoped that maybe you, or Jazz or Sam or Tucker had become ghosts. But I never found you, and I was destabilizing. After a while, I was just so lonely, that I went back. I was- I was hoping that I would take myself back, then, after so long alone, that I, the other me, would have that same emptiness. The same pain. Or at least, that the other me might forgive me before I faded. But- But I was too late. Remember what I told you about my body not functioning properly when split? I had died while I was gone." Danny swallowed. "Did- did you follow that?"

"No," said Jack, bluntly.

"The human part of you died in the other future," said Maddie. "You only have Phantom's memories of what happened."

"After the split, yeah," said Danny.


"I sort of wrecked Vlad's place after that, more than I had on the way out, I- I hurt Vlad," said Danny. He shivered. "I was... really upset. Vlad had promised that he- that I- would be okay. I
hadn't even been gone all that long."

"You're shivering a lot," said Mirror, suddenly. "Are you cold?"

"Maybe?" said Danny. Echo and Mirror exchanged glances.

"I'll be right back," said Mirror, fading into the shadows.

"What's he doing?" asked Maddie.

"Dunno. Getting a blanket, or something, I guess. I was completely insane at that point. Irrational. I was letting myself be driven by obsession, grief, and anger, which isn't a great combination. I had just seen my own body. My own self, my other half, dead. Sort of. Not that that's an excuse for what I did. I- You remember the Wisconsin Ghost, right?"

"Yes," said Maddie. Jack just nodded.

"Vlad had him. I let him loose. We fought. We've never been on equal footing. I wounded him, but he- he-"

"He ate you," said Maddie, faintly horrified.

"Mhm," said Danny, trying to breathe through his nose, and chase away the gray at the corners of his eyes.

"'Absorbed' or 'merged with' would be more accurate," said Fractal. "After that..." He shrugged.

"Obsessions combine, change, warp. Utter insanity. There are parts of our obsessions that are similar, believe it or not, but others are so different, and our viewpoints, and our views on life, are so different, that insanity was inevitable. I think that part of him was still trying to do good, but with such a warped worldview-"

"No," said Danny sharply. "No, he's a monster, he's evil, there's no excuse for what he's done. For what he's tried to do."

"Danny," said Echo, gently, but Danny flinched away, keening. "Danny," said Echo again, reaching out to take Danny's face in his hands. "Look at me, Danny. Breathe. In and out. Maybe you want to rest now? Go to sleep? I can take you back."

"We can take it from here," said Fractal. "We remember what you do, we can explain."

"You've already done the important part," added Echo.

Danny shook his head. He had to see this through to the end.

"Don't push yourself," murmured Echo. "We're here for you, and even you don't have the whole story with your own eyes."

"What does that mean?" asked Maddie.

Danny drew in a deep, shuddering breath but his words caught in his throat.

"There are parts of the story that we don't know first hand," said Fractal. "You'll have to ask Jazz about them."

Mirror reappeared, blue eyes briefly flaring. He had a thick blanket tucked under one arm, and a huge, almost bowl-like, steaming mug cupped in his hands. He passed the mug off to Echo, and
draped the blanket over Danny, tucking it carefully around him. Echo then pushed the mug into Danny's surprised hands, wrapping Danny's fingers securely around the base.

"At least you aren't running a fever anymore," Echo said, quietly.

"You were running a fever?" asked Maddie, worried.

Echo glared back at Maddie. "What do you care?"

"Echo," scolded Mirror, as Danny took a cautious sip of spiced hot chocolate. "Be nice."

"What you did to Danny wasn't without consequence," said Fractal, bitterness in his tone. "You made him relive his death, force open a portal, and then you leaned on his connection to us, to the lair, to make Echo. He's robust, but everyone has limits."

"We-"

"Shut up," said Echo, draping himself over Danny like another blanket. "They were weapons, you made them to be weapons and you used them on purpose, to hurt him."

"Echo," said Danny, holding the cup close. The blanket made him feel safer, somehow. Or maybe it was just the presence of the three shadows. "They didn't know. They're sorry." It was interesting, being around them. Danny didn't have to be anxious about the shadow's safety. It was nice, in a way. It wasn't the same as being with his friends, though.

"Not sorry enough," said Echo, sullenly.

"He had a fever before," said Fractal. "Now he's too cold. Normally he'd be able to cope with that, he copes with colder."

"On a regular basis," interjected Mirror.

"But he's depleted his resources," finished Fractal.

Mirror patted Danny softly. "Would you two like some hot chocolate, too? We make it New Tenochtitlan style."

"Sure!" said Jack, his deep voice sounding strained.

"No," said Maddie.

Mirror nodded and vanished again.

"I think I'm okay now," said Danny. He took another sip of hot chocolate. "So that's how He exists," he said. He shivered again despite the blanket. "Anyway, Vlad helped me. I was- I was a little worried, after all that, that he was going to kill me, because of what I had done. I would have deserved it," he said, his voice hollow. "But he helped me. He got the time medallion out of me, so I could come back. When I got back, He was there. I still don't know how he got back to that time, not in detail. He had you. All of you. He had you strapped to the boiler at the Nasty Burger. He was going to kill you. He thought that if he killed you, I'd go down the same path, and I'd become Him again." Danny lowered the cup. "He was wrong," he hissed, showing the razor points of his teeth. "I fought him. I used a lot of your inventions. You'd be shocked how many of them actually work. Or maybe not. I don't know. You got thrown off a lot by me and my weirdness. I won. I sucked him into a thermos."
"Well, that's good," said Jack. "Us Fentons, we're winners, right?"

"Not- Not really. Ever hear of a Pyrrhic victory?" Danny didn't wait for an answer. "I beat him, but I took too long, used too much power. The boiler blew up, and you died." Danny shuddered. "I saw you burn."

"But we're still here," said Jack confused.

"Mhm," said Danny. "That's when Clockwork showed up. He saved you. He exploited dozens of loopholes in the Observants' rules to roll back time. He even brought me back to before the CAT was over. He said he thought that I deserved a second chance. You know the rest after that, I went to Mr Lancer, and admitted to cheating, and stuff." Danny shrugged. "Jazz knows the rest. I don't really know what happened while he was here."

"Wait," said Jack, frowning deeply. "Where is this 'Dan' character now? He's not sitting on a shelf in a thermos, is he?"

"Ancients, no. Clockwork has him. Just a tip, if we wind up at Long Now before we get home, don't open anything." He took another sip of hot chocolate. He was feeling calmer now, sleepy. He had to wonder if Mirror had spiked the drink. "I owe Clockwork a lot."

"But didn't he create the problem to begin with?" asked Maddie.

Danny shook his head vigorously. "The Observants created the problem. They're mean and nasty. Clockwork helped me. Helped us. Helped you. More than once, too. You remember when Vlad and Sam and Tucker got ecto-acne? Clockwork let me look back at Vlad's portal accident. That's why I knew what the extra contaminant in the ectoplasm was."

"If he was really helping, couldn't he have stopped Vladdy's accident in the first place?" asked Jack, brow furrowed.

Danny blanched, going even paler than he already was. "No. Just, trust me on this, messing with time like that is not a good idea. Heck, with Him, what the Observants did, what they made Clockwork do, basically made sure that he would exist." Danny rubbed his chest. "Without them messing around, odds are that future would never have come to pass. Not that I'm making excuses for myself, much less Him. I made bad choices."

"What happened?" asked Maddie.

"Well, I didn't exist in that time line, and neither did Jazz, and you guys weren't married, so that kind of sucked. There was other bad stuff going on, too, but, for me that was kind of the main thing."

"Okay," said Maddie. She pinched the bridge of her nose. She was still frustrated, but her opposition to what Danny was saying, what he was trying to say, had softened. "Okay. Anything else we should know about?"

"I was cloned this one time."

"What?" said Maddie, still holding her head in her hand.

"It was Plasmius. Um," said Danny, recognizing the blank looks on his parents' faces. "The Wisconsin Ghost. Plasmius is his actual name. He cloned me. It didn't work out very well."

"For someone so smart, he makes a lot of stupid mistakes," said Fractal.
"Mistakes such as?" asked Maddie, now thoroughly distracted.

"Not expecting Ellie to find out what was going on and switch sides. I mean, like we said, ghosts with sufficiently similar ectosignatures can share memories, and for the Deathless, initial obsessions are inherited."

"Alright," said Maddie, clearly nursing a headache, now. "So this 'Ellie' is a copy of your ghost side?"

"She's a clone, not a copy," said Danny, "and she's a clone of all of me." He smiled lazily. He wondered how Danielle was doing. It had been a while since he had seen her. The last time had been fun. She'd had a growth spurt after being stabilized, and was now as tall as he was. They'd amused themselves by, among other things, dressing Ellie up as Danny, and seeing how many people they could get to do double takes. Danny wanted to see her again. But the smile vanished before his next words. "She almost melted once. It was scary. I thought I'd lost her." The hot chocolate was now cool enough that Danny could take small mouthfuls, instead of tiny sips.

"We'll have to talk about that more later," said Maddie, massaging her temples.

"Okay," said Danny, agreeably. He was feeling nice and sleepy, now. A bit warmer than he would like, but otherwise very comfortable.

Maddie sighed. "You've really been through a lot, haven't you?"

"I guess," said Danny, blinking sleepily.

"We haven't been very helpful, either."

"It's okay," mumbled Danny. "It's my fault."

"No, Danny," said Jack, cautiously stepping past Fractal, "it's ours. Can you forgive us, son?"

"Yes," said Danny. He was barely keeping the mug from tipping over. "Of course. Never blamed you." Echo caught the mug before it could tumble out of Danny's fingers. He set it carefully on the mossy floor while Danny watched with sleepy interest.

"Danny, are you alright?"

"Yeah," said Danny, blinking at his mother. His gentle smile faltered. "You still hate Phantom, though, don't you?" he asked sadly. "You still think that ghosts are bad."

Maddie bit her lip. He saw indecision flit over her features. "You really think that Clockwork helped you? That he didn't just cause the problem?"

"I know he helps me, and he's not the only one," said Danny. He adjusted the way he was sitting so that Echo took on most of his weight, and playfully extended his leg until his foot rested against his mother's knee. "Frostbite helps. Pandora helps. I get lots of help. There are lots of nice people here." He blinked sleepily.

Maddie's frown deepened. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Hm," said Danny.

"He's fine," said Fractal. "As fine as he can be with core damage, anyway. We just put a little spectral poppy in his hot chocolate."
"Not fair," complained Danny.

"We could have leaned on the link to get you to go to sleep, but we don't know what effect that would have, what with all the other problems."

Danny wrapped the blanket closer. "Don't have problems."

"Don't worry, it isn't addictive," said Fractal.

At the same time, Echo said, "You need sleep, after all of this."

Then Mirror blinked back into view, another, slightly smaller mug in his hand. He offered it to Jack, who regarded it with extreme wariness. Danny giggled.

"There isn't any spectral poppy in this one," said Mirror.

"He's going to pass," said Maddie.

"Eh, I'll take it," said Jack.

Danny giggled again, and tapped Maddie's leg with his toes. Everything was much funnier when he was sleepy. He was glad that everyone was getting along. Well, they were getting along more than they had been, anyway. "Wanna hug," said Danny.

All eyes but Danny's (and possibly Fractal's, it was hard to tell where he was looking) went to Echo, who was still draped possessively over Danny. Echo glared at Jack and Maddie, as if daring them to ask him to move.

"Hug," complained Danny, urgently.

Maddie inched closer to Danny, and, ignoring Echo's death glare, put her arms around Danny. Jack, balancing the mug in one, huge, hand, followed shortly after, ignoring Echo's angry hiss. Fractal and Mirror settled down on Echo's side, moving carefully, slowly, so that Maddie and Jack didn't even notice them until they brushed up against their arms. Danny snuggled closer to his parents, humming happily. This is the way it was supposed to be. Everyone hugging, everyone happy. He was happy.

(He knew that things weren't quite so simple, that his parents hadn't quite decided whether or not ghosts in general, or Phantom in particular, could be good, but they were, at least, tolerating the shadows for Danny's sake, trusting him to keep them under control, but the fuzz of spectral poppy was casting everything in a rose gold light. Still. It was progress.)

He fell asleep.
"Is he *purring*?" asked Maddie, more rhetorically than anything else.

"That's a good sign," said Fractal, leaning so his ear rested against Danny's back. "It means that his core is getting better."

"I'm going to bring him to bed," said Echo, pointedly, still glaring at Maddie and Jack. Maddie glared back. Echo's green eyes narrowed. "Let go," said Echo.

"No," said Maddie.

Fractal sighed. "It's a long walk back to the cabins. Do you really want to have to carry Danny the whole way? It won't be comfortable for you or Danny. Echo can get him back in seconds."

"How?" asked Jack.

"The same way we can just appear out of nowhere," said Mirror. "It isn't invisibility."

"Unfortunately, we can't use that route with just anyone," said Fractal. "Otherwise we'd have zapped everyone to the door already."

"Why?"

"You aren't ghosts, and you aren't linked to the lair."

Mirror made a sound of discontent. "If he sleeps like this he'll get a crick in his neck." He glanced at Maddie. "If it makes you feel better, Jazz is still up. She'll be there to keep Echo from doing anything too weird."

"Hey," said Echo.

"You sound like Tucker," teased Mirror.

"A compliment!"

Maddie pushed back a lock of Danny's hair. He was practically a burrito in the blanket, only his face showing. It was easier, somehow, to see that he was sick when he was asleep. Her poor baby. She hadn't noticed that he was in so much pain.

(Perhaps Echo was right. She was a horrible mother.)

She pulled back.

Echo smirked, and vanished with Danny.
"Okay," said Mirror cheerfully, getting to his feet. "We should keep going. We won't get back to bed by staying here! Well. You won't, anyway."

Fractal stood as well, stretching. "Yep. You two need sleep, too."

. Paulina Sanchez sat, discontent, at the window. She hadn't been able to sleep. Not with open, glassless, windows and a distinct lack of doors. Why, anyone could get in. Anyone at all. Paulina drew her quilt closer around her shoulders.

But that was not the only reason for Paulina's unhappiness.

The shadows were ignoring her. They shouldn't be ignoring her. They were the ghost boy's- Phantom's- shadows. They were parts of him. Phantom loved her. Or he was going to love her. She was special. She was the prettiest, most popular, best liked girl in Amity Park. She'd supported him even when he adult labeled him Public Enemy #1. She was, like, the Louis Lane to his Superman.

But when she had tried talking to the one with glasses, he'd just snapped at her. Which was way uncool. Then there was Echo, but Echo was... creepy, and he was only interested in Fenton, anyway. Paulina's lip curled. She got that Phantom was stuck in him, which was gross, but that didn't mean that Phantom had to be nice to him.

Poor Phantom, though. Being stuck with Freaky Fenton, Failure Foley, and Mopey Manson as friends. He must have been desperate when he first got to Amity Park, and now he was just too nice to drop them like they should be dropped.

Paulina remembered when she, of all people, used to be friends with them.

It had been just awful. Being at the bottom of the heap, being teased all the time, for her looks, for her accent, for the way she dressed, for her name... She didn't know how she had survived. Thank goodness for Tia Carmen and her two-week summer beauty extravaganza.

She smiled to herself as she remembered going back to school that September, how everyone had looked at her, had seen her, seen her beautiful, no longer nerdy, with too-large t-shirts, baggy jeans, freckles and pigtails, but with sleek hair, glowing skin, and stylish, glittering clothes. She had become popular that day, going from the bottom rung of the social ladder to the very top. Everyone had wanted to be her friend. Everyone.

Except for Sam Manson.

Paulina had tried to be nice to Manson. She really had. She had offered makeup tips, pretty clothes, a ticket to the top of the ladder, but Manson had thrown all of that away. Manson didn't want it. She wanted to keep wearing her dorky, gross, black, bargain-bin reject clothes, and lurk in the weirdo-infested social deeps. Like a looser. And she had gotten so angry when Paulina pointed that out. So angry when Paulina had said that she could be better, could hang out with better, brighter, shinier people.

Well. Manson had just been angry that Paulina was special, that Paulina had what it took, and she didn't. So there. Her loss. Fenton and Foley's loss, too, for picking Manson over the queen of the school.
Paulina huffed angrily. She'd almost broken them up too, a while ago, and it had been so good to see that look of frustration, of betrayal on Manson's face. But then Fenton went crawling back to the little witch. Not that Paulina wanted him anyway. Then there had been that week when Elliot had pretended to be from Hungary. Hilarious. Manson always said that she was looking past the surface, but then she got blinded by a fake accent and some sweet talk? Pathetic. Almost as pathetic as her continuous attempts to be 'unique.'

Hah. Paulina was the only special one.

But it was so frustrating that Phantom was hanging out with Manson at all, when he should be with Paulina. He clearly knew that Paulina was special. He had rescued her so many times, after all. Maybe Manson had done something to him. Yeah. That sounded like something that witch Manson would do, in her quest to be special.

Paulina would just have to break the spell.

A flash of white, not one of the little luces del tesoro, but something purer, more solid, caught Paulina's eye. She stood, dropping the quilt at her feet, and leaned out the window. It was Phantom, definitely Phantom, not one of the shadows, standing at the edge of one of the pools, almost obscured by foliage. The luces del tesoro orbited him like a rainbow halo, and he wore, antique, princely clothes. Paulina had never seen anyone quite so beautiful.

He turned slightly towards her, smiling.

Somehow he had freed himself from Fenton, and now he was showing himself to Paulina, and Paulina alone. Because he did know that Paulina was special, and that they were meant to be together. He was going to be the prince to her princess.

A brilliant, beautiful, smile blossomed on her face, the one that had made her the undisputed queen of Casper High, and she spun, running to the door so that she could join her prince.

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It had been hours, or, at least, it felt that way, since Valerie had heard the conversation between the three elder Fentons.

Danny Phantom was a copy of Danny Fenton? Impossible! Except... It did explain a lot. Like why Phantom showed up around Danny so often. And why he was always at Casper High, or the Nasty Burger, or the mall. And how he could get into FentonWorks so easily that one time. And how he seemed to know her so well. Heck, it even explained why Danielle's human form looked so much like Danny.

There, Valerie's mind shuddered to a halt. A standstill. A dead stop.

Taking Danielle and Mayor Masters into account, wasn't there an easier explanation for all of this? What was that saying? Occam's Razor? The simplest explanation is often the correct one? Or something like that?

What if there was only one Danny?

What if Danny was like Danielle?
Valerie shook her head. Impossible. More impossible that Phantom being Danny's copy. She'd had to cut dates with Danny to go fight Phantom. Beyond that, she had dated Danny. No. Mayor Masters was just a freak of nature and poor, unfortunate, innocent, Danielle was... What? Clearly not actually Phantom's cousin. Or Danny's.

Valerie wracked her brain for information, scraps of conversation overheard between Plasmius, Phantom, and Danielle. There had been a fight between the three of them a few months ago, one that Valerie had joined. Had Plasmius, Masters, implied that he was her father? But Masters didn't have children publicly, and Masters wasn't related to the Fentons, so... Had he made Danielle? That made more sense. He could have used Danny's DNA and... Whatever it was ghosts had instead of DNA from Phantom. Yeah. That made more sense.

It was also more creepy. Way, way more creepy.

Giving up sleep, Valerie kicked off her bed sheets. Maybe a walk would settle her nerves.

Once outside, she scanned her surroundings. Phantom did always keep his promises, but this was still foreign territory, and she got the feeling that even he wasn't completely in control here.

That's when she spotted him in the bushes by one of the ponds. Phantom. Or someone who looked a lot like Phantom. They didn't dress like him, though. Valerie had never seen Phantom in something so medieval, and her brain was having trouble processing him now. They weren't either of the shadows that she had seen before, either.

Then, as she watched, frozen, he turned and smirked slyly at her. Then he started to walk away.

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When Sam woke up, a nightmare fading in the back of her mind, the first thing that she registered was that the room was too quiet. She sat up, rubbing gritty eyes (and she really should have tried harder to get all of her mascara off before bed, and what was she thinking, putting on makeup that morning? It was habit, she supposed, but, really, there were more important things than her image as a goth.).

Danny and Jazz were missing. Their beds had been slept in, but they were gone.

Tucker's sleeping body on the bed next to her, and the relative quiet, told her that, no, it was not just that it was 'morning.' Maybe they had just gone out? Maybe Danny had had a nightmare, and Jazz was comforting him? It would be like Danny, to insist that Sam and Tucker be left to sleep.

Something, though, told Sam that this was not the case. That something more important had happened.

She swung her legs off the bed, and padded, barefoot, to the door, suppressing the urge to wake Tucker. This might be nothing, after all, and she'd been trying to be more considerate of her friends. She knew that she could be awfully bossy sometimes.

Jazz was sitting on a bench just outside the door, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and her knees drawn up to her chest. A mug sat on the ground next to her, and her one leg jigged anxiously.

"What's wrong?" asked Sam.
"Danny went to go talk to Mom and Dad," said Jazz. "I think that he's going to tell them."

"What?! Why?"

"I think he's trying to control how they find out," said Jazz, miserably. "Something about how one of the new shadows looked too much like him. Human him. He thought that they would find out."

"Oh, jeez," said Sam. "Is he going to be okay?"

"I hope so," said Jazz. "At least he has Echo and Fractal with him, right?"

"Right," said Sam. She frowned, gazing forward. She had caught sight off some movement out there, near the ponds. It hadn't looked like the wisps. More like... "Hey, Jazz," she said, pointing, "do you see that?"

Jazz looked up. "Is that..?"

The shape moved again, and came into full view. It was a shadow, not Echo or Fractal, a new one, identical to Danny, that had chosen to wear a high-collared pseudo-medieval suit complete with cape. Sam stared. He looked far better in that suit than he had any right to.

(She didn't know why she was so sure it wasn't Danny, it wasn't like Danny had never worn weird clothes before. She just was.)

Then Echo appeared between Jazz and Sam, cradling a blanketed Danny.

"Oh, my gosh," said Jazz. "Echo, is he okay?"

"He's fine," said Echo, "just overtired. He wore himself out." He smiled first at Sam, then at Jazz. "I thought that you two might like to know that he was back."

"How did it go?" asked Sam.

"Well," said Echo, "he is more or less satisfied. I'm not so sure. I suppose that they're at least willing to listen."

"Is he really just asleep?" asked Jazz, gently touching the side of his face. "He feels cold."

"Delayed reaction to the energized ectoplasm. Aaaaand we might have slipped some some spectral poppy into his hot chocolate?"

Jazz opened her mouth, as if to complain, closed it, and then said, "He probably needed it."

"Yeah," agreed Sam, watching as Danny nuzzled into Jazz's hand and licked her fingers.

Jazz jerked back. "Gross, Danny," she complained halfheartedly.


Sam bit back a laugh. Even in his sleep... She patted him on the shoulder as he mumbled. "So, what's with that?" She jerked her thumb towards the Danny lookalike standing in the foliage near the pools.

"That's Mirage," said Echo, rolling his eyes. "He's playing a game." Echo smiled, toothily, his mouth stretching wider than Danny's generally could. "He'd probably appreciate it if you joined, Sam. For now, I'm putting Danny to bed." He vanished.
Jazz glanced briefly at the caped shadow. "I'm going back to bed," she said. "I've barely slept."

"Okay," said Sam, looking at Mirage. She knew that Danny was in good hands, and she was curious as to what 'game' he was playing. Still, she was indecisive.

Right up until the shadow looked up, grinned at her, and winked.
Chapter 53

Sam made to follow the shadow as he turned away, but she spotted two other, closer, figures moving towards him. Was that Valerie? And Paulina?

Her eyes narrowed. She didn't really like either of them. Valerie was, personality-wise, slightly more bearable than Paulina, who, Sam was convinced, was entirely fake, but the way Valerie harassed Danny for something he had repeatedly apologized for, for something that he had been trying to stop, wasn't something that could be tolerated.

True, Sam was far from perfect herself, and she wasn't always entirely honest, but then, who was? Sam, at least, recognized her flaws. She wasn't sure that Valerie did, and she had heard Paulina describe herself as 'flawless' on more than one occasion.

(Sam knew she was a hypocrite.)

(Sam knew she had caused Danny's death.)

What was Mirage doing with the two of them? Or was their involvement accidental? Somehow, Sam doubted it.

She followed, careful to be quiet. Unlike Valerie and Paulina, Sam had practice being stealthy, and, neglecting her current lack of shoes, the clothes for it.

Valerie wasn't sure what she wanted to do more, demand to know Phantom's connection with Danny, or punch in that smug face. She was furious. Who did he think he was, shadow or not, mocking her like that?

A more rational part of Valerie knew that following after Phantom, or one of his shadows, like this was just asking for trouble. This wasn't Amity Park. She didn't know the terrain, she didn't know what could be lurking under every bush, behind every corner. She was already in the proverbial lion's den, but following the lion deeper in was not a good idea.

(Even if the lion had been weirdly kitten-like.)

As it was, she wasn't rational.

(It was a flaw of hers, to let anger cloud her judgment.)
She was, however, snapped out of her red mood by catching something distinctly *pink* moving through the foliage a few strides ahead of her.

*Paulina.*

Of *course* the airhead was chasing after the ghost. Paulina was as insane as she was mean. Paulina somehow thought that she could romance Phantom despite Phantom being literally dead. She was in denial beyond denial, living in a fantasy world where she could do no wrong.

Valerie hated Paulina almost as much as she hated Phantom, but Paulina was human. Barely. Whatever it was that Phantom was doing, Valerie couldn't let Paulina get caught up in it.

"Paulina," she called out, more than a little breathlessly. The plant life here was thick, verdant, luxurious, hard to run through.

Paulina didn't pause. Valerie groaned and pressed on.

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Paulina heard someone calling her, but she ignored it. It wasn't Phantom, so she didn't care. Phantom, her ghost boy, her ghostly prince, was the only one she had eyes for. He stayed a few paces ahead of her, turning to smile coyly back every few seconds.

This was fun, but she wanted nothing so much as to collapse into his arms.

Paulina pushed aside a brace of ferns, and stepped into a strange, sepulchral space beneath tall, leafy, mushroom-shaped trees. Thick, flowering vines hung from the distant canopy, and hugged the oddly-shaped trunks of the deceptively slender trees.

Phantom was clearly visible now, his aura the only reliable light, moving slowly, as if underwater, cloak and hair rippling in a phantom wind. He smiled over his shoulder, the barest, brilliant, white sliver of teeth visible between his lips.

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Sam paused when she reached the larger trees. There was something distinctly off about the trunks, and not just the way they were half-strangled by lianas. She squinted at the trunk, momentarily distracted from the chase. There were shelves carved in the trunks, with books on them. She pulled one off and flipped it open.

A single curious wisp floated helpfully over her shoulder, giving her enough light to see that it was poetry. *Dark* poetry. Dark, dark poetry.

Sam approved.

Except...

Taking this from a more *ghostly* perspective, it was actually... Well, not totally cheerful, but less
depressive. Maybe a little cheerful. In spots.

Sam approved even more.

She hastily put the book back on the shelf. She was going to lose the trail if she tarried any longer. She strode forward, using the balls of her feet to silently bounce from patch of moss to patch of moss.

(Deep down, in the dark depths of her deep, dark mind, Sam imagined being a little woodland fairy, flitting from flower to flower. A dark, bloodthirsty woodland fairy. Yeah. Oh, forget it, who did she think she was kidding? She liked darkness, but she liked nature just as much. She adored the big pastel purple flowers that hung from the vines.)

Up ahead, she saw Mirage come to a halt and turn to face the three girls facing him. He tilted his head, eyes half lidded, and smiled gently (just like Danny).

"Hello," he said, his voice identical to Danny's voice as Phantom.

"Phantom," gushed Paulina, half-lunging towards the boy. Mirage however, drifted back.

"Ah, no," he said. "I'm sorry. That's one mark against you."

"What?" asked Paulina.

"You aren't Phantom," said Valerie. "You're one of those shadows."

Mirage bowed elegantly at the waist, feet hovering half a centimeter above the forest floor. "If it pleases you, you may call me Mirage," he said straightening. His eyes flicked between the three girls. "I thought that you three might enjoy a game?"

"Three?" said Valerie, glancing around.

Paulina gasped. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, glaring at the other two girls. "This is our moment. This is when we profess our undying love to one another!"

"Do you listen to anyone but yourself?" asked Sam, disgusted. "Ever?" She stepped forward, towards Mirage. "What kind of game?"

"Questions and answers," said Mirage, lightly. "Or, more accurately, statements and truths. We all get to say something, and if the thing we say is wrong, then that's a mark against you. Three, and you have to leave."

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Paulina smiled her most charming smile. Clearly, this was just a way to get rid of the other two without hurting their feelings. "You don't have to be nice to these people, my love," she said, fluttering her long, curling eyelashes.

"There are few things that I have to do," said the shadow, "but this is something that I want to do. And I try to be nice to everyone."

Valerie scoffed. Paulina glared at her, thoughts like how dare she chasing themselves around in her head.
"You don't think so?"
"No, I don't."
"But I do," said the shadow, gently, sincerely.
"Of course you do," said Paulina, cooing.
"But you have thoughts that have been keeping you up, and I will tell you whether or not they are true. All I ask in exchange, is that you tell me whether or not my own thoughts are wrong."

Valerie bit her lip. She needed answers. But she didn't trust Phantom, any part of him.

Then again, Phantom had never, to the best of her knowledge, ever broken a promise. And she didn't need to tell him the truth.

"I can make it a little more interesting, if you'd like," said Mirage.
"What do you mean?"
"Well, clearly, I'm not the one you want to play with." He vanished.
"But maybe I am?"

Valerie jerked upwards. There, sitting on one of the lower branches, was a black haired, blue-eyed boy with a cheeky smile.

"Danny?" gasped Valerie.

"Fenton?" sneered Paulina.

"And that's a mark against both of you," said the boy. He pushed himself off the branch, and Valerie cried out in alarm. The branch was easily thirty feet in the air. But before Valerie could even think of donning her suit, the boy dissolved from view.

"And that's why I call myself Mirage," said the shadow, now standing a few feet behind Sam, and back in his guise as Phantom.

"So you are connected to Danny," said Valerie.

"Indeed I am."

Valerie frowned. "How?"

"You'll have to guess," said Mirage. "That's the game."

"Okay, fine," said Valerie. "So I get why you brought me and Miss Perfect here," Paulina, unbelievably, preened at the comment, "but why Sam? I thought you didn't have any secrets from her, Danny, and Foley."

"Phantom doesn't," clarified Mirage brightly. "But that's close enough that I won't put a mark against
you. I thought that she would like to watch. Actually, I was hoping to catch Tucker, too, but he needs his sleep. But, Valerie, you heard that conversation between Jazz and the Doctors Fenton." He paused. "This is the part where you say 'yes' or 'no,' or 'right' or 'wrong.'"

"Yes," said Valerie mulishly.

Mirage clapped his hands together. "I knew it!" He bounced up and down like a small child.

(Like Danny sometimes did.)

"My turn!" exclaimed Paulina before Valerie could formulate her next question. "Phantom loves me," she said making an attempt to circumvent Sam and fall into Mirage. Sam, however, was having none of it. Their dance, and the way that Mirage was practically hiding behind Sam, was mildly amusing.

"He might have, once," said Mirage, looking almost sheepish. "But no longer."

"What? No, no, no... That's a lie! He loves me. You love me."

"Not in the way you're looking for, Paulina. That's three strikes, you're out."

"That's not fair," wailed Paulina.

Sam rolled her eyes, and Paulina locked into the movement.

"You! You little witch! This is your fault!" she lunged, nails like talons.

Sam, who had martial arts training, easily avoided Paulina's wild lunge. Before she could retaliate against the living puddle, however, Mirage put his hands on her shoulders, and turned her intangible.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Paulina," said Mirage as Paulina's hand waved disconcertingly through Sam's face. "Paulina. Paulina, really. I know you can be more gracious than this. Don't be a sore looser. Paulina." He sighed. "Alright, I didn't want to do this, but... Sam, Valerie, up for a bonus round?"

"What did you have in mind?" asked Sam, leaning back to avoid one of Paulina's more wild swings.

"Well, I've always liked tag. Maybe with a touch of hide-and-seek?"

"Sure," said Sam.

"Are you ready, Valerie?"

"I don't know what you're trying to pull here, ghost, but-"

"Great," said Mirage. He drifted backwards with Sam, set her down, and vanished.
Paulina ran off after the first visible light, one that Sam knew perfectly well was a wisp. Sam, on the other hand, didn't bother to move at all.

"Sam," said Valerie. "Do you know where he went?"

"He didn't go anywhere," said Sam. "Isn't that right?"

"Ah, but you know me so well," said Mirage, reappearing, this time in human guise. His dress was still somewhat archaic, but much simpler. His feet were firmly planted on the floor. Sam thought that his skin was a little more translucent than Danny's, though, and that his hair was a little more windswept than Danny's usually was. But that could just be her imagination. "Or, maybe," continued Mirage, "I should say that you know Phantom well. I've only existed for a couple hours, after all."

"So," said Valerie, "Phantom is Danny's copy."

"Ah, unfortunately, that's the second mark against you."

Valerie scowled. "Where did you send Paulina off to, anyway?"

Mirage made a humming sound, then something like a pair of harmonicas and a tuba, "is just going to lead her back to the cabins. She'll be fine."

"Who?"

"The wisp she caught sight of," clarified Mirage. "Now, it's our turn. Sam, do you want to ask the question?"

"You know about Vlad," said Sam. 

Valerie's mouth fell open. "You know about Vlad?"

"That would be a yes," said Mirage. "Your turn."

"Danielle isn't actually your cousin."

Mirage's smile faltered. "She might as well be."

"But she isn't."

"No," said Mirage, shortly. Sam winced. This was a sore spot for Danny and Ellie, and, apparently, it was a sore spot for the shadows as well. Then, something occurred to her.

"D- Mirage. Is Ellie connected to this lair too?" she asked.

Mirage looked at her, surprised. "I don't know," he said. His eyes got a kind of distant, unfocused look to them. "That would be nice, though, wouldn't it? Or, oh, I think that some people combine their lairs. Maybe we could double up if she winds up having her own lair? I don't know how that works, though." He frowned, thoughtfully. "I bet that Clockwork knows."
"Was that story about the apocalypse true?"

"Statements, Valerie, that's the rule."

Valerie made a face. "That story about the apocalypse is true."

"Unfortunately."

"But it was all Phantom, wasn't it? Danny was just covering for you. For Phantom."

"It's a matter of perspective. But Danny wasn't covering. So, that's a third mark." He smiled, gently. "You should be careful about Vlad, though, Valerie. He's not the worst, but he can be dangerous."

"I don't need you to tell me that," snapped Valerie. "And you should take off the disguise. It's creepy."

Mirage shrugged, and the image of Danny and the medieval clothes peeled away, leaving Mirage in Phantom's form, complete with his typical suit. "Is this better?" he asked.

"I guess," said Valerie.

"But you aren't satisfied."

"Not on your life."

"Good thing I don't have one! But maybe you'd like to play something else?" He laughed, but stopped suddenly, mid-chuckle. "You guys don't think that I was too hard on Paulina, do you? I didn't want to hurt her feelings."

"Gosh, no," said Sam.

At the same time, Valerie said, "She needs to grow up."

"Oh. Alright, then," said Mirage, clearly surprised. "So, Sam, you pick the game."

"Gin rummy," said Sam, almost automatically. "What?" she demanded, noticing the look Valerie was giving her. "It's a game," she said, defensively.

"Yeah, Valerie, it's a game. Do you know how to play?"

"I know how to play poker," said Valerie.

"Eh, it's similar. More fun, though. We can teach you."

"Okay, okay, hold it. I'm not playing cards with you. Do you even have cards?"

"Then what will you play? Or would you like me to show you the way back? And," he added, contriving to look offended, "of course I have cards. Lots of cards. I even have some full decks."

"You'd better be playing with a full deck," said Sam.

"But it invites chaos, and Chaos can be so much fun," said Mirage.

"Bring that up and you're Doomed."

"Am I missing something here?" asked Valerie.
"Nothing you're not meant to," said Mirage. "If you don't want to play gin, why don't we-"

At that moment, a bright white light zoomed into sight, keening. Mirage raised his hands to cup the little wisp. "What's wrong?" he asked. He sang a few bars of music. The wisp responded, and Mirage hissed. "She what?"

He looked up, sharply, into the trees. A single, sharp tooth peeked out from between his lips. There was a crash of foliage and a girlish shout. Paulina ran out from around a tree.

Sam's mouth dropped open. How the heck had Paulina gotten back here? She would have to put the puddle a few places higher on the 'threat' scale, what with her insane obsession and intermittent bursts of surprising competence.

"I found you, my love," said Paulina, swooning.

"Paulina Sanchez," said Mirage coldly. "I will tolerate a lot of things. I will not, however, tolerate you threatening my friends, or people under my protection."

"What?"

"Apologize," demanded Mirage.

"I- I'm sorry?"

"Not to me. To-" he used the same harmonica-and-tuba sound that he had made earlier. He glared at Paulina expectantly.

"Um. I'm sorry," said Paulina, making a show of contrition.

"You'd better be," mumbled Mirage, looking away. He sighed. "I guess you can play with us, too, but you have to be kind. Okay? Do you even know what that means? Don't answer that." He pouted.

"You guys are getting better and better at copying Phantom, aren't you?" said Sam, contemplatively.

Mirage beamed. "You think so?" he asked. "I try. We each have our strengths. You should see Mirror." He leaned forward conspiratorially, whispering to Sam. "He's even better. I don't think he likes to play quite as much, though. Anyway," he continued, straightening, ignoring Paulina's incensed gaze, "how about we play Doubt? You all know how to play that, right?"

Valerie and Paulina stared blankly at the shadow.

Sam rolled her eyes and sighed heavily. "It's sometimes called BS."

Comprehension dawned in the two girls' features, while Mirage flinched.

"What," mocked Valerie, not entirely unkindly, "don't like swearing?"

"This is the Ghost Zone," said Mirage. "The Infinite Realms. The Spirit World. Underhill. Dreamland. Faerie. Words and names have meaning, can have power, here. Especially if people think they do." He shifted uncomfortably. "Words considered curses... I don't want to take the risk. But you do know how to play?"

Paulina nodded, almost hesitantly. Valerie said, "Well, yeah."

Mirage grinned, and there was suddenly a pack of cards in his hands, then two, then three, all with different colors and patterns. Sam squinted at the fourth one. Was that a tarot deck? The heck?
Did *Mirage* know how to play Doubt? Because it was looking doubtful.

Ugh. Danny was rubbing off on her, if she was using *that* kind of pun.

"What are we playing for?" asked Valerie, crossing her arms.

"What would you like to play for?"

"I want to know the real story behind the whole apocalypse thing," said Valerie, "and I want to know the relationship between Danny and Danielle."

"Pick one," said Mirage.

"Wait," said Sam, "you're actually going to go along with that?"

"I won't say anything that he wouldn't," Mirage reassured her. "What would you like, if you win, Sam?"

Sam frowned. "Do you have any more Stygian waters?" Could she get Valerie to make some kind of binding promise?

"Unfortunately, no. Have you decided yet, Valerie?"

"Tell me about the apocalypse," said Valerie, finally, seemingly pained by her decision.

"Alright," said Mirage. "Be aware that I will only tell you what happened in the original future time line, and that I will be sticking to what has been confirmed by multiple sources. The fact is, Phantom saw very little of what happened first hand. Do you still want to go that route?"

"You're trying to wiggle out, ghost," accused Valerie.

"Maybe," agreed Mirage.

"Then tell me about Danny and Danielle."

"Okay," said Mirage. "So, Sam?"

Sam glanced at Valerie. She doubted that she could get the angry girl to make a promise that she'd actually keep if push came to shove. On the other hand, this would be a good opportunity to humiliate Paulina. She winced at her internal wording. That wasn't quite what she wanted to do. She just wanted the other girl to stop harassing her and her friends. A bit of payback would be nice, though, all things considered. "If I win, you two have to leave Phantom alone," said Sam.

"Fine," said Valerie.

"What?" shrieked Paulina.

"You have to agree," said Mirage, concealed glee slipping into his tone, "or you don't get to play."

"Fine," said Paulina, with significantly less grace than Valerie. Then her entire attitude changed, and she fluttered her eyelids at Mirage. "Then, if I win, I want Phantom to take me on a date."

"No," said Mirage.

"But-"
"I can't and won't make promises for Phantom. Pick something else."

"Then, you take me on a date."

"I can't leave the lair, and I doubt that you can get here on your own."

"Then," said Paulina, pouting, "I want you to kiss me!"

Mirage sighed, long and hard. "Fine," he said, a slight frown playing over his features. "Now," he said, eyes regaining a mischievous glint, "if I win, you all have to do a cannonball in the big pool!"

"What?" said Sam. "That's what you want?"

"Yes," said Mirage, hiding a grin behind a facade of seriousness. "That's what I want."

So," said Jack, drawing out the word. "Are all lairs like this?" The walk so far, with two humans and two shadows, had been unbelievably awkward. The way Mirror looked, and acted, so much like Danny while making no effort to hide that he was not, in fact, Danny, was especially disconcerting to Jack and Maddie.

"I must confess," said Fractal, adjusting his glasses, "that we have limited experience with the lairs of others. I suppose that it depends on what you mean by 'like this.'"

"Well," said Jack, "I mean, are all lairs this big?"

"I think Clockwork's is," said Mirror, "but, other than that, the ones that Danny has seen are all smaller."

"I believe that there may be an inverse relationship between direct, active control of ones lair, and the size, as well," added Fractal. "Remember TV kid?"

"Oh, yeah," said Mirror, "TV kid."

"TV kid?" asked Maddie, trying to find her footing in the conversation.

"Yeah. Um. He didn't actually give Danny a name," said Mirror. "He- Danny- was looking for directions, and he opened the door to TV kid's lair. The lair was just the one room, but he had a lot of control over it." Mirror shrugged, and then turned his attention to hopping over a stream.

"And you call him TV kid because..?"

"That's what he was doing," said Fractal. "Watching TV." He paused. "There are a lot of ghosts that never leave their lairs once they find them, you know. Not all ghosts have social components to their obsessions."

"You want Danny to stay, don't you?" asked Maddie.

"I'm ambivalent," said Fractal.

"Echo does," said Mirror.
There are pros and cons to the proposition," said Fractal. "You can't deny that he would be less likely to get injured here, but at the same time, he is very attached to Amity Park." The shadow shrugged. "You have to recall that Echo doesn't particularly like you. I think that he was half-hoping that you'd take things badly, and that Danny would stay."

"He was-" Maddie's eyes narrowed. "How closely connected to Danny are you, anyway?"

"We aren't parts of his personality, if that's what you mean," said Mirror.

"That said, he could undoubtedly act like any one of us, given proper provocation. But, as before, it would be better to think of us as needful things. We fulfill roles."

"It's in our names," said Mirror. "Like, Fractal's the smart guy, I'm here to give you a different way of looking at things, and Mirage is mostly there just to mess with people."

"And Echo?"

"Well," said Fractal, "we didn't exactly mean to make him, now did we?"

"Echo is a knee-jerk reaction to a massive amount of pain," said Mirror. "Not pretty, but true. Don't let him throw you off, though. Danny loves you, and even if it doesn't seem like it to you, what he's done here has been for your protection."

"Including making us sign a leonine contract?"

"D- Don't give us that. The agreement is fair, and we intend to follow through."

"Yeah, and if virtually any other ghost found out what kind of weapons you were making, they'd kill you," said Mirror. "Probably. Or report you, or something. Do something you wouldn't like, anyway."

"What happens if you break a Stygian oath?" asked Jack, abruptly.

"I hope you aren't planing on trying to break one," said Fractal, glancing over his shoulder.

"No," said Jack, "just curious."

"I don't know," said Fractal, looking forward again.

"How do you not know?" demanded Maddie.

"I don't know," said Mirror, "because we actually keep our promises? It's never come up."

"You've never broken a promise, even by accident?"

"I've only been around for a few hours, so, no. But for Stygian oaths, breaking a promise by accident doesn't count. You just have to try to keep it. And before you ask, Danny doesn't break promises either."

"Then how do you know Stygian oaths even exist?" asked Maddie with a little exasperation.

"Well, you took one, so I'd say they exist."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"No one that I know of has ever broken a Stygian oath," said Fractal. "Considering who and what I
know of, that's really impressive. If it was possible to break one, it would have happened by now, and I'd know about it. Probably." Fractal sighed. They had reached the stairs. "You do know the rest of the way back?" he asked. Jack and Maddie nodded. "Okay. Good. We need to go take care of something."

Before Jack or Maddie could ask what they needed to do, the shadows vanished.
Chapter 55

Mirage shuffled together three of the four decks, but Sam stopped him before he shuffled in the tarot deck.

"Aw, Sam," complained Mirage, and Sam had to remind herself, yet again, that this wasn't Danny. "Come on, this'll be fun. Besides, the cards are so beautiful."

"Just like our kiss would be," said Paulina, fluffing her hair. Sam distinctly saw Mirage's eye twitch.

"How would a tarot deck even work in a game of Doubt?" asked Sam, ignoring the girl.

"Well, Doubt is all about numbers, right? Tarot cards have numbers," said Mirage, not giving up on the concept despite Paulina's comment.

"What about the trump cards? There are twenty-two of them."

"Oh. I thought that we'd pull them out when we got them, use them to tell our fortunes, or something. Besides, I think this deck is missing most of its trumps." Mirage set the box down on the square stone table he had found for them to play at, and smeared the deck out over its surface. "Yeah, it only has twelve, for some reason."

"And the court cards?"

"I thought that we could just have the pages and knights count as jacks," said Mirage.

"I guess," said Sam, doubtfully.

"Can we hurry this up?" asked Valerie. "It isn't like he isn't putting in three other decks that might or might not have all the cards."

"Right!" said Mirage, teeth bright. "I have these, too!" he added, pulling out two handfuls of mismatched playing cards from... somewhere. How was he doing that?

Sam sighed. "Fine," she said. "Let's do this."

Mirage's grin widened. He began shuffling, and then began dealing the cards out, rapid fire. "So," he said, as he passed out the cards, "the player to the dealer's left plays first, so that'd be you, Paulina, and then Valerie, and then Sam. You say aces first," he added, helpfully, as the dark haired girl frowned prettily at her cards. "Then- Oh! We should take our trumps out first. Those are the ones that have funny names, like the World, or the Fool, or the Hermit." Mirage started to sort through his cards. "It might also help you later if you put your cards in order. Although, that could hurt you if you try to bluff, and someone notices you pulling cards out from the wrong spot. Hm." He began to lay out his cards. "So, it looks like I've got the Tower, Death, the Hanged Man, and the Emperor. I
"Well, the Tower is disaster, and I hate to say it, but you guys being here is kind of a disaster, then Phantom is dead, so, Death, and the Hanged Man is sacrifice, which is something that happens often with Phantom, and the Emperor, well, we are in charge here, aren't we?" said Mirage, talking quickly, tapping each card as he explained it.

"I have the High Priestess," said Paulina, "and," she slyly turned the second card around, "the Empress."

"Cool," said Mirage, either missing or ignoring Paulina's implication, even when she began to inch the second card closer to his Emperor. "But you only got two? What's this, that you put to the side?" asked Mirage, reaching.

"Well, that one isn't very pretty," complained Paulina, trying to keep the card out of his reach.

Sam rolled her eyes and lunged across the table. "Neither is the Tower," she said, examining the card. Her lips twitched up. "The Devil? Ha!"

Paulina snatched the card back, and ripped it in half. Mirage winced.

"Don't listen to her, my love, she's just trying to turn you against me."

"Um. Paulina," said Mirage. "I'm not 'your love.' I'm not in love with you. Neither is Phantom. You have to stop this. Maybe go out with Peter from the senior class. He likes you. You seem to be interested in the same things."

"Yeah, mirrors."

"Sam. Not helping."

"Sorry."

"But he isn't like you," protested Paulina.

"Yeah, and my scooter isn't like a space shuttle," said Sam, "but I'm never going to get a space shuttle, so saying that is kinda pointless."

"No one asked you, you b-"

"Okay!" interrupted Mirage. "Valerie, you want to share?"

Valerie scowled. "I have Judgment, the World, and the Wheel of Fortune."

"Rebirth or conviction, a new beginning or a lack of closure, and either good luck or bad luck," said Mirage.

"I don't believe in this stuff anyway," muttered Valerie.

"Neither do I, really, but it's fun. What do you have, Sam?"

Sam blushed. Her cards were a bit weird. "I have the Lovers and the Chariot, and I don't need you to interpret them for me." Love and victory.

But Paulina ignored him, choosing instead to stare at Sam, who, for her part, glared right back. "You- You didn't get the Lovers. That's my card. You must have stolen it somehow!"

"That'd be a trick," mumbled Mirage. "Paulina, please, it doesn't matter, but it's your turn. You need to play a card. Or cards. Aces."

Paulina's glare softened into syrupy sweetness as she switched her gaze to Mirage, and Sam had to restrain herself from kicking the other girl. The 'no fighting' rule was unlikely to exclude Sam, after all, and she didn't want to give Danny, or his shadows, extra trouble.

"If you really want me to," said Paulina, leaning towards Mirage even as he leaned away.

"Oh my god," said Valerie abruptly, clearly having enough of the whole situation. "You do realize that Phantom's dead, right? A ghost? Does that not register to you? Even if you ignore that, he looks like he belongs in elementary school."

"He was in high school before he died," complained Mirage. He turned to Sam. "I don't look that young, do I?"

"You look fine," said Sam.

"Love conquers all," said Paulina dramatically. "It defeats every barrier, tramples every wall, batters down every door. As long as out love is true-"

"Paulina, please listen to me, Phantom does not love you," said Mirage, a little desperately. "You're an okay person, if a bit vindictive, considering that you waited seven years to get back at Valerie, and you went out with Danny to get back at Sam for calling you shallow, and you've been leading Dale on for years, just because he chased you around with pond scum when you were ten, and- Where was I going with this?" asked Mirage, cutting himself off, and staring into the middle distance, blinking. "Oh. But, yeah, you're an okay person because you help Star out, and Ashley, too, most of the times, and you volunteer a lot, and you aren't stupid. But Phantom doesn't love you, and honestly, you don't love him either. You like the idea of being in love with him, and you do support him, and he appreciates that, but you don't know him. So, please, stop doing this."

The sickly sweet smile washed off of Paulina's face like syrup being washed off of a plate with hot water. "What would you know about it?" she snapped. "You aren't him!"

"You know what, I'm not even going to dissect that. How many aces did you put down?"

"Four," huffed Paulina.

"Great," said Mirage.

"Six twos," said Valerie, laying down a mismatched handful of cards.

Play proceeded. It was an interesting game. The number of cards that they themselves had meant nothing, what with all the extra cards Mirage had put in. They all had to rely on tells. Mirage had some of Danny's tells, but not all of them, and he seemed to have picked up a few of his own... At least, that's what it looked like to Sam before he bluffed Valerie into calling 'doubt' on him, and made her pick up the pile. Paulina was too angry to lie effectively, but she watched Sam like a hawk, and apparently knew Valerie well enough to tell when she was lying, so she called 'doubt' on the two of them more often than not.
"So," said Valerie, glaring at Mirage over her cards. "What is the relationship between you and Danielle, anyway?"

"I'll tell you if you win," said Mirage.

"Not like that, I mean, socially, what's your relationship like?"

"We don't have a social relationship. She's never met me."

"Between Danielle and Phantom."

"They're cousins."

"And that means something to ghosts?"

"Clearly," said Mirage. He set his cards down almost as soon as Sam had called hers. He sighed. "They've claimed each other. They're family."

"So, he, what? Provides for her? Gives her shelter? Because the first time I met her, she was on the run. It doesn't seem like he's taking very good care of her."

"They're kids, Valerie," said Sam. "There's a limit on what he can do."

"He has this place, doesn't he?"

"I don't think he knew it existed," said Sam.

"Excuse me," interjected Paulina. "Who is Danielle? And I've got nine."

Mirage didn't even look at her. "Doubt," he said. Paulina scowled and gathered up the cards. "Danielle is Phantom's cousin. She goes by Ellie, now. You've probably seen her around Amity Park with Phantom. She looks a lot like him. Ellie places more emphasis on personal freedom and safety than Phantom does, she likes to travel, and you might have noticed that she was on the run from Plasmius that first time you met. Even now, Phantom has difficulty with him. Still. It is mostly Ellie's choice not to stay."

Valerie put down her cards, calling the number. No one disputed it. "What's up with Plasmius anyway?"

"No one knows what's up with him," said Sam. "He's insane." She put down her own cards. She was getting close.

"Considering what he's managed, he can't be that insane," pointed out Valerie, "and all ghosts are insane, anyway."

"By human standards," said Mirage. "By ghost standards, you're the crazy ones." He put down his cards. "I suppose my answer depends on what, exactly, you're asking about. Be specific."

"What's his relationship with Danielle?"

"Creepy. He isn't actively after her anymore, though. I think they might have made up a bit."

"The last time I saw her, she was trying to beat him to death."

"Yeah. Your point?"
"That wasn't what I meant, either."

"I know what you meant, and I'm not tell you."

"What did he actually want her for anyway?"

"Sam," said Mirage, "I think that it's your turn."

"Don't ignore me."

"I'm not ignoring you, I'm just telling Sam that it's her turn. Not that I'm going to be answering that question, either."

"Fine," said Valerie, ignoring Sam as she took her turn, and Mirage as he quietly took his. "Then what's Phantom's relationship with Plasmius?"

"Gosh. Complicated. He want to adopt him, though."

"What?" exclaimed Valerie, as Sam almost bit through her tongue.

What was Mirage doing, revealing something like that?

"Yeah. He wants Phantom to be his son, or evil apprentice, or something equally stupid. You've probably heard bits and pieces of this shouted back and forth during fights."

"Maybe," confirmed Valerie.

Okay, so, that made more sense, now. Often, Sam regretted being earthbound during ghost fights. This was one of those times. Even with the Fenton Phones and Tucker's camera work, she missed dozens of conversations, and hundreds of details, during ghost fights. It would be easier if Danny told her and Tucker more, but even when he wasn't trying to protect or spare them from knowledge or worry, he was often too tired, or too busy, to give them a detailed description of events. Actually, it was mostly a case of being too tired. Usually, between the two of them and Jazz, they got a good accounting of injuries, both physical and mental.

The turn made it's way around the table once more. "What is Plasmius, anyway?" asked Valerie.

"I'd rather not give some people ideas," said Mirage.

"Oh," said Valerie, glancing at Paulina. "Yeah, I guess."

"You can tell me anything, you know," said Paulina, apparently deciding that now was the time to switch back to diabetes-flavor.

Mirage didn't say anything. Sam rolled her eyes.

"Why does he want Phantom, anyway? Couldn't he get, like, anyone to be his apprentice? I mean, he's evil enough for any ghost, and he's powerful."

"Lots of people want Phantom," said Mirage, almost absently, before putting down his cards.

"What for?" asked Paulina. It was the most intelligent question she had asked so far, in Sam's opinion.

"Well," said Mirage, taking a moment to think about it, "there are a couple reasons, but I guess that the most pertinent ones are that he's unclaimed, he's a child ghost, and those are rare, and his
obsessions are unusual, even for an older ghost. There are lots of ghosts that want children, and children are hard for ghosts to do. Plasmius is just one of those, but he thinks that he has a better claim because he saw him first or something, even though that doesn't really matter."

"I thought Fenton said something about Phantom being adopted, though," said Paulina.

"Yes, but that isn't exactly public knowledge. Clockwork is kind of a private person, and there are ghosts out there who would go after Phantom if they learned that he was connected to Clockwork, so they didn't advertise."

"'Go after' meaning..?" Valerie asked.

"Suck up to. Scam. Threaten. Harass. Beat up. Kidnap. Take hostage. There are plenty of ghosts who would like to turn back time, especially among the Dead. They'd consider Phantom a weak spot. Leverage. There are a few that have already tried."

"I didn't hear about that," said Sam.

"Well, saying 'already tried' might give you the wrong idea. Some you do know about. They were pathetic, or at least not too much trouble. Most of those underestimated Phantom completely. He just forgot to tell you why they were after him. At least one got headed off by Clockwork. A couple don't exist anymore, and never did. It's confusing." Mirage frowned. "I.. Don't think he knows about those consciously. I wonder why I do?"

"I don't know," said Sam. She put down her last two cards. "I win, by the way."

"What?" screeched Paulina. "No you don't! Doubt! Doubt!"

Sam flipped her cards over to show two threes, the correct cards. "You have to leave Phantom alone from now on."

"You- You- You-"

"Me, me, me," mocked Sam.

"You can't make me!"

"Maybe not," said Mirage, cheerfully. "But as long as you're here, I can. So."
Danny woke to find himself constrained, constricted. He did not like this. He pushed against the soft restraints, but made no headway against them.

A whimper escaped his lips.

“Hey,” said a familiar, soft voice. “Hey, Danny, it's okay.”

Danny let himself relax a little. He did not like being trapped, but if she said it was okay, then it must be okay. She wouldn't lie. Instead of fighting against the restraints, he instead fought to open his eyes. It was far harder than it should be.

He drifted off again.

Paulina was crying. She didn't understand. She had thought that he, her ghost boy, her love, Phantom, had come for her. He was supposed to be her prince in shining armor. He had even dressed the part. But he had spent most of the time talking to Valerie, answering questions, or deflecting them. Ignoring her. He shouldn't have done that. It wasn't right.

She sniffled, curling deeper into the hollow of the tree, not caring that her clothing, her only clothing, was getting smeared with dirt, or that her hair was full of leaves and twigs.

“Paulina?” said a hesitant, familiar, echoing voice. “Are you crying?”

“Go away,” said Paulina.

But there were footsteps, coming closer. “I-” said the voice. “I didn't mean to-” the voice cut itself off again.

“Which one are you, anyway?” asked Paulina.

“Mirage.”

Paulina scoffed. “Why aren't you with Valerie, or Sam?” she asked, bitterly.

“They went to bed. You should, too.”

“Or what?”

“Or you'll be tired tomorrow, I guess.”

“I don't care,” said Paulina.

“I didn't mean to make you cry,” said Mirage, quietly. Paulina looked up to see the boy staring down
at his feet, his hands clasped behind his back. “I’m sorry.” He fidgeted, and his whole form flickered and rippled.

“You humiliated me,” said Paulina. “In front of them.”

“I didn't mean to,” said Mirage. “Sam might've,” he admitted. “She doesn't really like you. But I don't hate you.”

“So, Phantom does like me?” asked Paulina, hopefully.

Mirage cringed. “Not really,” he said. “Not like that. Paulina, you... You do recognize that...” He hesitated again. “He doesn't hate you,” he said, finally, “but he isn't in love with you, and probably never will be. He isn't- He's not quite what you think he is. He couldn't be what you want him to be.”

“And that's what, exactly?”

“Perfect,” said Mirage. “Paulina, you can barely stand the sight of blood. Sam, Tucker, Jazz, and Danny, they have to stitch him up at least once a week. He forgets things. He would never be as romantic as you want, in the way that you want. He isn't terribly sensitive all the time. Look at me, and what I've done. What I am comes from him. He enjoys messing with people too much. Ancients, what he's done to Sam and Tucker... He'd drive you crazy in a week, most likely.”

“That's just a lie to get me to stop trying.”

“It is to get you to stop, but it isn't a lie. We've been trying not to lie. It would make some things easier, though, if we did. But, Paulina, what you're doing, even ghosts usually consider obsessing over a single specific thing or person to be unhealthy. There is someone out there for you, I'm sure. It just isn't Phantom.”

“What do you know?” muttered Paulina.

“Enough,” said Mirage. “Think of it another way, if you don't like me, and I'm basically him, with different parts emphasized, after a while, you wouldn't like him, either. He has days where he's just like me. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” said Paulina.

“Okay,” said Mirage, floating off the ground. “That's good. I can take you to a place where you can clean up, if you'd like, and I think that we have some clothes in your style, somewhere.” He hummed, contemplatively. “Walking shoes, too, but most of them are used.”

“Okay,” said Paulina, starting to pull herself up.

Mirage grinned. “Great!” he said, fading into the trees. “Wanna play a game while you walk? I spy with my little eye...”

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When Danny regained consciousness the second time, he was much more aware of his surroundings. He no longer felt constrained, but secure, wrapped in his blanket with warm bodies on every side.
How did that happen, anyway? He had thought that there were enough beds for everyone tonight.

He felt a cold hand brush his cheek, and he let his eyes flutter open. It took him a long time to focus on the ceiling. His eyes didn't want to cooperate at all.

Danny could feel his friends, his sister, with ghostly senses that had, since coming here, and until now, been unresponsive. It was a comfort to have them so close. He could feel Tucker, to his right, hugging him like he was a giant teddy bear, emotions muzzy and satisfied from long, uninterrupted sleep. He could feel Jazz's jittery, excited dreams from where she laid, curled, on the end of the bed near Danny's feet. To his left was Sam, just now starting to dream, but deeply satisfied.

The hand ghosted over his cheek again.

Danny's eyes flicked up, over his head, to, finally, focus on Echo. Danny blinked, brain trying to catch up with what he was seeing. Echo hadn't spent the whole rest of the night like this, had he? Actually, that would be just like Echo.

The shadow brushed his thumb over Danny's cheek again. Danny leaned into the touch, but then the corners of his mouth turned down. He tried to sit up, but failed. He glared first at the blankets he was encased in, and then, noticing the ghostly tail tangled in among them, up at Echo.

“You know,” said Echo, “if whatever is out there really is a threat, bringing them to the door is only putting them in harm's way.”

“I know that,” said Danny, trying to squirm out of the blankets without disturbing Sam or Jazz. “Kinda was hoping you and Fractal would stall, or do circles or something 'til we knew. Can you... not do that? I still don't know how this all works.”

Echo sighed ostentatiously, and phased Danny out of the blankets before setting him down in a chair in the next room. “That's just it,” said Echo, “neither do we. But we can definitely go in circles, or any other shape you'd like. We've got a few impossible ones, even.” He grinned, more than a little wickedness showing through. “They'll never even notice that they're being lead around, as long as Fractal doesn't get flustered.”

“I think he's been doing okay.”

“Small groups,” said Echo. “Remember when he introduced himself?”

“It'll be fine,” said Danny, standing to look for fresh clothing. “Hopefully whoever is outside my door will go away before too long. What happened after I passed out?” Danny paused, frowned, and turned. “Actually, why did I pass out like that? I know that I've been weird lately, sleep-wise, but still...” His eyes flicked over Echo's face. Was that guilt he was detecting? “Did you drug me?” asked Danny, somewhat annoyed.

“Just a little,” admitted Echo.

Danny groaned. “How did Mom and Dad re- Oh, my gosh. Mom and Dad. I told them. I told them.”

“Yes, but they didn't reject you,” said Echo, putting a hand on Danny's shoulder, “and even if they did, we've got that contract, and you are safe here.”

Danny's heart rate, which had been spiking, dropped so fast that Danny had to blink spots out of his eyes. “How're you doing that?” mumbled Danny, raising a hand to his head.

“I think that it's a feedback, issue,” said Fractal. “We all have the same ectosignature, after all: yours.
Good morning, Danny.”

“Hi, Fractal,” said Danny, breathing through his nose, and trying to stay awake. “Either of you care to tell me what happened last night after you drugged me?”

“Sure,” said Fractal, “but we should probably get Mirage in to tell you about the stuff that he did, and introduce you.”

“Actually,” said Danny, “I think that I might remember what he did. Something with Sam, Valerie, and Paulina. How did he keep them from tearing each other to pieces? And a card game? Sam won?”

Fractal's eyebrows went up. “You remember all that?”

“Well, I'm just guessing about Sam winning, but I don't think that she'd be that happy if she'd lost, if that makes sense.”

“But you don't remember what Mirror and I did?”

“No, not really.”

“How about Shade and Umbra?”

“Um. Are those the other new ones?”

“Yeah.”

“No, no idea.”

“Interesting,” said Fractal. Then he shrugged. “Nothing terribly important happened. We just walked your parents back, and then went to go help Shade in the workshop.” He sighed. “I really wish that we could show you and Tucker the workshop. I think you'd like it.”

“Not worth the risk, even if my parents behave, we have the rest of the class to worry about,” said Danny.

“Still,” complained Fractal.

“I'm sure I'll come back at some point,” said Danny, finally managing to find a reasonably similar pair of socks. “Assuming that I don't, you know, manage to die before then.”

“You should just stay,” said Echo, invading Danny's personal space.

“I can't, I promised to bring them back to Amity,” said Danny, edging away.

“You didn't say when,” said Echo, “and you could get Jack and Madeline to release you from the oath.”

“Echo...” said Danny, warning in his tone. He didn't want to hear this. He didn't want to be tempted to stay, safe, in his lair, in his little bubble world. He was of course. He just didn't want to be. He wanted to be stronger than that.

(He didn't want to be tempted to trick away the freedom of others. He knew what being a prisoner felt like. He knew what being a slave felt like. To do that to others was unacceptable.)

Echo sighed, and took a deliberate step back, hands raised in a human gesture of surrender.
“Okay,” said Danny, “is anyone else up?”

“Mr Lancer is,” said Echo. “I don't think that he slept well.”

“Maybe I should go talk to him,” said Danny. “I haven't really had a chance to, since he figured me out. Ugh. This is so weird. Mr Lancer knows, and now my parents... And what was up with Valerie last night? Jeez, next thing you know, it's going to be the whole class.”

“Hopefully not,” said Fractal. “I doubt that they, collectively, could keep a secret to save their own lives, much less yours.”

“Yeah,” said Echo, sounding somewhat ill. Could shadows even get ill?

“Can you guys get sick?” asked Danny, seizing on the topic to distract himself.

The shadows did not appear to be surprised by the question. “We certainly felt sick right after you took that ectoplasm,” said Fractal. “Other than that...” he shrugged.

“Right. I'll add that to the list of things I'm going to have to ask Clockwork or Frostbite. I'm going to go talk to Mr Lancer. You two should probably stay out of sight.”

The population of Harmony consisted of, in no particular order, three hundred and twenty-six living humans, forty-eight of whom were under the age of eighteen, thirty-four humanoid(-ish) ghosts, six living dogs, an excitable ghost puppy that was, according to his tag, named 'Cujo,' twenty-seven living cats, thirteen dead cats, an elderly pony, a possessed teddy bear, a parrot named Leon who, most of the other inhabitants agreed, had achieved sapience, ten ghosts who self-identified as 'blobs,' and an unclear, but large, number of will-o'-the-wisps.

Anthony Trent hadn't the slightest idea how he had wound up (nominally) in charge of such an eclectic population. He supposed that it had something to do with his status as (former) copilot of the plane that had been the source of the majority of the humans in Harmony, although he would have thought that the dubious distinction would have made him a less likely choice. Perhaps it was because he was the only one who was passably fluent in Esperanto, in addition to his native French and job-required English. The fact that such a young language, relatively speaking, was the lingua franca of the Spirit World was odd, but, he supposed, no odder than the almost complete lack of doors in this place, or the way that blue, shape-shifting man with a clock (of all things!) embedded in his chest had directed them here, or, even, the strange, nude boy he had seen on the roof of the Door Building.

Which was, as it turned out, what Anthony had called this town hall meeting for.

It was, perhaps, a measure of how peaceful it was here, of how well the town lived up to it's name, that such an event was worth holding a meeting over.

When a town meeting was called, almost everyone showed up, except for those charged with watching the door, or the very elderly and their caretakers. The structures that the people of Harmony had commandeered for their own purposes had clearly been intended for a much larger population. A city, rather than a village. They met in the Town Hall, a rectangular red brick building topped with a cupola, which also served as an entrance to whatever lay beyond Harmony.
Some young men and women had once mounted an expedition to the deeps below Town Hall, braving the spiraling staircase. They had discovered a place that was, if possible, even more confusing and contradictory than the green wastes that they had passed through before. It was all stone staircases and almost-Grecian carvings, all covered in glowing, flowering vines, all going every-which way, some of which formed either very convincing optical illusions, or simply defied the confining logic of three-dimensional space.

The place beneath did not seem to be dangerous, however, and when the expedition got lost, the flowering vines had led them back by closing all flowers except those on the correct path, so the people of Harmony continued to use the Town Hall for their meetings.

(This also had the effect, acknowledged by only a few, of giving them an escape route if ever one of the more dangerous monsters from Outside got in.)

Anthony called the meeting to order, and the conversations died off. The younger children, some few of whom had been born in Harmony, took longer to quiet down, but they did eventually, smiling up at the mayor with oddly luminous eyes. He smiled back. The very youngest children, the 'native Harmonians,' were a precocious, well-behaved, bunch, for all that the eldest of them was only three. Their elders, even the teenagers, also seemed, to Anthony, to be different than children he had met before coming to Harmony. Perhaps that was only an effect of the small, tightly-knit, population, but at moments like these, when their eyes glittered and shone with shades of green and amber, he had to wonder. How much did this place effect them? Were they becoming more like ghosts?

(Unbidden: Were they dying, even now? Still, Anthony found it difficult to be alarmed.)

Anthony opened his mouth to explain what had happened, what he, and a few others, had seen, and to ask other witnesses to come forward, when there was a knocking sound.

The silence in the hall became profound as everyone turned to find the sound. No one really knocked anymore, especially not to come into a public place, such as this one. There were no doors, except for the Door. Even when people had tried to build doors, such things would be destroyed, usually when no one was watching, but sometimes even when they were. Something about this place didn't like doors, or even windows.

(It was a good thing that the weather here was so temperate.)

Instead of doors, curtains were used for privacy. Instead of knocking, people clapped, or whistled, or simply shouted. So knocking, actually knocking, was very unusual.

A boy, aged about twelve or thirteen, by Anthony's estimation, stood by the arched doorway of the large room, knuckles of one hand resting lightly on the lintel. His skin was deathly pale, his hair was pitch black, and his eyes were a celestial blue.

“Hello,” said the boy.
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Uh, there's a very oblique reference to pedophilia in this chapter, nothing explicit, nothing that you wouldn't hear on the news, an episode of Law and Order, or even one of those safety videos, but I don't want it to be a surprise, and I thought that I should mention it as a courtesy. I've marked where it begins with an asterisk, and where you can safely pick up again with another asterisk. I'm probably just being paranoid, especially considering some of the stuff I've seen in the phandom, but I don't want to get in trouble.

Chapter 57: Taxonomies

"Who are you?" asked Anthony, a little cautious. Harmony did not 'approve' of fights, or at least something always stopped ones started in earnest, but, whatever it was, it could not always stop an attack before damage was done. As the people of Harmony had learned in the past.

(Anthony always wondered how it knew the difference between real fights, and things like practice rounds in Takahashi-Sensei's aikido class. So did a lot of other people. He suspected that the ghosts knew, but they never said anything.)

"My name is Mirror," said the boy in a clear, carrying voice. He took a few steps forward, and tilted his head. "I guess you could say that I'm a representative of your landlord. Don't panic," he added after a moment's thought, "I'm not here to collect rent or anything like that."

"Landlord?" asked someone in the back (Anthony thought that it might be Frida 'I'm from Germany' Weber, but it was hard to tell).

"The ghost to whom this lair belongs," clarified Mirror. At the resulting gasp, he blinked, and actually took a step back. "No one told you?" he asked. "But..." His eyes, like Anthony's, flicked over the crowd, pausing at the ghosts. He shook his head. "I suppose it doesn't matter. That's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here?" asked Anthony.

The boy made a face. "There's something nasty outside the Door," he said, waving his hand behind him. "Or several somethings. Or someones. We aren't sure. I've come to warn you, and to tell you that if you wish to evacuate, I can guide you through what you call the Deeps. Oh, and, once this is all done, I will bring you back up here, if that's what you want."

Predictably, there was chaos.
"Mr Lancer?" asked Danny, quietly, still a ways behind the man. He didn't want to startle his teacher into the water.

Still, Mr Lancer jumped. "Daniel!" he exclaimed. "I didn't see you," he said, a note of apology in his voice.

"That's okay," said Danny. "I know I can be hard to notice, sometimes. I think it's a ghost thing." He walked forward to stand next to Mr Lancer, staring into the pool. "I talked to my parents last night," he said. "I told them about you know. I think that they took it okay." Danny paused, watching Mr Lancer's reflection in the water.

The older man sagged with relief. "That's wonderful, Daniel," he said. Then, as if worried that he had been too quick to respond, "My offer still stands, though. If you need anything, I will do my best to help."

The corners of Danny's mouth twitched upwards. "Thank you," said Danny. "That means a lot to me. I guess I'm a little worried that they aren't taking it as well as they seem to be, but... I don't think that you can do anything about that. Can you?"

"I- Believe it or not, there are signs for that kind of thing." Danny raised an eyebrow, but Mr Lancer shook his head. "Not for your situation, exactly, but there are similar circumstances that I've dealt with as a teacher."

"Like what?" asked Danny, curious. This wasn't the response that he had expected.

"Like a student picking a career path their parents don't approve of, or," Mr Lancer hesitated almost imperceptibly, "coming out of the closet. I can keep an eye out."

"'Coming out o- ' Oh. I get it. Okay. Yeah. I guess I can see that. Thank you."

"It's my job as a teacher," said Mr Lancer. "I think that this goes beyond the call of duty, though," said Danny. He bit his lip. "I kind of dropped a lot on you, the other day, and then just sort of, I don't know, left you. I'm sorry."

"I won't say that I wasn't confused," admitted Mr Lancer, "or that I'm not still confused, but that's hardly your fault, Daniel. You've been working hard to get us all out of this mess."

"I guess," said Danny. "But I just wanted to say that if you had any questions, I can try to answer them. And don't feel like it's an imposition. It'll be good practice."

"Practice?"

"I'm going to have to teach everyone enough ghost etiquette before we leave to not get killed."

"Is that something that could happen?" asked Mr Lancer, alarmed.

"Maybe," said Danny. "A lot of ghosts here in the Realms aren't used to dealing with humans. They might hurt you without really meaning to. You learn pretty fast not to do things that'll get you attacked. New ghosts are generally more durable than humans, so what might be considered a chastising blow for an inexperienced ghost could seriously hurt a human. Then, some social behaviors are... ingrained. Or, um, burnt-in, might be a better way to say it, or pre-programmed. Instinctual, like they're in the ectoplasm, or, um, like, they arise from how ectoplasm is ordered, or how ghosts work. I don't know. I've read about it, but it's a lot to keep straight. Like, um, ugh. The only examples I can think of right now are embarrassing ones."
"You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to," said Mr Lancer. "You don't owe me anything."

"Yeah, but... I feel like I kind of do, after all the trouble I've given you, and this can be, I don't know, a practice, for when I have to tell Mom and Dad. So much of this... I've never really had to explain it all at once. Sam and Tucker have been with me the whole time, and Jazz, she guessed a lot of it, and did so much of her own research... I don't know how to say everything without freaking them out. Some of it- Some of it sounds bad. And I have to figure out how to do the etiquette thing, too. So if you don't mind being the practice round..."

"Not at all," said Mr Lancer, forcing a smile onto his face.

"Okay, then. Um. Examples, uh. Child ghosts. Child ghosts will act differently around adult ghost that they like, trust, and respect... Or, no, that's not quite the right way to say that. Adult ghosts that they feel they can rely on?" He bit his lip, suddenly uncertain.

"Perhaps you mean, ghosts that they look up to as parental figures?" asked Mr Lancer, helpfully.

Danny nodded. "Yeah, I think that's probably the best way to say that, or... They'll act different, really docile around adult ghosts that they look to as... potential protectors. Or maybe 'pliable' is the right word? 'Silly'?" Danny shook his head to clear it. "Anyway, they act just bizarrely well-behaved. I guess."

"Why?" asked Mr Lancer.

"Um," said Danny, thinking. "It's instinctual, but if you want the logic behind it... If you're a child ghost, odds are, you're going to be a child for a good long time, maybe even forever, so you want to have a good relationship with the people who are going to be with you, who are going to protect you, and provide for you. You want to be liked. In the Ghost Zone, you don't really have to worry about food as much as on Earth, but there are other things, too. Protection. Affection. Care. Knowledge. Healing. Even if you're Deathless, and are going to grow up eventually, you're still going to be dealing with your parents for essentially forever, unless you go off somewhere specifically to get away from them or something." Danny shrugged. "A surprisingly large amount of ghost social stuff is centered around not forgetting what's going on. Sorry, I'm getting off-track." He sighed. "Then, with Dead children... Well, if a child dies, that usually means that something, somewhere, has gone badly wrong. Sometimes... Just... Well, you know. Then you have an interest in keeping that from happening again. Does that make sense as an example?"

"I think so," said Mr Lancer, slowly, "Although, I'm not sure why you thought that it was embarrassing."

Danny groaned. "Mr Lancer, I'm a child ghost."

Mr Lancer blinked. "You- But, you-"

Danny waited.

"But you protect the town!" said Mr Lancer finally. "You're sixteen, and you have parents!" Mr Lancer winced a little at the last objection.

Danny made a face, but before Mr Lancer could apologize and make everything more painful, he started talking. "I get where you're coming from," he said, "and I'm not going to lie to you, I am dangerous, even by ghost standards, but, well," he made another face, "first off, instincts, even human instincts, especially human instincts, aren't always very logical. It doesn't matter that I can beat up ninety-nine percent of all ghosts. Beyond that, just like back in the Material World, you have
things, predators, that prey specifically on children, and child ghosts, and there are, um, environmental hazards that adult ghosts can deal with easily that child ghosts can't deal with at all. Except for avoiding them altogether, but you can't always do that. Then, ghosts measure childhood differently than humans do. Actual, total age doesn't really matter much when you have a ten-year-old from Ancient Rome, and a ten-year-old from the eighteen hundreds and they act about the same. I've met someone who died when they were in their twenties, and they're still considered a child. Although," Danny added, thoughtfully, "I have noticed that the tendency to act silly does decrease with greater primal age... Oh, um, primal age being the age you're supposed to look. Usually the age you died at, if you're Dead. I think that the standard, though, for telling whether or not you're a child, is if you can stop absorbing ambient ectoplasm at will, which child ghosts can't do. I can't do that, and... And if you're going to ask about aging out, I don't know if you've noticed or not, but I haven't actually grown at all since the Accident, so I don't know if that's ever going to happen. Yeah," finished Danny, awkwardly, choosing not to address the matter of his parents. He sighed, heavily, sitting down at the edge of the water.

*"Predators?" asked Mr Lancer into the following silence, clearly trying to pick the least sensitive topic out of Danny's monologue, but somehow finding one of the more sensitive ones.

"Yeah," said Danny, hiding his discomfort with the subject for Mr Lancer's sake. "They're rare, but dangerous, and there would probably be a lot more children in the Realms if not for them. They don't go after large groups, though, so as long as no one goes off on their own."

"Why don't they go after large groups?"

"For some of them, it's because their abilities only work on one person at a time, but for others it's because it's hard for adults to perceive them, unless a child, or someone else who already sees them points them out, so if they go after a large group, they'll get pointed out, and then, if there are any adult ghosts in the group, they'll be destroyed. Because literally no one likes them. There's a destroy-on-sight policy."

"That sounds like an excellent policy, all things considered, but... Why?"

"Because a lot of them don't usually kill their prey. What they do is almost always covered under the Taboo against Acts of Rapine, and, well, I guess it's like in prison."

"What?" asked Mr Lancer, surprised.

"You hear on the news, and stuff," said Danny, "that some people, when they go to prison, they have to be put in solitary, so the other prisoners don't kill them. Not all crimes are equal."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you? A lot of them come from there, apparently. A human obsession becoming a ghostly one." Danny shuddered, drawing his knees up to his chest. "Can we talk about something else now? I don't think that this is really what I want to be explaining to the class."

*"Ah. Right. Perhaps you could just say that ghosts take politeness very seriously, and that they might be punished for impoliteness?"

"I guess that would work."

A few seconds passed before Mr Lancer spoke again. "You used the term 'Deathless' earlier. I believe you mentioned it yesterday, too, but there were so many other things going on, that I think it just slipped on by. Could you explain what it means?"
"Um. Sure. It's, um. In general, there are three kind of broad categories of ghosts. There are the Neverborn," he started counting on his fingers, "the Deathless, and the Dead." He waved three fingers at Mr Lancer. "The Neverborn are ghosts who formed more or less on their own out of raw ectoplasm and the energies of the Zone, or emotional energy, or imagination, or whatever. It's hard to tell when they started existing. Typically, both the weakest ghosts, like blobs, and the strongest ghosts, like the ones who are basically personifications of ideas and natural laws, are Neverborn. Then there are the Deathless, who are ghosts that are born ghosts. That is, their parents are ghosts. Which, yeah, I know, it sounds weird, but it happens. These little guys," he indicated a wisp who had floated near, "a lot of them are Deathless. Most of them are Neverborn, but a lot of them are Deathless. I think. We still have some communication problems when it comes to, um, more complicated concepts. The whole... process is a lot, a lot, different than with humans, and it's my understanding that it's difficult, but it happens. Then the Dead are, um. People or animals who have died. Pretty straightforward there. I'm Dead. Most of the ghosts you see in Amity Park are Dead."

"Daniel," said Mr Lancer, concern clear in his voice, "you aren't dead."

Danny looked up at Mr Lancer. This was the part that he knew would be the hardest for the teacher to accept. It had taken Jazz time, and, in during that time, she had come up with a dozen alternate theories. Sam had freaked out massively when Danny had first come out of the portal, and Danny was sure that she was still carrying the knowledge around like a burden, although he wasn't sure why. Tucker brought it up in jokes, like Danny, but he knew what it meant. At least, he knew as much as any human could. It had taken Danny himself a while to come to terms with the fact that he had died himself, which as it turned out, wasn't all that unusual among the Dead.

(He wasn't sure quite when it had happened, or how, but, eventually, he stopped saying that he had ghost powers, and started saying that he was half-ghost.)

"If it helps, I'm as much alive as I am dead. But I am Dead. I died. I react to things in the same way the Dead do."

Mr Lancer took a deep breath, and Danny could tell that he was tempted to argue. But he contained himself. "I doubt you want to explain that to the class, either."

"Not particularly. I mean, the different kinds of ghosts, sure, but the 'I'm Dead' part, not so much."

"Hm," said Mr Lancer, staring blankly at the plants on the other side of the pool. A wisp floated mischievously through his field of view, pulling loops. "Three kinds of ghost..."

"In general, if you're talking about how they came to exist, yeah. I mean, there are other categorizations, like shadows, spawn, doppelgangers, children-by-theft, certain kinds of liminals, and that's not even getting into categories that judge based on appearance, or intelligence, or obsession, or powers, but those are the easiest ones to understand. The easiest for me to explain, anyway."

"You've had to learn a lot about this, haven't you?"

"Yeah," agreed Danny.

"I can't have been easy."

"I've had help," said Danny. "Not with everything, but with most things. But, it has been kind of like going to school twice, but one of them will kill you if you fail." Danny blinked, and raised a hand. "That's not supposed to be an excuse about my grades, by the way. Just, you know, an observation. Like, sometimes I don't turn in homework because of poor time management, or because I want to play video games or goof off with Sam and Tucker, not because I'm fighting ghosts, or doing
something ghost-related. I mean, it usually *is* ghosts, but... Yeah."

"You shouldn't be penalized for trying to have a life, Daniel," said Mr Lancer. The expression on his face was one familiar to Danny. He saw it on Sam and Tucker all the time. "There are often allowances made for students who have... circumstances outside their control. Clearly, I can't say that I've ever seen a situation like yours, and, honestly, I don't think that I will be able to get the rest of the staff to give you the help you deserve, and you *do* deserve help, Daniel, far more than I could ever give you, but I will give you as much help as I can. I promise you that. At the very least," he said putting on an expression of restrained distaste, "I can make the same allowances for you that I am forced to make for members of our sports teams."

"Ha!" exclaimed Danny. Mr Lancer looked at him oddly. "Oh, um. It's just that I've always thought that something fishy was going on there. With the jocks, I mean."

Mr Lancer sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid so. I hate to make excuses for such behavior, but what with all the repairs Amity Park is forced to make, and the public safety measures, the school wouldn't have enough money to run if not for sports-obsessed private donors."

"Sorry," said Danny, hugging his knees.

"What? Why are-? Oh. Daniel, it's hardly your fault. Blaming you for that mess is the farthest thing from my mind. I'm sure things would be much worse without you. You've saved my life more than once."

"I'm also the one that locked you in the janitor's closet that one time."

"Y-You mean the time I was trapped in the closet over the weekend? That was you?"

"Yeah," said Danny, voice muffled from speaking into his knees. He was looking up at Mr Lancer, a little afraid of what his reaction might be. It was possible that Danny should have waited to tell him *that*, or that he should have given the incident some more context, but he wanted to give his teacher the chance to back out of his promise before he got his hopes up.

"Wh-" started Mr Lancer. He blinked, and sat down abruptly. "You were in detention for skipping class," he said, after a moment. "Skipping class," he repeated, "to go to Circus Gothica."

"Mhm," said Danny.

"Circus Gothica," said Mr Lancer, brow furrowed, "the evil circus. The circus that was evil because the owner had a... something that could control ghosts. Miss Manson said that Phantom didn't even remember what had happened."

"It was a staff," said Danny. "But, yeah. My memory of that week is... patchy." Mr Lancer gave him a look. "Okay, it isn't *quite* a giant hole. I *do* remember being in that detention, or, at least, showing up for it, but, after that, I think my next clear memory was flying with Sam." He paused. "I had just caught her. She'd fallen off the train." He paused again. "While it was going over that bridge. You know, the long one that the county is always renaming."

Mr Lancer stared at him. "I think that I'll have to ask the three of you to tell me the rest of that story at some point. Not now, though. I suspect that your classmates will be waking up soon."

"Yeah," said Danny. "I can hear some of them moving around." He stood up. "I should go, make sure that everyone has breakfast."

"Daniel," said Mr Lancer softly. Danny turned. "I'm not going to blame you for something you had
no control over and don't even remember."

Danny smiled. "Thanks."
Chapter 58

Vlad was no longer angry, but he was annoyed. He had been searching the Ghost Zone for hours and hours, and he had yet to uncover any sign of Daniel. Where could the child be? Vlad knew that whatever new idiocy Jack had come up with had torn open a temporary portal, and that such portals could lead anywhere, usually they followed some logic. Usually a portal opened in Amity Park would appear in Amity Park equivalent space in the Ghost Zone, or at least somewhere nearby. Vlad hadn't had nearly enough time to explore every such location, the Ghost Zone folded in strange ways, even discounting all the doors, but he'd explored a great many of them, starting with those closest to the school. He had set the vultures to the task. He had recruited Skulker. He'd even scoured Sidney Poindexter's lair, for all the good it had done him.

At this rate, he'd start running into GIW goons.

To top it all off, Vlad was beginning to suspect that he was being followed. He kept seeing figures out of the corners of his eyes. The same figures. Four of them. Three with wings, the other with too many arms.

Now, Vlad wasn't what anyone would call a good person. Even he wouldn't call himself a good person. He wouldn't label himself as evil, of course. As he had told Daniel long ago, all he ever wanted was love. Perhaps he had done a great many... distasteful things in his life time, but he had always been careful to stay on the correct side of ghost law.

Even so, he had made an effort to learn who he might have to fight against, if someone took exception to one of his less laudable acts.

He was certain that he would win, but this wasn't a fight he wanted to waste time or effort on.

No matter. He knew a shortcut. He could loose them. He knifed right, behind a small floating island, and threw open the door he found there. It lead not to a lair, but to a different part of the Zone. He dropped to his left, changing his perception of 'down' with the ease of years of practice. This was often faster than simply flying, took no energy, and left little to no trail to follow.

He touched down on a larger island, and vanished into the feathery trees that adorned it. There was another door here, and he went through. This door lead into a set of ruins, the last remains of a once-great realm. Vlad turned human to avoid the traps that grew like weeds in such places, and padded through the halls. He doubted that, even if the four ghosts tracked him through the doors, they would be able to follow him through the ruins.

Pleased with himself, Vlad strolled straight through the walls. There was, of course, still the problem of why they were searching for him, but Vlad was more than prepared to put that problem to the side while he searched for Daniel, and he needed the victory.

He emerged from the last wall into the green-white light cast by the Ghost Zone sky. His eyes adjusted rapidly, to reveal the presence of a winged figure.

She smiled toothily at Vlad, her braids swinging over the shoulder pads of her riot gear. "You didn't really think that'd work, did ya?"
"Who are you and what do you want?" demanded Vlad, perched on a floating bit of rock, nursing what was probably a broken arm.

"For serious?" asked the girl with the ponytail, and the red dress. "I thought you were s'posed to be, like, smart or something."

Vlad growled, low and deep in his throat. How dare these three who chose, for some ineluctable reason to emulate air-headed valley girls, who could hardly form a coherent sentence, insult him? So what if they had managed to beat him? If he had been in ghost form to start with, they would never have won!

"Hey, calm down there, kiddo," said the most normally dressed of the three, hands on her hips. "We aren't after you. We just wan' you to answer some questions, appear in court, that kinda thing. Give us some info, give Addy's cuz some info, y'know?"

"Assume I do not. Enlighten me," said Vlad, his voice cold.

"Ancients, you sound like my aunt, and not the fun one," complained the four-armed ghost, using her free hand to sweep back her starry hair.

"Which is kinda rich of you, seein' as you're the one who started the fight," said the ghost who wore body armor.

"I did no such-"

"Oh-kay," said the four-armed ghost, bringing the incipient fight to a screeching halt. "Let's do introductions, okay? Let's start with that, since it's, you know, the least common denominator as far as politeness goes. Okay?" She got nods from her compatriots, and a glare from Vlad. She snorted. "Well, we all already know who you are, Vlad Masters-Plasmius, formerly Vladimir Vasiliovitch Pavlov. Yeah, Libra has a file on you three inches thick. You do know what Libra is, right?"

"Yes," said Vlad, shortly, taken aback by how the girl had rattled off his full name.

"Cool. So, I'm Adrestia the Inescapable," she said, making, to Vlad's extreme consternation, 'finger guns' at him, "bounty hunter. This is my crew, my squad, my fam away from fam. The one in red is Tisiphone."

"But you might know me better as Tisiphone," said the indicated girl, baring her teeth.

"Then that's Alex in the riot gear."

"That's Alecto to you, though," said Alecto, crossing her arms.

"And, last, certainly not least, and most patient of the three is Meg."

"Hey," complained Tisiphone, "I can be patient. D'you know how long it take to put these braids in? Meg's got just the one!"

"Tess, your hair braids itself."
"That's not the point!"

"Isn't it, though?"

"Don't go sneaking away on us, Plasmius," said the last girl, Meg. Curses, Vlad had thought that all four of them had gotten absorbed in their internal dispute, but it made sense that 'Meg' would be the one to notice him, if she was who he thought she was. Megaera, the jealous one. The envious and jealous often had sharp eyes. He was one who would know.

"Anyway," said Adrestia, "to business. Meg, write this down. You know Phantom, right?"

"Yes," admitted Vlad. There really wasn't a point denying it. He had been looking for Daniel all day, and any of the ghosts he had encountered could confirm it.

"And you know Jack and Madeline Fenton?"

"Yes," said Vlad again. Where was this going? Could Daniel be in Libra custody? He almost smacked himself. Of course Jack's bumbling and the idiocy that Daniel's class clung to like a spar in a shipwreck had caused an incident. They probably had asked a ghost what they had died of, or something equally moronic. Daniel was probably finally reaching out to Vlad as the only person who could extract him and Maddie from this mess!

"Have you ever known Jack or Madeline Fenton to harm or attempt to harm Phantom physically or emotionally?" Adrestia sounded like she was reciting the question from memory.

Vlad blinked. He opened his mouth to categorically deny any such an allegation, then snapped it closed again when he realized that, not only could he not do so, but that he had, on occasion, instigated incidents that had resulted in exactly that. His eyes narrowed. "What is this about?"

"You've been mentioned by others in connection to Phantom several times," explained Adrestia. "We heard that you offered to adopt him, but were rejected because of obsession incompatibility."

"There's nothing incompatible about our obsessions!" objected Vlad. "The child is simply too loyal to that oaf he calls a father. He doesn't understand that the man destroys everything and everyone he touches." Vlad would have said more on his least favorite subject, but he could recognize an evasion when he saw one. "But that doesn't explain why you four are running around asking about Phantom."

Adrestia regarded him coolly, but then nodded. "Libra's thinking about bringing a case against Jack and Madeline Fenton," she answered.

"What- Against humans?" Then he groaned. "What did they make?"

"According to one witness, a weapon that forces the Dead to relive what made them that way. Normally we wouldn't go after humans for murder, it really isn't any of our business. The problem is who they used it on."

Vlad felt his blood drain from his already-pale face. "No... They wouldn't have."

"That's what we're trying to establish. It'd be a lot easier if we could figure out where the portal Phantom opened came out, and we could interview the primaries, but, hey, we've got to work with what we've got. Which is you right now. So, if you could help us out here, and answer our questions, it'd be appreciated."

Vlad sighed. "Could you repeat the last one?"
"We're coming up on the last questions now, just bear with me here, okay?" said Adrestia. "You keeping up, Meg?"

"Heck, yeah. Gosh, this's so much easier with shorthand."

"Since when do you know shorthand?"

"Since I took that correspondence course, duh."

"That had better be legible at the end of all this, Meg. Anyway," she said, bringing her attention back to Vlad. "Do you know if Phantom has been formally claimed, or if any adult ghost has formally declared themselves to be responsible for him? In other terms, do you know if any ghost has been appointed, or has appointed themselves, his guardian? If so, whom?"

"To the best of my knowledge, he doesn't have a guardian, beyond his biological parents," said Vlad, wearily. "He is friendly with the Far Frozeners, however, and I have frequently met him near the Time Locked Lands, so perhaps he has allies there whom I am not familiar with."

"Okay. Does Phantom have any other adoptive, returned, or steadfast family, any family-by-theft, any oath-siblings, or any other bonds of fraidship that have not yet been mentioned?"

It took Vlad a moment to unravel the terms. He so rarely had the opportunity to use them. "Other than Jasmine-" he paused. "He does have a cousin-by-theft."

"Ah. We hadn't heard that yet. Details?"

"Her name is Danielle," said Vlad, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "The last time I saw her, she was almost identical to Daniel."

"Do you know where we can find her?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"He's offered sanctuary to a few ghosts in Amity Park, but I doubt that any of that amounts to fraidship, or even vassalage."

"Hm," said Adrestia. "You guys have any questions?" she asked the three winged girls.

"Nah, I think you've got everythin','" said one of the girls, waving a lazy hand.

"Great. One last thing. Would you be willing to appear as a witness in court? You would, of course, be allowed an advocate in the preliminary committee as a major witness, and you may pull out at any time before the conclusion of the preliminary committee."

Vlad raised an eyebrow, but he was not surprised. It was obvious that he would be a star witness, considering that he knew both the victim and the suspects. This would be an excellent opportunity to
get rid of Jack for good! Now, if he could only arrange for Maddie to emerge unharmed... Perhaps he could even argue for Daniel to be released into his custody... "I will have to consult with my advocate before I make any guarantees."

"Make sure to go to the Hall of Justice as soon as you make up your mind, but, sure," said Adrestia. "Anything you want to add before we go?"

"Actually, yes," said Vlad, surprising even himself. He cleared his throat. "I have reason to believe that members of the Group for Inter-dimensional Warfare are planning an expedition with the stated purpose of retrieving Daniel and his classmates. I doubt, however, that that is their only goal, and even if it is, well, I am sure you are aware of their reputation."

Adrestia's lips moved silently. Then, "The Guys in White? Yeah, we know about those maniacs. We'll make sure that word gets out. Alex, fix his arm before we go, will you?"

The ghost scoffed, but zoomed up to Vlad and prodded his broken arm before zooming away again, moving faster than he could react in human form.

"Latter, man," said Adrestia, giving him a negligent wave before zooming off herself.

"Of all the times for the eyeballs to hold a meeting," groaned Adrestia.

"You should show them more respect, Adrestia," said Astraea, disapprovingly. They were standing in one of the many private conference rooms in the Hall of Justice.

"I show them plenty of respect," said Adrestia, "I just don't feel any. They're massive jerks, and I could take any one of them."

"Right. Just like Plasmius thought he could evade the three of you. Issitoq is as old as time, and his inner circle is almost as old as he is. Not to mention that there are a lot of them."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it, I've got it, but we've got the other bureaucratic nightmare to deal with. You're gonna tell your mom, but then what? Lady Themis is at the thing, and, many things we are, we aren't a police force."

"We do have resources, though. The Eumenides aren't your only crew, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't know about having them out and about near human children. Some of them are kind of, er, wild, if you know what I mean."

"I do, but we may not have a choice. Let me talk to Mother, and then we can figure out what to do. If nothing else, we can go to Walker."

"Gross."

"I know. But, hopefully, we can get into contact with the Reeves. We can certainly gather our cousins."

"What about the Egyptians?"
Astraea shook her head. "Other than the dynasts, the wannabe dynasts, and the loyalists, who are, well, you know, always fighting with one another and themselves, Ma'at is the only central authority."

Adrestia sighed through her nose. "It's almost enough to make you wish that we were human, huh? At least they can cooperate on short notice."

"Don't even joke about that. I'm pretty sure that's a myth, anyway."

"Okay," said Fractal, smiling at the class, "are you ready for some walking today?"

The students stared sullenly up at the shadow. Many of them had not appreciated the way Mirage had chosen to wake them, which had involved, in several cases, ice cubes. Danny's lips twitched. He shouldn't have been so amused, the whole thing had been massively inappropriate, considering the circumstances, and yet he was.

"Great," said Fractal. "Now, since you're going to be out in the wide open Zone in a few days, you all should learn how to interact with ghosts without insulting anyone. Otherwise, your chances of getting back to Amity Park unharmed are going to drop significantly. Not," he said, pointing warningly at Jack and Maddie, "because ghosts are trigger-happy, or easily offended, or violent, but because you get a bunch of ghosts from a bunch of different eras, and even in some modern human cultures some insults warrant physical responses, and most ghosts aren't used to dealing with people as fragile as humans. Therefore, Danny, Jazz, Sam and Tucker-

"Why am I always last on these lists?" complained Tucker, good-naturedly.

"I don't know about anyone else, but for me, it's because your name is last alphabetically. Anyway, those four are going to be telling you about how not to get yourself into trouble."

"Why not you?" asked Mikey.

Fractal blinked. "I thought that went without saying. Of course I'll be helping them. Of course, I'm not human at all, and what's obvious to me may not be obvious to you. These four, on the other hand, they've been on the learning side of all of this."

"It would have been nice to get some warning, though," said Sam, grinning sardonically.

Fractal pushed up his glasses, and shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry. It isn't like we've had a lot of time to plan this. This is only the second night you've been here."

"Just giving you a hard time," said Sam. "No worries."

"She does that," said Tucker.

"Wait a sec," said Dash. "You're gonna make us listen to the nerds?"

"Um. Yes?" said Fractal tapping the tips of his fingers together.

"Hasn't Jazz tutored you before?" asked Danny.
"Shut up. I wasn't talking about Jazz."

Tiffanie huffed, and looked away from Dash.

"Babe," he protested, "I'm totally over her."

"Right," interrupted Fractal. "If you'd all follow me, please," he said, starting towards the stairs. "We can get started on what definitely not to say. Would you start, Danny?"

"Well, first off, never ask a ghost how or if they died."

"Why?" asked Ricky. "Wouldn't that be the first thing that you'd ask? Like asking them where they come from?"

Danny frowned, about ask what was wrong with Ricky, to even ask that, when Jazz dove in.

"PTSD," said Jazz. "It isn't exactly the same, but you wouldn't interrogate a stranger about the worst moment of their life, would you?"

"I guess that makes sense," said Ricky.

"What do you mean 'if' they died?" asked Mikey.

"Well..."

... then, if someone gives you a name, use that name. Don't go, 'Hey, Zagreus, I heard you went by Bacchus back in Rome! Was that whole thigh thing true?' Because they hate that. Like, they really, really, hate that," said Tucker.

"Did you... Did you do that?" asked Mia.

"I resent that allegation. And no. But the idiot who did it, yikes."

"Nicknames and descriptions are usually alright," said Danny, "if you're close to the person in question or you want a fight. So don't risk it. Titles are fine, if they give them to you. If you want to be safe, just stick with what they explicitly tell you to call them."

"Any questions on that?" asked Jazz.

"So, calling Phantom Invis-o-Bill...?" asked Sarah.

Danny cringed. Ancients, that name was awful. "Bad. Really bad."

"You're all lucky that he's so easy going," said Fractal. "There are many ghosts who would have snapped at you people, given what you've put him through." He frowned. "Not necessarily you, specifically. Just Amity Park in general."

"I would have snapped," said Sam. "I'm not even a ghost."

"I wouldn't say many," started Danny.
"You do see how angry Skulker gets when you call him tin can?"

"Or how about Aragon, Prince of Nothing?"

"Or," Tucker pitched his voice high, "Technus, Master of Long-Winded Introductions!"

"Or anytime Jazz tries to talk to them?"

"Hey, I'm not that bad with names!"

"You called Skulker 'Ghost X' for almost a year, Jazz," said Danny.

"Yeah, because it was hilarious."
Chapter 60

Chapter 60: Encounters

The evacuation to the Deeps was orderly. The people of Harmony had known that there was nothing to fear from them except for getting lost. Now they didn't even have to fear that. What they did have to fear was whatever was waiting outside their door.

So they left.

A few did stay. The young and brave, or the old and immobile. They hid on the outskirts of the town, where the lambent mists of the skies met the cornices of a finely carved, and impossibly tall, gray wall. The young stayed to fight, to buy time. The old stayed so that they wouldn't slow down the others.

There were arguments, of course. Not everyone was happy with the idea of leaving their home at the say-so of a stranger. Still, that wasn't an issue for long. A few minutes of conversation with Mirror was enough to make even the most stubborn citizen feel like they had known him for years. The younger children adored him. Frida 'I'm from Germany' Weber had ambushed him with cookies. His 'brothers' (and Anthony did not know why he put 'brothers' in quotation marks when the three of them were all but identical) Shade and Umbra had managed to ingratiate themselves with the more militant and military-minded members of the city by bringing odd, glowing-green weapons with them.

The ghosts had no issue with him whatsoever. In fact, they seemed to love him. They went out of their way to do whatever he wanted.

Honestly, if Anthony hadn't just spent the last two and a half years of his life living in some kind of pocket universe... But he had, so...

The real problem was simple chaos, an inevitable result of moving so many people so suddenly. Mirror was the only one who knew where they were really going, and he was only one person.

(Oddly, Anthony found himself doubting this proposition.)

So, Anthony wasn't particularly surprised when a pair of children, an eight-year-old and a three-year-old, sisters, went missing. However, he wasn't terribly alarmed, either. The Deeps, despite their uncanny and occasionally impossible dimensions, and apparently perilous drops, did not feel dangerous. At all.

"Mirror," said Anthony, weaving through the crowd to reach the odd maybe-sort-of-ghost at the front. The boy paused and turned, sky-colored eyes wide.

His smile faltered, turning into a reluctant frown. "Is something wrong, Mr Trent?"

"We've misplaced a pair of children."

"Ah. Well, I don't think that they could have gotten into too much trouble. Just give me a minute to find them..." The boy's eyes took on an abstracted, unfocused look, sparks of green swimming through their depths. "Oh, heck." He pointed at Anthony with both fingers. "Stay here."
He disappeared.

Charlotte and Emily Thomas were two of the younger citizens of Harmony. Charlotte, at least, was also one of the more curious citizens. When she saw something interesting, she just had to go check it out. An unfamiliar ghost, one that looked a lot like the boy who was leading the way down into the Deeps, was definitely something interesting.

"Gosh," said the white-haired, green-eyed ghost. "You two are just so cute." He was floating cross-legged and upside-down, dressed like a character from one of Charlotte's story books. "Vous êtes trop mignon."

Charlotte giggled. "Et tu," she said, as little Emily chased after the fluttering corners of the ghost's cloak.

"What's your name?" asked Emily, lisping, once she finally got hold of the piece of fabric.

"My name is Mirage," said the ghost. "You have been taught not to talk to strangers, haven't you?" he asked, kindly.


Emily frowned up at her sister. "Lottie," she complained, her brown eyes briefly flaring gold.

"Aren't I?"

"Hmm," said Charlotte, miming thinking, her own eyes glittering. "No. I don't think so." She bounced, excitedly, on the balls of her feet. "You're the real one, aren't you?" she asked. "In the ground? Like in King Arthur's Quest?"

"The Fisher King!" exclaimed Emily around the handful of fabric in her mouth. Emily hadn't yet grown out of that habit. Their mother was working on it, though.

Mirage tilted his head. "My, you are sharp eyed. I'm not, I'm afraid. I guess that you could say I work for him, though." He smiled, rotated, touched down. "I did not intend to waylay you two fair maidens, however. I think that you've been missed."

"You'd better believe it," said Mirror. His arms were crossed as he glared at Mirage, but his expression softened as he knelt down to speak with the children. "Your mom and dad are looking for you," he said. "They're worried. Mirage will be able to take you on an adventure later. For now, though, won't you stick with mine?"

Charlotte looked down at her feet. She hadn't thought that she had been gone that long. "Okay," she mumbled. Emily just frowned.

"I was with Lottie," she said. "Just like I was told."

"I know, and that was very good, but you have to go back, now. Do you mind if I take a moment to talk to Mirage before I take you back."

"No," said Charlotte. Emily shook her head.
"Okay, good." Mirror stood up, and pulled Mirage a few feet away. "Mir-" he started.

"I can't help it if someone wants to follow a mirage," protested Mirage.

"Oh my gosh. That's why you picked your name? Really?"

"You're just jealous that you didn't think of it first."

"Eh, I'll stick with mine. Anyway, what do you think?"

"About the kids?"

"No, about whether or not we should paint the walls pink."

"They're definitely liminal."

"Both of them?"

"The younger more than the older, but, yeah, and they know it."

"How much?"

"Amity level, but with more access to ectoplasm. They know how to work with it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. But find a different way to check next time, okay?"

. .

"What do you think, Lottie?" asked Byron.

"I think you should paint your room pink when we get back."

The teen snorted. "Yeah, yeah. You're hilarious. But do you agree with me, or with Alice?"

The little girl shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, he said he wasn't, but he could be? He feels right, but so does Mirror. I kind of think Ada's idea is cool."

"Thanks, Lottie," said Ada, "but just being cool doesn't mean that it's right."

Alice, for her part, asked, "You think that there's a third person? Well, I guess that it's better than Byron."

"Hey! My theory is valid."

"Mirror is human. He couldn't do this," she gestured at the lair.

Byron's eyes flared angry gold. "He looks human. That doesn't mean that he is human. Remember, it took us weeks to notice that Inky had died. Besides, he could be like us."

"Occam's razor, Byron. Besides, Inky is an all black cat with green eyes. Humans change a bit more than that."

"I just don't think that they'd lie to us," input Ada, jumping over the last few steps to the landing.
The other thirty-odd children voiced assent, followed by the bell-like chiming of the wisps.

Byron sighed. "I wish you guys could talk," he complained, petting one of them. "I bet that you'd tell us what's really going on."

The wisp purred in response.

Ryan, who was two years older than Charlotte, sighed. "I don't understand why we don't just ask one of the other ghosts."

"Because they just smile and pat our heads and tell us how cute we are. I don't think that they've even told the adults anything yet," said Byron, sulking. "I think that they like being mysterious."

"I don't know, Byron. When was the last time you asked, anyway?" Sonia technically wasn't a kid anymore, she'd celebrated her eighteenth last month, but she was still cool. Her boyfriend, Teddy, was seventeen for another three months, anyway.

Byron mumbled something unintelligible.

"I thought so," said Sonia. "Maybe they'd tell us now. We're closer to them than the adults are." Sparks of red swam in her pale gray eyes as she spoke, beneath her hand, the vine wrapped around the banister began to wilt. Noticing this, she quickly pulled back her hand.

"Control issues?" asked Byron, a little slyly. "I know that's common with older people."

Sonia rolled her eyes. "I don't need that from you, Byron."

"I'm wounded!" gasped the boy, miming being shot.

"Okay, so, the question is," said Alice, "are we going to go off-path and get answers once and for all, or do we wait until we get to our destination?"

The question was greeted with forty pairs of bright eyes, and just as many sharp, white smiles.

"Do you even have to ask?"

... Okay, now," said Danny, "if someone wants to give you something weird, or sketchy, like, alcohol or whatever, or do something weird and sketchy, just tell them that in your culture, it isn't allowed for someone in your position."

"That will work?" asked Valerie. She'd been increasingly skeptical as the day went on.

"Yeah, I mean, there are so many different cultures here, if you don't want to constantly be in a state of total war, you need to be able to make those kinds of allowances. Any ghost old and friendly enough to try and give you something weird is going to be familiar with that necessity. Younger ghosts will have grown up with drinking ages, and, uh, more similar laws. Just be vague about why exactly it is you can't accept or do something, and be polite." He cast an eye over his classmates. Some of them were starting to fade, not to mention his parents, who had been exhausted before they had started.
"I think we should take a break for lunch, now, if no one minds?" said Fractal. "We have a nice little balcony with seating just a flight down, it is a bit off our path, but..."

"Yes! Let's go!" shouted Rebecca. "God, my legs..."

There were other cries of assent. Fractal smiled, and practically danced down the steps.

It took a few minutes for everyone to settle in and break out the sandwiches. The view was marvelous, in Danny's opinion, but many of his classmates chose to sit facing away from it. Danny didn't get it. He would probably never get it. If he could get it, then it wouldn't be in his lair.

The collection gray stairs, colorful flowers, and bright, ghostly lights reminded him of something. There was a pattern, like a fractal, but not one that he was familiar with, not one that he could easily pick out.


(A moment of peace amid screaming, terrifying pain.)

(His heart and mind opening, accepting something more.)

He just couldn't place it.

He leaned on the railing, looking down, enjoying his sandwich, and the feeling of peace. The center was down there, the heart, or core, of his lair. He would like to see it someday. (He would like to be enveloped, completely concealed, completely secure.) It would be lonely down there, though. He got the feeling that the place wouldn't be healthy for his human friends, or even his ghostly ones. (But maybe he was wrong. Maybe he could bring them with him. Keep them safe, and happy, forever and ever and ever.)

He shook himself out of his reverie. That was dangerous. That was really, really dangerous. That was... He didn't know what that was. He pushed himself away from the railing (what had happened to his sandwich?), and looked back, towards the class.

Fractal was staring at him, his entire attention focused on Danny. Danny blinked, and shifted his sight to an archway just a couple of meters behind Fractal. Two familiar faces gazed at him intensely from behind the lintel. The one was Echo, and he suspected the other was Mirage. Or Mirror. He could have been Mirror, but Danny thought not. Or one of the other two who were apparently floating around. Gosh, there were a lot of them now, weren't there?

"Is something wrong?" asked Sam. She had joined him at the railing, along with Tucker and Jazz. All three of them were looking at him with concern.

"I- I don't know," said Danny. "I-" he faltered. "I think that if... If you ever come back here, if I ever bring you back here... I think that you need to make me promise to let you back out first."

"What do you mean?" asked Sam.

Danny shrugged, helpless.

"You think that you would be tempted to stay," said Jazz. "To keep us here?"

"Maybe," said Danny, fidgeting.
"Okay," said Sam. "If it makes you feel better, we'll do it. But we trust you, Danny. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, man, we're with you all the way. It isn't that bad here, anyway. Some connectivity would be nice, but..."

"Tucker," scolded Sam, elbowing the boy.

Danny smiled at their antics, until his sister started patting him on his head. He ducked out, complaining, but still grinning. He glanced at the shadows, who looked satisfied themselves.

Then Danny abruptly was overcome with the feeling that something was terribly out of place. The three shadows' heads snapped left, simultaneously. Fractal mouthed something that looked like a curse. Danny followed their gaze to a set of stairs, covered corridors, and furnished balcony, oriented orthogonally to theirs. Something was about to happen, something that would cause him a lot of trouble, and that he was totally unprepared to deal with.

Something that his shadows knew about.

Which meant that they were keeping secrets from him. Which- hooray- meant psychological problems galore. Why was he like this? That wasn't rhetorical. He really, really wanted to know, but he had a suspicion that he'd need several long sessions with Jazz to even scratch the surface.

In the meantime: Trust issues! Again, hooray! He couldn't even trust himself.

(Out of the corner of his mind, he felt the shadows flinch.)

These thoughts happened in the space of a second. Just barely enough time for a wisp to notice and brush consolingly against the back of his neck. They were getting close to the wisp clans' territorial boundaries, and they were nervous themselves.

Danny let the tiny ghost comfort him for a moment.

Then something like a dozen people emerged onto the other balcony from under one of the covered walkways.

. . .

When the group from Harmony stopped for lunch, the teenagers snuck off. It was practically their job to sneak off, all things considered. A moral imperative. They were teens! Rebellious, curious, intrepid.

(They weren't buying it, either.)

They left the younger children behind. They'd be in enough trouble for sneaking away from the group, they didn't need to be lectured about endangering the little kids. They'd left a couple of their number behind to keep up the whole 'babysitting' ruse. Not that they'd ever, ever say that to their younger friends' faces.

So they went adventuring in search of the Fisher King. Well, not really, the Fisher King, but whoever was in charge here, the person who had made this place. More than that, they were looking
for answers. They wanted to know why they had changed. If they had been changed. If there was a purpose behind it all.

Also, this was fun! Even if they couldn't find anything, well, the views were great, and walking down a path that twisted like this, so that some of them were oriented in the upside-down with relation to the others, wasn't something that they could do every day. Gravity was weird here.

But Byron was sure that they would find something. Alice wasn't as good at tracing as Emily was, the children who were born in Harmony had more of whatever this was than the others, but she was more focused, and she had help.

Then they came out onto a kind of balcony. Wow, that was a view. It gave him more than a little vertigo, even after the twisting corridor, and the staircases that they had already traversed.

Byron's sharp ears caught a gasp from above. The dozen teens tilted their heads up. Wow. He had not expected that.
Chapter 61

Chapter 61: Surprised

Danny was surprised, until he wasn't. Until he realized that this was just like him. This was a thing that he would do. Definitely. He had known for ages and ages that humans sometimes fell into the Zone. He had never seen one, but he supposed that they had to go somewhere. Then he just sort of... wilted a bit. He didn't know how to deal with this. This was one explanation too many, especially when he didn't know the explanation. He couldn't tell his parents about these people, couldn't tell them why they were here. He didn't know those people. He felt like he did. But he didn't.

(He did, however, have a responsibility to them. They were his. They were more people to worry about it.)

One of the kids on the other balcony waved. "Hallo!" she shouted.

There was panic.

Sam was surprised at first, when she saw the people on the other balcony, but, honestly, once she thought about it, this was such a fundamentally Danny situation that she had to laugh, despite how just about everyone else was freaking out. Of course he'd help anyone who showed up at his door! Or, as the case might be, his Door. Sam had thought that the wisps were as far as that particular impulse extended, but, apparently, that was not the case.

Poor Danny. Judging by his expression, all of this was going through his head, too, and he was panicking. There really wasn't any reason to, but Sam supposed that this was just one surprise too many. Or maybe the issue was that his shadows hadn't told him.

That could be it.

Or it could be that this would be hard to explain to his parents.

"It's okay, Danny," she said quietly, knowing that he would hear her despite the cacophony the rest of the class was raising. "We'll figure this out."

Jazz was... Not surprised. Not really. She had been sort of expecting this. Well, not humans, or apparent humans, but someone other than the wisps. Other ghosts. Maybe the newly dead, or people needing sanctuary. Danny was just... hospitable. One of the nicest, most caring people that she had ever met. It was reasonable to assume that his lair would be as well.
Just as predictably, Danny was freaking out. Not as obviously as the rest of his classmates, but still. Most likely, he was worried that their parents were going to take this badly. Danny had been sneaking worried glances at Jack and Maddie all day.

She put a hand on his shoulder. This much stress was not good for him. "Breathe, Danny," she said. "This isn't something that Mom and Dad will be upset about. This is okay."

Tucker wasn't surprised at all. Well, he was surprised that they had actually run into someone other than the wisps, but he wasn't surprised that there was someone in the lair other than the wisps. And themselves, of course, but whatever. Helping people was Danny's thing. Once he saw all those guest rooms, he had known. Not, like, actually known, known, but he had gotten a feeling.

Yeah.

So.

He didn't entirely get why Danny was freaking out about it, though. Those kids up there looked fine, and there wasn't any way that they could get here from there, as far as Tucker could see.

But the thing was, Danny was freaking out about it. So Tucker had to do something. He couldn't exactly do anything about the people on the other balcony, so...

"They look friendly, right?" he said. Danny, staring up at the other balcony nodded imperceptibly.

Danny was lucky to have friends who knew him so well, who could calm him down so easily. Ancients, he just wanted to go home and sleep for a week, maybe take a few days without worrying about ghost attacks and other chaos. A few days to heal would be... He wanted to say necessary, but he doubted that he would get the time to heal before the next thing went wrong. He would have to work through it.

(Or he could just hide and pretend that none of it was happening.)

His parents were heading his his way.

(Oh, Ancients, what was he going to say?)

"Danny? Do you know what's going on?" asked Maddie, quietly.

"Not really, no," said Danny, shaking his head in case she couldn't hear him. He finally tore his gaze away from the people on the other balcony to look up at his parents. They didn't seem angry. Not yet, anyway. They would be, though. They'd think that he was lying, and then they would be angry. Or they'd think that Phantom and the shadows were manipulating him, and then they'd be angry. Or they'd use this to 'prove' that Phantom wasn't to be trusted, which... Yeah.
"Okay," said Maddie. "Danny..."

Danny tried to fade behind Jazz, but Jazz moved. Traitor.

The smile Maddie gave Danny was strained, but clearly intended to be comforting. "We'll figure this out, it'll be okay."

"Could everyone calm down please?" called Fractal. "Excuse me?" He bit his lip.

"Here," said Mr Lancer. "Class! Attention, please!" It took Mr Lancer a few tries to get everyone under control, but, eventually, they calmed down enough for Mr Lancer to turn to Fractal and say, "You were saying?"

"Right," said Fractal. "So, I guess we forgot to tell you about our other guests?"

"You guess?" exclaimed Danny. Then he clapped his hands over his mouth.

"Um," said Fractal, nervously. "Yes? I'm sorry."

"Parlez-vous français ou anglais?" called one of the people on the other balcony. The girl was blonde, with a long blue skirt and dark jacket.

"We speak English!" Maddie called back. "Who are you?"

"Oh, sweet!" said one of the boys. Danny couldn't place his accent. "I'm Byron! We're from Harmony. You aren't."

"Where?"

"Harmony! Where are you from?"

Maddie turned her gaze to Fractal. "Harmony?"

Fractal shifted. "Lots of people get lost in the Ghost Zone. Some of them find their way here."

"You- You've been imprisoning people here?"

"What? No!"

"Imprisoned?" shouted one of the other people. "No way. We just live here!"

"Harmony is in here," explained Fractal. "It's built around the Door."

"Where are you from?" asked Byron again.

Maddie licked her lips. "We're from Amity Park!" she yelled. "Why are you here?"

The other people conferred with one another for a few minutes. Maddie looked expectantly at Fractal. Fractal shrugged. "We were... There's something nasty sitting outside our Door. We were evacuating the town."

"What were you going to do with us, then?" demanded Ricky.

"Well," said Fractal, somewhat evasively, "our contract doesn't have a time limit. It just says safely..."

"You were going to lead us around in circles, weren't you?" accused Maddie.
"Wouldn't you?" asked Fractal sharply,

"And then- We would never have seen them! They're children. They deserve a life! They deserve to be around other people! Other humans!"

"Excuse me! I'm eighteen!" shouted one of the girls.

"And I'm seventeen!"

"I'm not a kid!"

"Who're you calling short?!"

"We have lives!"

"Don't be a jerk!"

"Our parents are just over- Well, somewhere back there!"

Danny looked back up at the other people. Mirage had popped over there at some point, and was now having an intense discussion with some of the people up there. Two of them looked up, and met Danny's eyes as he stared at them. Their eyes flashed with red and gold light. His own eyes were brighter when he was excited, but theirs were, at least, noticeable. To him, in any case. He didn't know if someone without enhanced vision could see the lights inside their eyes.

Danny bit his lip. They were liminal.

(The remnants of a conversation he hadn't been anywhere near echoed in his head. They were liminal, and they knew how to use it. They were liminal, and they were looking for him. They were like him. They were like Jazz, Sam, and Tucker. They were like the people of Amity Park.)

It would be nice if they could all sit down together and talk. If they could show Jazz, Sam, and Tucker how they used their liminality. If they could all be friends. He liked having friends. Sam and Tucker would still be his best friends, of course. They always would be. They were the best. The best.

But, the way these things were going, he didn't think that talk would be soon.

Soon all of the teens on the other balcony were staring up at Danny, their eyes twinkling like faint stars. His eyes flashed back at them. One of them squeaked, and they all started to talk excitedly to each other and Mirage in French.

(Hopefully, no one noticed that they were all looking at Danny. There was enough distance for there to be some ambiguity.)

"Maybe we'll cross paths again," shouted Byron, cheerfully. "But we've got to go back soon, or we'll get in trouble with our parents. Travel safe!"

The liminal children scurried back down a walkway, chattering. Mirage sent a last glance up towards Danny before disappearing himself.

Danny sighed. That hadn't been so bad, except for restarting the fight between his parents and his shadows. He sighed again.

Then a searing pain shot through his head. The shadows all winced. Not good. Bad.
And he knew exactly what had been waiting outside his Door.

Shade hissed, glaring at the men, the human men, coming through the Door. This was not good. His weapons weren't designed for humans. They were equivalent to rubber bullets at best, paintball guns at worst. He wasn't prepared for humans. There were limits to what he could do. To what the lair could do.

He vanished from the roof, and shut his eyes, making conscious contact with the other shadows. They all needed to know.

Now, to find out who these men were, and why they were here.
Danny was on his knees before the world came back to him, his head ringing.

(Active immune systems took energy. Infections caused fevers. Danny was already hurt. This was salt in his wounds.)

He pushed himself up. Leaning on Maddie. Staggering into her. Jazz was supporting him from the other side.

"We can't stay here," gasped Danny.

"What's wrong?" asked Maddie.

"The Door's been opened," said Fractal. "But... This should be fine. We should be fine here. We're ages away from the door."

"What came through the Door?" asked Jack.

Fractal bit his lip, then looked away, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You will tell us," demanded Maddie. "You've kept so many secrets, you are not keeping this one. You are not going to endanger us all."


"GIW?" exclaimed Jack. "They're here to rescue us! I knew we could have faith in the government!"

"I don't know," said Fractal. "To begin with, I'm not sure that the GIW are even a real government agency..."

"They aren't," confirmed Tucker, tapping at his PDA. "They're contractors. The government pays them, but so do a lot of other people, and they have independent leadership."

"They're here for us," stated Maddie, resolutely. "They're here for us, and any other humans here. You're going to take us to, to the people from Harmony, and then you're going to take us to the Guys in White, so we can go home."

Fractal froze for a moment, and then shook his head vigorously. "No. Dr Fenton, these people have guns. Real guns, not ectoblasters. They could be here to hurt you."

"That's utterly illogical. Why would the GIW be here to hurt us?"

Fractal shrugged, shrinking away. "It doesn't feel right. There's no reason for them to have come with that kind of weaponry."
"They're the government," said Ricky, flippantly. "They always go for overkill."

"Ghosts like you are dangerous," posited Valerie, crossing her arms. "It would be stupid for them not to bring weapons." Danny looked at Valerie curiously, temporarily distracted from being upset. She didn't sound as convinced about that statement as she would have been yesterday.

"The faster you get us to the GIW," said Maddie, "the faster we get out of your hair. Not to mention, they'll give us safe passage back to Amity Park."

Then suddenly, there was Echo, centimeters from Maddie. Too close to her. She stepped back. "And will you take responsibility for that, Madeline Fenton? They may give safe passage for humans." He hissed. "But what do they call human, hm? What's to say that they won't decide that you're all too contaminated to bring home?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Elliot, suddenly. "They're nuts! They shot at me once!"

"They might not be GIW, anyway," added Sam. "They might not even be human. They could be ghosts disguised as humans."

"Couldn't he tell, th-"

"Shut up, Tucker," said Sam through gritted teeth.

"He used the word 'competent,' too," said Mia. "You don't see that too often with the Guys in White. They could have just gotten their weapons from them."

That set off a shouting match between the people who believed that the men coming through the Door were there to help, to bring them home, and the people who hated the GIW and distrusted everything to do with them.

Danny covered his ears. His head still hurt from whatever it was that Shade had done to send the information, and the noise was not helping. There was something else, too. His mind was not entirely on this place, this moment. The lair was moving, shuddering, rippling... Not literally, except in a few places, but it was trying to eject the men, the soldiers, playing the haunted house role to the hilt. Lampposts tumbled. Trees shook, and reached out. Vines twined. Ghost fires burned. The sky went dark. The wind howled. Poisonous flowers, both ghostly and earthly, bloomed. Shade, Umbra, and the remaining Harmonians lurked in the deepening shadows.

These were the things that he could do.

That the lair could do, anyway.

It wasn't working. They were still there. They weren't leaving. It was a good thing that they were far away. They were good. They were skilled. There were a lot of them, too.

Options. What were his options? How could he fix this?

More: How many of them were still outside? Because he could hear their radios crackling through his head, trying to talk to someone outside and the other soldiers inside and he wasn't letting that happen. No. Not when he could make them crackle and moan and shriek, and who named their rescue mission Eurydice? That was stupidly unlucky, more so when you were going into a place half-made of legends and stories, and the lost peelings, carvings, shavings, detritus of imagination, centuries and ages of superstition.
Vlad sat down across from his advocate. The man was a green-skinned ghost with a neat white beard, and a neat, if old-fashioned suit. His name was Foxglove, following the tradition that some Ghost Zone lawyers had of naming themselves after poisons. Vlad suspected that he was much, much older than he presented himself as. He was among the very best of the legal minds of the Infinite Realms, having had lifetimes to hone his craft.

Even so, Vlad had tried to retain the services of another before turning to Foxglove. A ghost who had a reputation as the single best advocate in the Infinite Realms. But Hemlock had claimed to be already representing another interested party. It was unfortunate, but not entirely unexpected.

"I think that we can make the argument that Daniel should be remitted to your custody whilst on the Material Plane. However, marriage being what it is, I am uncertain that we could arrange for separate sentences. I think that the simplest solution, and the one most likely to get you what you want, would be to argue for Jack and Maddie to also be placed in your custody, as indentured servants for the duration of their sentences. Or, to argue that they serve separate indentures, and that Maddie serves hers with you."

"What would be our argument in that case?"

"That, as they are humans, it would be difficult to provide for their imprisonment in the Realms. This would be a difficult argument, especially as others may be advocating for their execution. But I only mention this to prepare you, in case we cannot, in fact, separate their sentences."

"Is the outcome of the preliminary committee really so uncertain?"

Foxglove laughed. "It isn't so much merely uncertain, as it is entirely unpredictable. Involving living persons imposes a time limit that is not usually present, and Daniel- Phantom- is something of a celebrity. There will be thousands of advocates in attendance. The first few days will be all about weeding out those who do not have proper standing to be there. Without a time limit, those same proceedings might take weeks, or even months. We really have no idea who will be there, or how unexpected attendees might skew the results. Really, all we can determine with certainty at this point, are the results that you desire, or would be happy with."

"I see," said Vlad. "Well, let's discus that..."

Mirror saw the teens rejoin the group, and glared at them. Beyond the headache they had caused on their own, their parents had discovered their absence, and getting everyone to move, get away from the people with guns, was hard to do, when some of them weren't there and the rest of them weren't going to go without them. Which was reasonable. Mirror wouldn't have left them alone, either, but Mirage was with them! Of course, it was also reasonable for that to not satisfy worried parents, but it was frustrating. Incredibly so.

"Okay!" he shouted, once the hugging had stopped and the scolding had commenced. "We have to go. The Door has been breached."
Jeremy Nye slid down the roof, making sure to stay out of sight of the camouflaged men. This was so messed up. There were lots of things in the Outside. Weird things. Dangerous things. He had seen them, before he had first come to Harmony, when the plane had crashed on that purple island. He'd seen a lot of ghosts, too. Made friends with a few, even, since then. What he hadn't seen a lot of, was humans. Well, other than the people that had been on the plane with him.

He had been twenty when it happened. Twenty, and on his way back to college, and his girlfriend, and his life. He'd always held hope that, one day, he'd be able to go back. That he'd be able to see home again.

It was tempting to believe that these were members of the army, the marines, the air force, or, heck, even the navy, come to 'rescue' them. To bring them home, anyway. Many, even most, of the people of Harmony had no desire to to leave, although many of them would like to send letters to whatever friends and relatives they had back on Earth.

Jeremy... Jeremy like Harmony alright. He liked the people here. He was grateful to the mysterious 'landlord' for giving him, for giving all of them, the chance to live here, safe from the dangers of Outside.

But he wanted to go home.

He took a deep breath, and laid down his weapon. This was a risk, but it was one he was willing to take. He looked up, to the roofs.

One of Mirror's compatriots, Umbra, Jeremy thought, was perched there, a rifle cradled in his arms. His eyes glowed ice-blue in the dark. If Jeremy hadn't spent the last couple of years of his life seeing glowing eyes of varying intensity in everyone from ghosts to his neighbor's daughter, he would have been thoroughly disturbed. As it was, he still felt vaguely unsettled, despite the concern obvious on the boy's face.

Jeremy wondered for a moment if the boy (the ghost?) would stop him, but all Umbra did was incline his head, and then blink, extinguishing his eyes.

That was... Good?

Then, the soldiers (were they soldiers?) were just in the next street. He walked there, carefully, his hands already raised. He stepped out into the street. "Don't shoot!" he said as soon as he had done so, announcing his presence and peaceful intentions in one breath.

All their weapons came up. That was okay, though, Jeremy had expected that. "I'm not armed," he said nervously.

"Iota," said one of them. "Check him."

Another- Iota?- nodded. "Lay down and put your hands behind your head," he ordered Jeremy.

Jeremy complied, and let himself be zip-tied and frisked. Regardless of what he was thinking now, regardless of what doubts he was having, they were the ones with the guns. Iota then pulled him roughly into a sitting position.
"Who are you?" demanded the first man.

"Um. My name is Jeremy Nye. I'm from Cleveland. In Ohio. In America. You, you're Americans, right?"

"He isn't on the list," said one of the others.

"What list?" asked Jeremy.

His question was ignored. "Are there others?" asked the apparent leader.

"You mean, like, other people? Yeah. Loads."

"Where?"

"Um. I don't know?" When the man frowned, Jeremy hastened to explain, "We heard that something was going to come through the door, and a lot of people got spooked. They left. I don't know where anyone else is, right now."

"How many?"

"I don't know, a few hundred?"

"For how long?"

"Well, I've been here a couple years. Some have been here longer, some shorter."

It was hard to make out the man's expression behind his protective goggles, but Jeremy thought that he was narrowing his eyes. He swallowed. "Children?"

"Yeah. A few dozen."

"Any in the last few days?"

"Um, no. You're the only ones who have come through in a couple months, and before that it was just a couple of boaters from Bermuda. You know how it is. Or, um, I guess you don't."

"You're familiar with this area?"

"I guess. Yeah. I mean, I've lived here for a while now."

The man smiled. "Why don't you show us around?"

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Umbra frowned. He hadn't liked letting Jeremy go through with this. But it had been his choice, and he hadn't been hurt yet. Yet. Maybe, maybe they'd been overreacting. On the other hand, zip-ties weren't exactly friendly.

He flicked to another roof to get a better perspective. As long as they had Jeremy, he wasn't going to let them out of his sight.
A fragment of a thought shot through Danny's mind, and he seized on it as a potential solution to the current problem, and a way to end the argument.

"Choices!" he shouted, louder, much, much louder, than he had intended. The word echoed into the following silence.

"What?"

"You all have choices. Make a choice. You should all just make a choice." He took a breath. A deep breath. "Fractal and Echo both know the ways. One of them can take the people who want to chance the Guys in White, or whoever they are, and the other one can take everyone else to meet up with the people from Harmony. There's still the contract, so we'll have to bring you all back to Amity eventually, no matter which choice you make. It'll just take longer if you decide to stay."

There was a beat as everyone digested that.

"Phantom?" asked Dash.

Danny blinked, then brought his hands up to his eyes. They reflected back green light. Heck. He bit his lip. "Yeah?"

Dash smiled. "Cool! I'll follow you, man."

"What? No. Don't decide based on that. This is- I'm not- I can't protect you when I'm stuck like this. You can't rely on me for this. You have to decide based on whether or not you trust a bunch of heavily armed men that you've never met and know nothing about, or a town of people who you at least know have children."

"No," said Valerie. "We have to decide based on whether or not we trust you. We haven't seen these people. They might as well not exist. And those people?" she gestured to the other balcony. "We don't know if those people are real, or more of these shadow things."

Danny threw out his hands in frustration. "Fine! Three choices, then. You can run around by yourselves without guidance. You can just go ahead, and try to figure things out on your own. We can- We can-" Danny suddenly felt light-headed.

"We can make sure you have food," picked up Fractal as Danny raised a hand to his head. "That you're comfortable, in most places. But we can't keep you from all trouble. There are just places, things, in here that aren't entirely healthy for humans, that we can't change on a moments notice. I mean, they aren't automatically dangerous, or, um, how should I put this? It's like cold weather. Snow. If you are prepared, or if, it's fine, but if you aren't then you could freeze to death... You do understand what I'm trying to say, don't you?"

There were a few nods, and murmurs of assent. Danny sighed. Maybe people would be reasonable. He felt his eyes finally return to normal.

Fractal looked nervously at the people who were still glaring at him. "I'm not lying. I promise."
"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Maddie. "Are we really supposed to believe that you'll keep your word just because you promised?"

"You should," said Danny, tiredly. "You've done research into frailties, right? And I-I think I said something about them, a couple of days ago, um, I might have passed out right away after. I was telling you that Echo had to obey Phantom's rules. I think."

"Phantom has a frailty?" asked Jack. "What is it?" Then he seemed to remember what he was saying, and who he was saying it to, and the grin on his face slid off.

"He keeps promises," said Fractal. "Always, as well as he can. That's why we don't make many of those."

"Why?" asked Maddie.

Fractal shrugged. "I couldn't tell you when it started. I don't have any recollection of purposefully broken promises, after his death. But it became more important, later. There is a promise that we have to keep. About the future."


"Good," said Fractal, uncertainly. "So what are you going to do?"

It was like Danny had suddenly gained the ability to read minds. (He wouldn't put it past himself, honestly. He was always developing new powers.)

He could practically see Maddie's thought process. What would happen, she worried, if they split up? There could be three groups, or more. There were only three adults. There were only three ghost hunters, and Valerie was still a child, even if she was Red Huntress. She wasn't used to thinking of Jazz, Sam, and Tucker as ghost hunters, and she certainly wasn't thinking of Danny as one.

"Which of you will be guiding which group?" she asked, temporizing.

Echo and Fractal exchanged glances. "I will lead the group that will join up with the Harmonians," said Fractal.

"I'll take you to Harmony," said Echo, shoving his hands into his pockets, "but I'm not taking you to the trigger happy morons. Before you ask, Harmony is built around the Door. I'm just not going to be upset if we miss the people with guns entirely."

"Fine," spat Maddie. "Jack. You you with him," she pointed at Fractal. "I'm going with you," she glared at Echo, "and I'm going to make sure that you don't get any ideas about trapping us here, or leaving anyone else behind."

"Fine," said Echo, with equal hostility.

Danny was heartened to discover that most of his class preferred Harmony to soldiers. They weren't literally saying 'I trust you,' but that was the subtext.

Only Valerie, Nathan, Lester, Paulina, and Dash chose to come. Other than, of course, Jazz, Sam, and Tucker. And Maddie. And Danny. Because, as much as Danny wanted to avoid the GIW, he wasn't going to let his mom go walk up to a bunch of heavily armed strangers by herself. He really, really wanted Jazz, Sam, and Tucker, or at least one of them, to stay. But he knew that they wouldn't, because they weren't about to let him walk up to a bunch of heavily armed strangers by himself.
Valerie came because, well, it was Valerie. She hated ghosts, and would always trust humans over
ghosts. Lester was going because of Valerie. Nathan was going because of Lester. Paulina was
going because of Phantom, and apparently so was Dash. Ancients. That made things awkward.

(Danny had hoped that Paulina would have gotten the message after last night. She wasn't trying to
seduce the shadows anymore, at least, but she clearly hadn't given up on Phantom himself.)

It was a lot quieter, with only ten people. The drawings on the walls ceased to be abstract, and started
to be poetry, and fragments of stories, most of them not in English. Illuminated, illustrated. Delicate.
The stone here was paler, too. White-gray, with gold flecks. The false moonlight was stronger, too.
The stars in the windows were brighter. There was more light. Cleaner lines. The vines restricted
themselves to the ceilings, their hanging flowers were lacy, pale, the color of pastel sunsets.

The quiet and restrained colors helped Danny calm himself, prepare himself. Finding out that there
was a whole town in here... He already had a town he was responsible for. Then there were people
who were liminal, about as liminal as the average person in Amity, but with more access to
ectoplasm, more control. People who could use ectoplasm, like he could. Maybe Sam and Tucker
could learn how, too. Maybe Jazz could. Maybe they could do more than just twist their perspective
enough to pass through things in the Ghost Zone, and fall upwards now and again. Maybe they
could learn and use what they learned to stay safe. Maybe they could play games together. Maybe-

Danny forced himself to come back to the problem at hand. It was not the time to panic or to obsess
over things he couldn't change, or things that might not ever happen. Harmony had been fine by
itself for a long time now. The people would be alright. The lair would keep them safe. They were
far away from the soldiers, and moving farther. They would be safe. He'd keep them safe.

He was drifting off topic again.

What would he do if the soldiers turned out to be bad? To want to hurt people (his people)?

Maybe he could trap them. Force them into place. Imprison them. But that felt wrong wrong
wrong. He couldn't put anything like that in his lair. He couldn't do that. Couldn't enclose an area
like that. Couldn't put in doors. He just... He couldn't.

Driving them out wasn't working. Scaring them off wasn't working.

Ancients, he felt like he could barely think. He didn't know what was happening to him, what was
going on in his head. Every since those people had come through the Door... Oh. Maybe... He
wasn't entirely sure how the link between him and the lair worked. Maybe the lair was leaning on
him for processing power. He wasn't sure if he should be alarmed or not.

Of course, there was also the possibility that he was just crashing again. Running out of energy, like
he had the past couple of days. He hadn't slept much last night, which probably also contributed.

Then Echo led them out into a set of stands. Danny blinked, looking down at a Greek-style stage lit
by ghost fire. Above was a domed ceiling, painted to look like the sky. Echo quickly walked down the steps, the klimakes. He stopped once he got to the orchestra, then turned to look back up at the class. "This is the clan boundary," he announced. "You might as well make yourself comfortable. It'll take a bit." The shadow sang to the wisps, his voice entirely inhuman. Then he faded out of human visibility. The wisps winked out, too, one by one, following Echo. They weren't bothering to hide from Danny, though. He could see them, disappearing into the proskenion.

Danny sighed, and found a seat, leaning back. "What time is it?" he asked.
"No idea," said Sam.

"Party time," said Tucker.

"You're the worst," accused Sam.

"I'm the best," countered Tucker.

"You're both wrong," said Danny. "Jazz is the worst and the best."

Jazz opened her mouth, then closed it. "That doesn't even make sense," she said.

"I know," moaned Danny. "Do you smell popcorn?"

"Actually, yeah," said Tucker. He stood up. "Give me a second."

"Tucker?" asked Maddie. "Where are you going?"

"To get popcorn," said Tucker, as he walked off to the parodos. "I'll be back."

Maddie frowned after him, but didn't stop him. Instead, she came to sit next to Danny. "What's happening?" she asked.

Danny shrugged, glancing at where his other classmates were sitting. The twins were huddled next to each other. The A-listers were sticking together. Valerie was standing, arms crossed, face drawn into a scowl.

"Tucker's going to go get popcorn. Echo and the wisps are talking to the other wisps, to make sure that everything is okay, and that there isn't a problem with crossing over. To let them know what's going on. They probably have a ritual. Um. They're part of the same tribe, Bright Harp, but the guys we've been with are the Three Winds clan, but the ones they're trading off to are the Halogen Whistles. No, I don't know how they come up with their names." He rubbed his eyes. "Why?"

Maddie sighed through her nose. "I'm sorry, Danny. I've put a lot of pressure on you today."

"I guess," said Danny, slouching.

"Mrs Fenton," started Sam.

"What?" said Maddie.

Sam bit her lip. "You've been doing a lot more than pressuring him. You realize that, right? Pressuring is what my parents do."

"Sam," said Danny.

Sam huffed. "You deserve more than this," she muttered.

Then Tucker reemerged from the parodos, carrying a large bowl of popcorn. "There's a bunch of ancient carnival and theater stuff back there," said Tucker, as he rejoined the group. "It was kind of cool," he continued, "but except for the popcorn machine, it was all locked up in these weird cages. Do you know what's up with that?"

Sam gave Tucker a flat look. "Name the one experience we've had with a carnival, Tucker."
"Oh. Yeah. Never mind. Why even have it, then?"

"Other people like it," said Danny, who had slouched so much that he was now staring at the ceiling.

"Oh," said Tucker. "Popcorn?" he asked, offering Danny the bowl. Danny took a handful.

Then the ghost fires went out, and the wisps filled out, trilling.

What followed was- Well, Danny wanted to call it an opera, or maybe a ballet, but wisps always sang, always changed color, and they were always flying like that, zipping around, twirling and twisting. This was just their version of a ceremony, their version of formality. Still, Danny couldn't help but feel like they were showing off, for his sake, or to impress the other clan, if nothing else.

Then the music stopped, and about three quarters of the wisps that had come with them flitted back out, towards their own territory, and they were replaced with twice that number of new wisps. Echo came back out from the proskenion, and a brightly colored wisp zoomed up to Danny, bobbing up and down excitedly in the air. Danny smiled gently at the leader of the Halogen Whistles, and hummed a greeting.

"There are hammocks behind the skene," said Echo.

"The what?" asked Paulina.

"The building that's the back of the stage," said Echo gesturing. "That's where we're sleeping."

"We only ate lunch a couple of hours ago," said Valerie.

Echo tilted his head. "Do I care? Nope."

"Echo-" started Maddie.

"It's bad enough that you're making him make me bring you this way," said Echo, cutting her off, "but I want everyone to be awake and well-rested by the time we get to Harmony, in case we have to run. I'm not going to let you be the reason he gets caught by them." He vanished, bringing an end to the conversation. Valerie started grumbling about ghosts and disappearing acts.

"I need to sleep," said Danny. "You do too, Mom."

"We know you and Dad didn't last night," added Jazz. "Please."

Maddie covered her eyes. "Alright," she said.
"We need to talk," said Jazz. She had just watched Danny crawl, emotionally and physically exhausted, into a hammock and cocoon himself in butterfly-patterned blankets. Echo had yet to reappear, but Jazz had the feeling that the shadow was just waiting for Jazz and Maddie (but mostly Maddie) to leave the room. "Because," she said, giving her mother a direct look, "I can tell that you aren't going to go to sleep."

Maddie ran her hand through her hair, grimacing when it ran into tangles. "What do you want me to do, Jazz? We're lost in the Ghost Zone, at the mercy of ghosts."

Jazz's mouth thinned into a line. She grabbed her mother by her sleeve, and walked her to a small, out-of-the-way alcove. "This is Danny's lair," said Jazz. "We aren't at anyone's mercy except his, and he has a lot of it."

"Jasmine-"

"You aren't being fair to him, Mom. He didn't ask for this."

"I know, Jazz," said Maddie, exasperated. "Try to see this from my perspective! Try to look at it logically. This isn't natural." She looked away, agitated. "Now you'll say that I sound like a bigot."

"You do," said Jazz.

Maddie shook her head. "Jazz, this isn't about race, or identity, this is like trying to defend radiation poisoning."

"No it isn't. Danny is perfectly healthy- or he was, before this disaster."

"According to whom? Ghosts?"

Jazz was about to riposte with 'And what's wrong with that?' when she registered what the comment revealed. "Danny didn't tell you about Vlad?"

"What about Vlad?" asked Maddie, taken aback.

"Argh, of course he didn't. They have that truce thing. I guess that means that I have to. God help me."

"Jazz, what are you talking about?"

Jazz took a deep breath. "Danny told you how he-" Jazz broke off and licked her lips. "About how he died, right?" she continued bluntly.

"Jasmine, your brother isn't dead."

"I had the same reaction at first," said Jazz, "but that's how he thinks of it, and-" Jazz was about to say, 'and your stupid Mortifier thing worked on him,' but accusations like that wouldn't be productive. She was getting worked up. This was bad form. She had to stay calm. "You could at least pretend to accept it," she said instead. "Look, either way, this happened because Danny was in
the portal when it turned on. Who else has been injured by activating portals?"

"Oh my god," breathed Maddie. "This... Vlad has it, too?"

"Yes," said Jazz, shortly. "He and Danny have an agreement. It keeps their fights from getting out of hand." Jazz laughed. "You'd be surprised how many ghost rivalries are hemmed in with rules and agreements like that, formalized until they're practically games... Anyway, Danny has a thing with promises. He couldn't tell you about Vlad. Don't be mad at him."

"I'm not," said Maddie, hollowly.

"So, Vlad has been half-ghost for over twenty years. He's studied this. If it was hurting Danny, he would have said something."

"... It explains so much," said Maddie. "How Vlad changed. Why he acts so strangely..." She looked up at Jazz. "Who is he, Jazz? Who is he as a ghost?"

"His ghost name is Plasmius," said Jazz, cautiously.

"My god," said Maddie. She sat down, heavily, covering her mouth with one hand. "Jazz. Earlier, last night, Danny told us, your father and I, about, about the end of the world."

Jazz blinked. That was unexpected. "Oh."

"He said that Vlad helped him but- That Plasmius did something to Phantom. Ate him."

"Oh. Well. Yes. You see, if Fenton and Phantom can be temporarily separated, then so can Masters and Plasmius. I'm not sure why Vlad didn't die, after being separated. Danny said he didn't ask. He said he didn't think to, but I don't think he wanted to know. Either that, or he didn't want to catch Vlad in a lie. I don't know. It hardly matters." Jazz paused. "He probably told you to ask me about what happened over here, during the time he missed while he was in the future. It wasn't much. Dan disguised himself as Danny, came back, trapped us all when I realized that he wasn't Danny, and then we listened to him gloat until Danny got back. I'd give you more details, but..." she sighed. "You should really go to sleep."

"Vlad... Vlad survived..."

"Vlad... Vlad survived..."

"No. Nope. Stop right there. You aren't going down this path. You aren't putting Danny through that nonsense."

"But."

"No. Try to see this from Danny's perspective, Mom," said Jazz. "I've been thinking about how to put this into strictly human terms, but all of got is a surrealist nightmare of an analogy. But hey, if life gives you a surrealist nightmare, lemonade makes you. Jeez, Danny's sense of humor is rubbing off on me..." Jazz rubbed her eyes. She was tired herself. "Okay, so imagine you're driving a car full of all your classmates, and your teacher, and your parents. No one knows that you're driving, but it's something you have to do. You're just getting people from point A to point B. That's all you want to do. But then your parents stab you with a needle full of stuff, which, you know, you really shouldn't do to someone who's driving, because they think that you're a kidnapper. You have a bad reaction to it, and crash the car. Luckily, you crash the car into your own house, which your parents don't know about, because your grandfather gave it to you, and they inexplicably hate your grandfather. Everyone is fine, but the crash took out the phone lines, so, because you feel guilty, even though the crash wasn't your fault, you give everyone breakfast and patch them up. But, in the meantime, the police have also decided that you're a kidnapper, so they send in, I don't know, Officer Felix
Brutality—I can't believe I made that pun—and a SWAT team into your house, but they don't bother to identify themselves, so you don't know if they really are the police, and you wouldn't trust Officer Brutality anyway, because he tries to beat you up on a regular basis. While that's happening, your parents have been harassing the live-in staff and are giving you grief because you've been talking to your grandfather, which is really beside the point, and kind of a minor issue." Jazz stopped to breathe. "What I'm trying to say, is that, from Danny's perspective, this is home invasion on steroids. He's not feeling well to begin with, then he feels threatened by the GIW, anxious for our safety, confused, because Harmony is clearly as much a surprise to him as it is to us, guilty, because he always blames himself when something bad happens, scared, stressed, because of how many different things are happening at once, and that's only scratching the surface, and you aren't helping any of that by picking fights with the shadows and acting like Phantom is some kind of disease."

Maddie looked like she was about to argue, but clearly thought better of it. "What do you mean, threatened?"

"Wouldn't you feel threatened, if a guy with a gun walked into our house?" said Jazz, shrugging. "That's compounded by this being more than just a house. This is his lair. An extension of his mind."

Jazz brushed back her hair. "That's my understanding, anyway. I think that he's only okay with us being here, because he likes us."

"What about the other people, from Harmony? He doesn't even know them."

"I don't know anything about them," said Jazz, "but I'm going to bet that they were asking for help when they came in. He probably likes them, too, just not consciously. I'm not trying to say that there aren't ghostly components to this, and to how Danny's acting, but at least look at the human parts of this. Just, try to start your understanding from there."

"The 'ghostly components' are the problem," said Maddie. "What are they, Jazz? Do you know?"

Jazz licked her lips. "I think that I should talk to Danny about that, first."

"You aren't his psychiatrist," said Maddie.

"Actually, I kind of am," said Jazz. "I shouldn't have even told you this much."

"It's fine, Jazz," said Echo, calmly. Jazz turned, to stare at the shadow who was leaning against the wall. "It's fine if you tell her. I'm curious myself."

Jazz raised her eyebrows. Echo was acting much more mellow than he had been. "You're okay with this? And so is Danny? Really?"

Echo shrugged. "Danny doesn't want to have any more secrets from them. As for me, well, the sooner they show their true colors, the better."

"What do you mean 'true colors'?" snapped Maddie.

"What do you think I mean?" asked Echo. "Sooner or later, you're going to turn against him."

"I will never."

"Don't make promises you don't intend to keep, human. You made those weapons, and you used them. You don't do that kind of thing to people you any empathy for. It's your fault that we're in this situation. I won't let you hurt him like that again. So, Jazz, tell us about the ghostly components to his behavior."
"You realize that you aren't helping, either."

Echo's eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask to be made, much less in that way."

"I'm not saying you did annnnnd now I'm contributing to the problem." Jazz pinched the bridge of her nose. "Aarrgh. Fine. Mom, you know that ghosts are territorial and possessive. Echo, you, well, you don't quite exemplify that, I know that there are ghosts way more possessive than you, but you're more possessive than Danny."

"I know," said Echo, amused.

"Right," said Jazz. "Of course you do. But, even ghosts that are, relatively speaking, laid back, still have these tendencies, and they don't always manifest in the way that they would in humans. Like the wisps, they always share territory with other types of ghosts, and their own family groups, their clans, tend to be large, but they have difficulty sharing with other clans, and they tend to be protective of the ghosts who are 'in charge' of the territory. You've noticed how the wisps are around Danny? They want him to like them, so he doesn't kick them out, and they want him to stay healthy, so that they don't loose their territory to his death."

"Way to be cynical, Jazz," commented Echo.

"I am, of course, going at this from an entirely selfish, 'logical,' perspective," said Jazz. "Now, with Danny, he's less possessive of places, and more possessive of people. But, in light of his personality, his obsession, and probably a hundred other things that I'm not thinking of, that isn't manifesting as him wanting to lock us away or control us. He wants us to be safe and happy, but you're running into what he perceives as a very dangerous situation. But trying to stop you, trying to trap you, physically or otherwise, goes against his beliefs, and would make you very unhappy. So he can't do that. It's probably driving him crazy, how illogical you're being from his perspective. That's one thing."

"That's just one thing?" said Maddie.

Jazz shrugged. "Psychology is complicated," she said. "I don't know what to tell you. Now, for why he thinks that we're running into danger, and I agree with him on that, by the way, beyond just that they have guns, and they're uninvited, I suspect that the lair is putting some effort into kicking them out, right?"

"Yeah," said Echo. "We don't want them here."

"Okay, so, for ghosts, being scary is kind of a threat display. A warning signal. Like a rattlesnakes' rattle, or bright colors on a poisonous frog."

"It's not that simple," objected Echo.

"I know, I'm just using analogies. Anyway, the lair, which, I'm going to reiterate here, is Danny's private space, Danny's territory, is trying to be scary, trying to warn off the GIW, but they're ignoring it. That's a threat. That's picking a fight. Normally, ghosts feel safe inside their lairs," Jazz was grasping at straws here, drawing conclusions from very little evidence; she didn't know very much about lairs, "but he's already been successfully attacked once in here. So he doesn't. More than that, he's going to be worried about the threat in terms of the people already here. Something that's a threat to him, is also a threat to us, if only because if he gets hurt, then he can't protect us," Jazz paused. "Yes, before you ask, that's his thought process, especially when he's depressed. Which he probably is, right now, considering how little trust you're showing him."

"Jazz, he's been lying to us for years."
"He knows that," said Jazz. "But he's been protecting Amity Park for the same amount of time. He's saved my life, and yours, and Dad's, and probably everyone in town's at some point or another. I think that it earns him, and, yes, the shadows, a modicum of trust. But, honestly," she said, her eyes narrowing a bit, "I think that you're just covering up your fear that he doesn't trust you anymore. That Echo here is actually representative of what's going on in his head right now. You're in denial. And Echo has borderline personality disorder, or something."

"I feel like I should be offended by that," said Echo.

"If it helps," said Jazz, "Danny once told me that everyone he's close to has tried to kill or seriously injure him, at one point or another, or has convincingly pretended to do so. That includes me, Sam, Tucker, Clockwork, Danielle, Dora, Frostbite... The list is frighteningly long, and explanations typically include mind control and unavoidable circumstances, but the point is, that you're in good company there, and that Danny is ridiculously forgiving. The only person that he's going to blame for this is himself." Jazz stopped. Thought over what she had said. "I'm sorry," she said, finally, "I shouldn't have told you how you felt. That's something that you're specifically not supposed to do in psychology. I should- I just- Danny has enough to deal with. If you two can get along, or at least not fight, I think that will help. So, please, try. Try to get through tomorrow without acting like the other one is some kind of monster. Make some kind of deal, I don't care, just stop. Please. For Danny's sake."

"Alright," said Echo. "If you think that that will be best for him, then I will do it, but," and now he turned his attention to Maddie. "let me make myself clear. No matter what he does, I will not forgive you. I do not trust you. If you think that you can escape me by leaving the lair, if you think that once you are out, you can betray him, that you can hurt him again, then you're wrong. If you harm him, then mark me, I will know, I will stand at the door and scream your crimes to every soul that passes, and then they will come for you." He blinked once, slowly. "Do you understand?"

"Then let me make myself clear," said Maddie, at long last pulling herself to her feet. "If my research shows that you've been lying, that you are an infection, that you're the cause of Danny's pain, then I will not hesitate to eradicate you, no matter what the consequences to myself."

Jazz felt like pulling out her hair. What, in the name of all the Infinite Realms, was wrong with her family? Other than the obvious.

Then Echo smiled, bitterly. "At least you're willing to do the research now, rather than just blindly following prejudice." He glanced at Jazz, and tilted his head, haughtily. "It's a start I suppose."

The shadow chose that moment to disappear.
Chapter 65: Stuck With Us

Star felt bad about leaving Paulina. Not bad enough to stay with Paulina, but bad. She knew that a lot of Paulina's actions were powered by insecurity, rather than a sense of entitlement, like most people assumed.

(Okay, so there was a lot of entitlement, too.)

Lina just always felt like she was being cheated, like she was being laughed at, behind her back. At least, that was Star's interpretation. Maybe it was wrong, but whatever. She was Paulina's friend, not her psychiatrist.

So, when Paulina was risking death to go after a crush that Star knew was hopeless, well, Star felt bad about not being able to talk her out of it. Then again, Star hadn't had much hope of talking her out of it in the first place. The stalker shrine to Phantom in Lina's locker had nothing on the one in her room.

But, Star reasoned, Phantom was there, even if he was stuck inside Fenton, and so was that creepy shadow, Echo, and Valerie, who had apparently been fighting ghosts for the past two years. Lina would be fine.

Speaking of Valerie, Star was worried about her, too.

Valerie could take care of herself, Star knew that, but sometimes she made dumb decisions. Like, the whole Red Huntress thing. That was dumb. Fighting Phantom? Super dumb. Valerie had a temper, too, and Star just didn't think that that was a good thing, when chasing off after a bunch of trigger-happy Guys in White.

Of course, the GIW wasn't the only reason that Star was worried about Valerie. She and Paulina didn't get along super well, especially after Valerie got kicked off the A-list. Hopefully, they wouldn't get into a fight, now that Star wasn't there to play peacekeeper. Maybe Jazz would stop them. Star didn't know the older girl super well, but she seemed like a calm person.

"It feels weird, without Nathan and Lester here," said Mikey.

"Yeah," said Ricky.

"They're going to die, aren't they?" asked Mikey.

"I hope not," said Ricky.
"I'm breaking up with him," announced Tiffanie.

"Uh, okay?" said Kwan. He wasn't sure how to handle this. Paulina, who would normally deal with break ups in the A-list, was here, Star was lost in her own thoughts, and Dale was, honestly, kind of an insensitive jerk. Cool to hang out with, and really good at football, but he could be mean. "Why?"

"Because he's gone off with her."

"Uh, you mean Paulina? 'Cause, I don't think that's a problem. She's like, super obsessed with Phantom. You know that."

But Tiffanie was already shaking her head. "No, not Lina. Lina knows what's up. She wouldn't do that to me, it would be totally uncool. No. I'm talking about Fenton."

"Uhhhh. You've lost me. I know Fenton's, like, super wimpy and girly, but, he's definitely a guy, and I don't think he swings that way, you know?"

"No, the other Fenton."

"His mom?" asked Kwan, feeling thoroughly grossed out.

"No, Jasmine Fenton, his sister. God, you're a freak."

"Oh. Yeah. Just, I mean, you could have used her first name to begin with. There's like, four Fentons, here. It's kind of confusing."

Mia was watching Fractal. She couldn't see very well without her contact lenses, but there was something familiar about the way he moved.

"Doesn't he remind you of someone?" asked Hannah, suddenly. "Something about the way he talks and acts, you know?"

"Yeah," said Mia.

"I don't know who, though."

"Jazz, maybe," said Mia. "They act sort of similarly. They're both... Bookish, I guess. Nerdy."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

Jeremy was stalling.

He knew that he had screwed up. The zip ties were a hint, he supposed, but Iota had explained that it
was only a precaution, and the leader, Alpha had seemed eager to get everyone, everyone from Harmony, and whoever it was they had come looking for, 'back to the real world.' Still, that was what had initially put Jeremy's guard back up. He knew that many of his neighbors didn't want to leave, and if these men tried to force them, there would be a fight.

Then there was everything that Beta and Gamma had said about ghosts. Destroying ghosts.

In the Outside, yeah, there were a lot of dangerous ghosts, but Jeremy knew and liked the ghosts who resided in Harmony. Sure, the wisps weren't exactly brilliant conversationalists, but you could get a surprisingly large amount out of their songs and lights.

Finally, Jeremy was worried about the kids. He didn't know any of them very well, except, maybe, for Sonia, but he knew that they weren't entirely normal. That, actually, a lot of people in Harmony were a step closer to ghosts, a tad more spiritual, than they had been when they had first arrived. It wasn't something that bore thinking about, no one really talked about it, and, most of the time, no one cared, but everyone knew, and the children had much more of it than anyone else.

So, Jeremy was stalling, leading the men away from anything important. Distracting them. Hopefully, Shade and Umbra would be able to come up with a plan before he ran out of lies to tell.

Walden ran a hand through his frizzy hair, and, from his perch on the pillar's base, counted the dogs again. He was colorblind, so, unlike virtually everyone else, he had to do it this way. He wasn't sure how he'd been stuck with this. Yes, he liked dogs, but he was hardly the only one who did, and someone who could distinguish green from red would be much better at this.

He kept coming up one short. After counting one more time, he sighed, and jumped down.

"Yeah," he said. "Cujo's missing."

Danny stirred inside his cocoon. Anxious. Someone was in trouble, but he didn't know who, where, why, or how. He felt like ants were walking over his skin, crawling in his mouth and eyes. He wanted them to go away, leave him alone. They were too close. The GIW were too close. Why wouldn't they go away? Why did they hate him so much? What did he ever do to them? Why was his mother choosing them over him?

He struggled out of his cocoon, still somewhat somnambulant. He sniffed, wiping tears out of his eyes.

"Hey," said Tucker.

Danny looked up, surprised. He didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but he hadn't thought that anyone would wake before him. Tucker was sitting on a chair, eating a sandwich.
"Peanut butter," he said, offering Danny a sandwich. "No jelly, 'cause it's slimy."

"Thanks," said Danny.

"I've got some orange juice, too," said Tucker. "Want some?"

"Sure," said Danny. "How long was I asleep?"

"A while," said Tucker, shrugging. "You want to talk about it."

Danny swiped at his eyes again. "Not really."

"Okay, cool. You should maybe talk to Jazz, though."

Danny nodded. He would do that. "Thanks," he said again.

"So I've tracked down some fruit," said Sam, as she walked in. "Oh, hey, Danny. You're up. Are you okay? Do you want an apple? Or, um, a nectarine?"

Danny nodded, swinging a little in the hammock. "Thanks, Sam." He sighed, heavily. "I really don't want to do this," he said. "I don't trust those people at all."

"Which people?" asked Tucker. "The Guys in White, or the people from Harmony?"

"The Guys in White," said Danny. "They feel dangerous," he said, his eyes loosing focus. "There's something off about them. Something wrong about how they're moving, what they're doing." He blinked, the world coming back. "What?"

"You tell us," said Tucker.

"I think that your connection to this place is getting stronger," said Sam, when Danny just shrugged.

"That makes sense," said Danny. "Maybe I'm just getting better, though?"

"Do you feel better?" asked Sam.

"Not really. Where is everyone?"

"Well," said Sam. "I think that Jazz is trying to psychoanalyze your mom again, Valerie got into a fight with Lester, a beam, I'm not sure where it came from, almost fell on Dash when he pushed Nathan off the stage, and Paulina is off in her own fantasy world." She paused. "Do you remember what happened with Mirage, Valerie, Paulina, and I?"

"Sort of?" said Danny. "It's like I'm remembering a dream. Does that make sense?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Tucker.

"You don't need to know," said Sam.

"Hey," complained Tucker. "Come on. I'm not going to tease you that badly."

"But you admit that you're still going to tease us."

"Says the one that hordes blackmail material like it's a matter of course."

"I'm not the only one with blackmail material. I've seen the files on your computer."
"Hey, those are practical blackmail materials. For, like, Vlad, and Agent O, and the police."

"Wait," said Danny. "Why would you want to blackmail the police?"

Tucker raised his eyebrows, amused. "Says the vigilante half-ghost."

"Oh."

Sam, meanwhile, looked thoughtful. "We should pool resources. Not all my blackmail is for you two. Actually, Grandma knows a lot..."

"Hey, guys, Nathan didn't get hurt, did he?"

"No, he's fine. Not even bruised," said Tucker.

"There's padding around the stage," explained Sam. "I think that you anticipated the whole, 'falling off the stage' problem."

"Is Dash hurt?"

"No, he screamed like a little girl, though," said Sam.

"Oh, yeah, that was hilarious," agreed Tucker.

"Mm," said Danny. "Is Mom mad at me?" he asked, quietly.

"I don't think so," said Sam, after Tucker just shrugged. "I think she's just angry in general."

"Trust her, she's an expert at being angry."

"Whatever, Tucker."

"So, you didn't really say where everyone was," said Danny.

"Oh. They're just sitting out in the stands, not talking to each other. Except for Jazz and your mom. You know how Jazz is."

"Yeah, I know how Jazz is." He sighed. "I guess that if everyone's awake, we should get going again."

"Danny," said Sam. "You know that you don't have to do this, right? I mean, if I'm interpreting that contract right, you don't have to go now, just because your mom wants you to."

"I know," said Danny, miserably, "but if I don't, then they'll never trust me again. I'd actually feel better if you two didn't come," he admitted. "I don't want you to get hurt, if things go wrong."

Sam and Tucker looked at each other, and shook their heads. "No way, man," said Tucker. "You're stuck with us."
"Okay," said Echo. "Harmony is directly above us. I'm taking you directly to the door. Do not sneak off. Do not leave the route. Follow my instructions. Got it?"

There were a few murmurs of assent. Echo glared.

"I'm serious. Don't try to run off and find the GIW." He rolled his eyes when he didn't get any more of a response than before. "Whatever," he muttered, and started off up the stairs. The wisps stayed behind, leaving them in the shadows.

Danny was watching his mother. He had been watching his mother all morning, trying to build up the courage to talk to her. He glanced at his sister, who gave him an encouraging nod. He nodded back, and took the stairs two at a time, so that he could reach Maddie's side.

"Mom," he said, "um, how are you doing?"

Maddie blinked, and looked down at Danny, as if she was surprised to see him. "I'm fine, Danny," she said. "Glad that we'll be going home, soon."

"Okay," said Danny.

She gave Danny a small, strained smile, and put an arm around his shoulders, giving him a quick hug as they paused on the stairs. "I love you, Danny," she said. "I do, really. No matter what."

Danny mirrored the smile. This was as close as they could get to discussing things here, in front of the others.

"You've been working so hard," she said, more quietly, "and we've been making things so hard for you. Thank you for meeting us halfway."

Danny nodded, but he felt like he was going much more than halfway in all this. They came out into a building, a very familiar looking one. It took Danny an embarrassingly long time to realize that it was identical to the Amity Park town hall, only without any doors.

However, luckily for Danny's self-confidence, the others didn't notice until they had reached the front steps.

Maddie stopped dead, at that point, staring, painfully exposed, visible to anyone who might happen by. "It's Amity Park," she said, with a tone of fascination.

Danny caught the look of triumph on Echo's face. But then it was gone. He blinked, trying to figure out why, but dismissed it in favor of pulling his mother off the steps, and shepherding the rest of his charges into a more protected street. It was dangerous here.
Shade had, thus far, managed to keep the GIW off of the rooftops, away from anything that could function as a good sniper position. Jeremy had helped greatly with that, actually, although Shade suspected that this was more coincidence, and good luck, than anything else.

However, the addition of Echo and Danny's group complicated things greatly. Now they had to keep the GIW away from their path, and although Echo could feel the presence of the GIW, their location in the lair, the GIW agents were trained soldiers, and they could move quickly, much more quickly than Echo could make Lester and Nathan move.

It was a good thing he and Umbra they had already taken out all of their drones. It was a good thing that they didn't have very many drones in the first place. Even with strategic darkness, it would have been impossible to hide the group from drones.

Things went well for a while. Longer than Shade had thought they would, honestly. But then the GIW started to wind their sinister way back towards Echo and Danny's arrow-straight path.

He and Umbra kept them off-balance with occasional ectoblasts, or showing themselves, then disappearing, but, without seriously hurting the men, those distractions only did so much good.

Sooner or later, this was going to end poorly.

Echo stopped, scowled, and then made a left-hand turn, the first one so far, at the next intersection. "Keep up," he snapped.

Valerie was instantly suspicious.

The ghost had been anxious and snappish this whole time, but this was different. Turning left like this, when he was so insistent on avoiding the GIW... That suggested something, didn't it? That suggested that the GIW were to the right.

Valerie knew that there were things going on that she didn't understand. She knew, knew, that there was some connection between Danny and Danielle, and between Danny and Phantom, something that went deeper than Danny being possessed, or overshadowed. She knew that something had happened between Danny and his parents. Something big.

She knew that Phantom had always kept his promises.

At the same time, she would always, always, trust humans over ghosts.

She almost turned, almost ran to the GIW. But then, just before she did, she looked at Danny, really looked at him.

He looked terrible. Sick. The scar that had been little more than an angry shadow a couple of days ago was now a lurid green. His eyes swam with green sparks. His skin was so pale it was almost gray, almost transparent. He looked half-dead. He looked like a ghost.

And with Phantom possessing him, he would have an ectosignature.

The GIW always shot first and asked questions later. She remembered what Elliot had said. They
had shot at him because of his hair color. What would they do to Danny?

Why was Danny here, anyway? He hadn't wanted to come. He didn't like the GIW. He had to know what he looked like. He was taking a spectacular risk.

She didn't turn. She didn't run.

Echo was frustrated. The GIW kept blocking them. Kept turning, as if to track them. How were they doing that?

He glanced back at the group. Lester and Nathan were too slow. Paulina wasn't much better. Annoying. Why had they insisted on coming? They would have been cared for, well cared for, back with the Harmonians.

Echo was making plans. Danny had to be protected above all else. That was obvious. His death could be the death of all of them. The lair might crumble, without Danny's mind to give it form. Danny did not quite understand that, or he would have been more cautious. Although, Ellie's existence would prevent the lair from disintegrating entirely. That was fine, though. It was a burden he need not know of. It wouldn't help any.

Then, after Danny, Tucker, Jazz, then Sam. Jazz and Sam were both more athletic than Tucker, with faster reflexes. They'd be more likely to get themselves out of harm's way that Tucker. Then, the twins, then Paulina, then Dash. Valerie could take care of herself. Maddie... Well. Echo didn't really want her to die. It would devastate Danny. If everyone else was fine, he would protect her, too.

He made another turn. He knew this landscape infinitely better than the GIW, but there were more of them, and they were starting to split into groups. The shadow snarled. They were tracking them, somehow. That complicated things.

Danny had more than enough time to build up a significant sense of dread before Echo stopped before a building's doorway and made to usher them in. When they had started to run, he had known things were bad. When Echo had doubled back to throw the twins over his shoulders, he had known things were terrible. But if they were abandoning the effort to get to the Door, which Danny suspected must be in a facsimile of FentonWorks, in favor of hiding in a building, then things were hopeless.

"Stop!" Danny's head swiveled towards the unfamiliar voice. There were two men there, in camouflage and body armor, at the corner of the building, not even thirty feet away. They had weapons in their hands, raised and trained on the group. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see Valerie, Paulina, and Dash, obeying, and raising their hands. He could see Echo tossing the twins into the building. Maddie started to move, to step in front of him.
He saw the guns move with her.

Team Eurydice had instructions about what to do when they encountered the Fentons.

The preferred outcome would be for each of the four Fentons to be sniped, long distance, with a high-powered ectoplasmic rifle, then for Eurydice to withdraw, and send in Team Orpheus. It would be easier for them to blame the deaths on ghosts that way.

But there were other contingencies. An apparently accidental death was acceptable. Being caught in the crossfire between agents and a pair of ghosts would also do nicely. The children wouldn't be able to tell who shot who, in such a situation, and they would be so relieved to be rescued, that they wouldn't ask questions. Yes. That was an excellent scenario, and one that Alpha and Gamma were more than willing to carry out.

Danny saw the guns track Maddie, traced the probable trajectory in his mind's eye. He saw the agents start to squeeze their triggers.

Something snapped, inside him, and across all the shadows, rippling, shuddering, altering things, just a little bit, just for a moment. It was the culmination off all the pressures he had been put under, suddenly made dire, made explosive, by the application of extreme, outside force.

No ghost could tolerate such a direct assault on their obsession. Not in their presence, and certainly not in their lair.

Danny had even injured his own mother, when she raised a deadly weapon against another.

Danny loved his mother.

These, however... He had no obligation to them. No desire to protect them, to keep them safe.

They might be human, but... Did that mean that they were people?

No. Not after this.
Despite spending a large potion of his time fighting, Danny was not, by nature, a violent person. Nor was he particularly vengeful, though he could certainly be petty, or at all cruel. As a matter of fact, Danny was rather forgiving. He didn't hold grudges, even when he should.

This was why, despite having more than enough justification to do so, despite having dropped them from his list of 'people,' the thought of killing the GIW agents never even crossed his mind.

Hurting them, however...

As far as he was concerned, that was fine.

There were plants and flowers everywhere in Danny's lair. This would likely appear odd to someone who wasn't very familiar with Danny, because flowers really didn't fit Phantom, thematically speaking. The reason for their presence was mostly because Sam liked plants, and Jazz liked flowers, but, as Maddie had discovered, they served another purpose. Defense. Ghost plants were aggressive, and frequently dangerous, but, once in a lair, they weren't terribly difficult for the lair to co-opt and control.

This was why, when the men made to fire at Maddie, thick, wooden spears shot out of the nearby buildings, driving through the men's arms and legs, pinning them in place, exploding their weapons into a thousand, sharp, jagged, shards that dug deep furrows in their exposed skin. Then, the still-living vines pulsed, and sent out smaller, greener, vines to wind around their limbs, preventing them from pulling free.

At the same time, the temperature plummeted. Frost formed on every surface, crackling and snapping. The wind picked up, icy, cutting.

Paulina screamed.

Danny's vision tunneled, but he was frozen to the spot, clinging to Maddie's sleeve. He was afraid that she would be targeted again, and he had to be ready to pull her out of the way. There was no telling what these people could do, what they were capable of. They might be able to escape.

Then he remembered (memory of a memory of a dream, he didn't know how he knew these things). There were others. These weren't the only ones. There were more of them. They were dangerous.

Maddie wasn't the only one in danger.

He had to protect. He had to keep them safe.

"Get inside!" he half-shouted, now pushing Maddie towards the doorway. "Get inside! Hurry!"

"Danny," said Maddie, horrified, "what-?"

"They were going to shoot you!"

"How can you know th-"
"This isn't the time to argue, Valerie!" snapped Jazz. She was pulling Paulina, who had frozen, to the doorway.

Echo was- Where was Echo? Where-? Had they gotten him?

No.

There he was, walking towards the trapped GIW agents. *Incandescent*. His aura burnt bright, and as he lifted off the ground, blue-white tendrils that could have been plants, or frost or both (botany in the Infinite Realms was strange) followed his path. Danny could feel his fury, as he stalked closer and closer to the agents, because it was *his*, *Danny's*, fury.

(Echo wanted to *hurt* them. Danny just wanted them to *go away*.)

(The shadows were not, quite, exactly the same as Danny.)

"**You were going to kill her,**" said Echo, the inhuman reverberation in his voice that had faded to almost nothing returned full force. "**You were going to put a hole in her head and her heart. You don't get to do that.**"

One of the men had managed to keep an arm free, and now he pulled a pistol-type ectoblaster from his belt. Echo smacked it away with the back of his hand, hard enough that Danny could hear bones break. The gun skittered away, across the pavement, coming to rest a couple feet to Danny's right.

Echo raised a hand, icy vines following it up, and twining together to form a long, razor-sharp point. "**Would you like me to demonstrate where?**" he asked pointing to the man's forehead. The icy point followed the gesture.

Danny's breath caught in his throat. Echo wasn't *really* going to do that, was he? He wasn't really-

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Echo suddenly shrieked and flickered, dropping to the ground. Danny gasped, and collapsed. The ground trembled. The vines wilted. The vibrant, dark colors of the sky began to bleach.

Jazz whirled, trying to find out *why*, priming her wrist rays. She saw Sam and Tucker going for their own weapons, even as Maddie dropped to check Danny.

"Looks like we owe the tech guys an apology," said an unfamiliar voice. "This spectral disruptor really did come in handy."

"Alpha! Sir, what happened?"

"Orders, sir?"

They were surrounded. Jazz swallowed, and prepared for a hopeless fight. Jazz could fight, but she wasn't a soldier, her weapons weren't designed to hurt humans. They were designed to *not* hurt humans.

"Cut me out," said Alpha, cradling his broken hand against his side. "Carry out the mission."
"But, sir," said one, "witnesses-"

"Acceptable losses," barked Alpha.

The soldiers nodded, and turned, raising their weapons. "Nothing personal," said one of them, as he trained his gun's sights on Jazz.

"Ready," barked one of them.

"Wh-what," stuttered Paulina. "Wait-"

"Aim."

There was a sharp crack of gunfire.

The soldier who had been holding the spectral disruptor fell, a hole through his device and his leg. There was another shot. Another. The soldiers started to scatter, but a few of them paused, their guns still pointed at the Fenton's and Danny's classmates.

The sky darkened further, throwing the street into darkness. Jazz was just barely able to catch sight of Danny, sitting up, the ectoblaster that Echo had struck from the soldier's hand grasped in his, blood flowing freely from his nose and ears, his face terrifyingly blank, before the darkness became absolute.

A pair of bright green flashes shot down from the rooftops, briefly illuminating their targets. Jazz raised her fists, sighting down her arms to fire her wrist rays. She wasn't afraid of friendly fire. Except for Echo, everyone was behind her.

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By the trapped agents, Echo flickered again, his aura sparking. The shadow pushed himself to his feet, dizzy. It was a new experience, but not one that he enjoyed.

Echo, like Danny, could see in the dark. He saw the agents, some of them still firing (more or less blindly) at the others. He snarled, and launched himself at one of them, a taller, thinner man, who had been fumbling with what Echo took to be night vision goggles of some kind.

This would not be permitted. This would not be allowed.

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Danny felt...


It was like all his emotions had dropped away, leaving only crystalline purpose, right and wrong, a single straight path, no colors, only the gray, the black, the white.
He didn't think that he could stand, indeed, he wasn't. He thought that Maddie might have picked him up, and now they were taking shelter by the walls of one of the buildings. It didn't matter, though. He didn't need to stand.

He just needed to make sure that they couldn't.

Vines began to carpet the street, starting at the edges. They took those agents who had sought out shelter first. Danny could feel their bones snap as the vines wrapped tightly around their ankles, he could hear their screams, feel their wrists be bound as they hit the ground, hit the vines.

He could see Shade and Umbra take aim and fire, as if their eyes were his own, he could see the smoking, circular burn marks they left on their victims. He could feel Fractal, as he angled an icy knife up between the ribs of an agent who was frantically checking a screen on his wrist. He could hear Mirage and Mirror as they both lead men astray with misleading voices and images. He could taste blood, as Echo fought an agent literally tooth and nail.

Then, like the surface of a pool stilling, ripples smoothing, after a stone had been thrown into it, Danny was himself again, his emotions returned, just as they were, just as they should be, stronger for their brief absence.

(But something remained of that moment of clarity. A thought. A conclusion.)

The flowers on the vines bloomed, once again shedding light on the streets. There were teeth among the glowing petals, pearly white and needle sharp.

Danny struggled to stand. Maddie's lower arm had a bloody, fist-size burn mark on it. One of the agents must have hit her at some point. She had been shielding him. Danny forced himself to breathe evenly. This wasn't life threatening, and he could fix it. His eyes flicked to the others. Dash was bleeding heavily from his ear, a chunk of flesh about the size of a penny missing from it. He'd be fine, too. Tucker- Oh, that wasn't good.

Echo, still bloody, came to Danny's side to help him up, even as Fractal slid to Tucker's. Maddie made as if to stop Echo, but thought better of it, instead supporting Danny from the other side. Jazz, Sam and Fractal were all trying to stem the blood pumping from the hole in Tucker's upper thigh.

"It's the femoral, isn't it?" asked Tucker, breathlessly, his face rapidly paling.

"Yeah," said Jazz.

"Stop trying to sit up," said Sam, swinging her backpack off, and pulling out her first aid kit.

"Y'know, I never really expected the GIW to be the ones to kill me."

"You aren't dying, Tucker," said Danny, dropping down next to him. "Help me," he said to Fractal.

"Of course," said the shadow, a touch of anxiety in his tone.

"Did the bullet go through?" asked Danny. "Is there an exit wound?"

"Yes," said Jazz, crisply.

"Okay. Great."

"Me having another hole is great?"

"You not having the bullet stuck in you is great," said Fractal. "Considering that the ones lodged in
the walls contain trace ectoranium, I doubt that we could effectively phase the bullet out of you, or otherwise remove it with ghost powers."

"This is going to feel weird," warned Danny. He took Fractal's hand and moved it over Tucker's wound.

"You know what feels weird?" said Tucker. "Being shot. Being shot feels weird. I mean, it isn't like this is the first time I've been shot or anything... Hey, Sam, if I made it my last request, would you ask Danny out? 'Cause, like, we both know that you're the aggressive one in this relationship, yeah?"

"Tucker," said Danny, putting his hands next to Fractal's. Their hands began to glow faintly blue. "You aren't going to die."

"Y-yeah," said Sam. "Stop being such a baby about this."

"Are you using your ice powers on my leg?" asked Tucker. "Is that a good idea? I mean, bullet wounds are bad, but so is frostbite... Not Frostbite, Frostbite is great, but like, frostbite... Heck. Frostbite, frostbite, Frostbite, frostbite... They sound different in my head, okay?"

"I bet a lot of things sound different in your head," said Sam.

"Are you insulting the dying guy? Really?"

"You aren't dying," said Danny. "We need everyone to be quiet now." He watched carefully as the aura around his and Fractal's hands darkened to a more brassy blue, one that matched the glow of Clockwork's amulets (He didn't notice Mirage and Mirror gesture at the vines, causing the plants to grow gags over the mouths of their prisoners). He wasn't healing Tucker the same way he had healed Maddie the other day. (He honestly didn't know what he had done that time, and was hoping that, whatever it was, it wasn't something that he could only access when high on excess emotional energy, or a one-off panic reaction, which was also possible.)

Clockwork had shown him how to do this, but it was difficult. It required focus. The fight had lasted for about five minutes, maybe a little less, so five minutes ago, Tucker hadn't been shot. Five minutes ago, Tucker had been standing there. So... Move there, five minutes ago to here and now. Or, should he just accelerate? Both had their risks, and he couldn't keep the time of Tucker's leg stopped for too much longer. He'd get gangrene.

"Option one," said Fractal, speaking in Esperanto. "With option two, we'd have to make a temporal gradient, so that it wouldn't get weird with the rest of his body, and I don't know how we'd deal with the energy requirements. Remember that short story? As it is, this'll only work because-" Fractal cut himself off. Because Tucker is liminal, and therefore can deal with a chunk of his thigh being replaced by a time-delayed version. They didn't need to give the GIW that information, even in Esperanto.

"Oh. Yeah." Danny swallowed and nodded. Ancients, he shouldn't do this when he had what must be the ghostly version of brain damage, but he didn't have a choice. Tucker was bleeding out.

The blue glow intensified, then flared. When it cleared, the hole in Tucker's leg was gone.

Danny sighed in relief.

"Gosh," said Tucker, "you were right, that feels weird."

"You're weird," said Sam. "Mrs Fenton," she said, "let me take a look at your arm."
Mirage and Mirror, both in Phantom form, began to move then. They were going to question the GIW, as Phantom. Good. Danny had some questions he wanted answered.
Chapter 68

Chapter 68: Finder and Found

"We're going to have to go to Walker," said Adrestia, finally defeated.

"What?" exclaimed Alex. "Why?"

"Because, as gross and jerky as he is, he's also the only one who has the equipment to detect material plane objects," said Adrestia. "And, honestly, we're almost out of Earth-space here. I kinda doubt that the Guys in White or Phantom are out of Earth-space."

"What about Technus?" asked Meg. "He's the one who reported this, yeah? He'd wanna help us, and he's the one that's all like, 'beeping!' right?"

"Yeah, but Astraea asked him, and he said that he sold everything to Walker. For, you know, a loose definition of 'sold."

"Extortion?" asked Tess.

"He's a bully," huffed Alex. "I've gotta wonder if he was ever a real police officer, or warden, or sheriff, or whatever, or just, you know, a gangster or something."

"Come on, girls," said Adrestia. "Let's not drag this out any longer than we have to."

Umbra landed silently in front of the Door building. The last vestiges of the GIW in the lair were waiting there, by the Door itself. They had Jeremy. Umbra would take him back, now.

He donned invisibility, and stepped into the familiar building, one hand on his sword.

"So," said Mirror, lightly, approaching the first man caught, "you're in charge?" He flicked his hand, and the gag came off. The man remained resolutely silent, glaring.

Mirage rolled his eyes. "Really. Don't play noble after trying to kill someone."

"Maybe one of theses others would be more talkative?" The gags on the other men peeled off.

"No?" said Mirage, looking over his shoulder. "That's alright."

"You can just listen for now."
"While I ask questions."

"Why Eurydice?" Mirror paused for a moment. "Why name yourselves after the one who did not return? Where is Orpheus, in all of this?"

"Are you waiting for him to come and save you?"

"We're not telling you anything, ghost!"

"And there's the weak link," said Mirror, turning, smiling, being as sinister as possible.

"Agent Epsilon, is it?" asked Mirage, smiling toothily. "Where is Orpheus? Off chasing another lead? Another group of material- excuse me- real world objects? We know that you have trackers for that kind of thing."

"No. I think not. Nearby, then? Is that what yet waits outside our Door?"

"I'm not telling you anything."

"Shut up, Epsilon!"

"Oh, methinks the lady doth protest too much," Mirage said as Mirror cackled.

"How many?" demanded Echo. He was still half-shielding Danny with his body. "More than you? Twice as many? Thrice? Four times?"

Danny, meanwhile, had been entranced by the sight of the toothy flowers systematically dismantling the soldiers' guns. However...

"Mirror," said Danny, getting the shadow's attention. "Did you tell the others where you were going before you left?"

Mirror blinked, then, with an air of exaggeration, sighed. "I didn't."

"Nor did I," said Fractal, raising a hand to his lips in consternation.

"You should go, then," said Mirage in a commanding voice. He donned Mirror's sinister grin. "I can handle this. The other two shadows exchanged glances, shrugged, then vanished. "Maybe I could make this easier for all of us, if I introduced myself?"

"We know who you are," snapped one of the soldiers.

Mirage tilted his head. "Do you?"

"You're the Phantom. Scourge of Amity Park."

"Protector of Amity Park," corrected Mirage, crossing his legs to float midair.

"This is taking too long," snarled Echo. He raised a hand, and the vines began to stir.

Mirage also raised a hand, but this one was quelling. One sharp-pointed vine paused inches from the back of one of the soldier's necks.

"Monster," accused Alpha.

"You think so, do you?" asked Mirage, vanishing, to reappear in front of the leader, their noses
almost touching, "I guess that makes sense, considering that I just tried to kill a bunch of children. Oh wait. No. That would be you." He paused. "You know, I almost pity you," said Mirage, floating backwards. "If you came here with the intention to hurt, to kill, this was always going to be the result. You were always going to loose." He ran a finger along one of the vines that had punctured the agent's arm. It pulsed, and the agent screamed. "Almost. Not really. You tried to hurt people, after all. I can't allow that. I can't forgive that. Not from arrogant things like you. If you had only restrained yourselves, if you had only acted like the human beings you so resemble, I would have let you wander. I would have let you walk. I would have let you stay. I would have let you leave. Not now. Not when you have made such a transgression against my hospitality. Not when you have so threatened my guests. But, if you cooperate, I might still let you live."

Echo hissed. Danny cringed. He didn't like the idea of keeping the agents here, hated it passionately, in fact, but at the same time, he couldn't let them go, couldn't let them be a threat to his family and friends.

"So," continued Mirage. "I now know a lot about you. About Orpheus. There are about three times as many of them, as there are of you, for example. I suspect that they were also the official team. The ones meant to bring those you didn't kill back? That's right, isn't it? The names would make more sense then. The problem with double meanings is that, sometimes, people can read between the lines. But the thing is, that right now, even though I'm saying this, and you're feeling quite a bit of trepidation, you are also feeling... Determination? And... dread, I believe?" He whirled, flitted to one of the other agents. "Agent Theta. Why are you feeling such dread? Such fear? And not of me. I know what that feels like."

"'Off chasing another lead,'" said Danny. "When you said that, it didn't quite match up. That one," he pointed at Gamma, who was imprisoned next to Alpha. "He twitched, I think."

"Oh? Who would they be, I wonder, and where are they going?" He leaned closer to Theta. "I already said that I'm not going to kill you," he said, gently. "I don't even want to hurt you. That one," he jerked his head towards Echo, "is another story, but then..." he trailed off, noting the bite marks on Theta's person. "I think you knew that. I can help you, with him. You just need to help me with this. Don't give him an excuse to hurt you."

"Don't tell him anything," grated Alpha. "That's just a duplicate. He's playing you."

Mirage sighed, standing. "You know," he said, "when it comes to my abilities, I often learn best by doing. But some things, well, some things, you just can't practice. They're too dangerous. Like," he said, raising a hand, a spiked vine following it, "this. With a lot of this, that you see, I'm copying another ghost. But I've never actually practiced this part of it. If I were to do any part of it wrong, then... Well. Someone would die. In this case, you."

"We'll go through you one by one," said Echo. "Until we get it right. Then you'll be ours, to do with as we please."

"Or until someone says something. Out of fear for themselves. Or, maybe even for something even more human." Mirage smiled. "Maybe you could become people again. Surely even you must care for something, for someone. You fought with these, alongside them, did you not?"

"Forget it," said Echo. "They don't love anything. They can't." The vines twitched, jostling broken bones. The flowers snapped and clacked. One vine scraped against the back of Iota's neck, drawing a drop of blood.

"Stop it!" shouted Alpha.
Echo snarled.

"Oh, a soft spot. Don't worry, if you tell, the worst we'll do is keep you."

Alpha bit his lip.

"No?" said Mirage. "Or... You're worried about something else now. Something has just crossed your mind. Something that will happen if you stay here? But you're hoping. You're hoping that Orpheus will come to you? But, you must realize, that if they come, they'll fall into the same trap. They won't stand a chance. And now even more of you are afraid. Of what? What are you dreading? Something hasn't gone according to plan. Something that you wouldn't be worried about if you weren't here. If you weren't... You've been looking at your wrist. Loosing time. You're on a time limit. Does Orpheus leave, then, or... The other one. You have to be gone before the other one is finished. Who are they? What are they doing, that's so important?"


An agent crossed back through the Door.

"Alpha Orpheus says that Inanna has just passed out of communication range," said the agent. "Has Alpha Eurydice contacted you yet?"

"No, sir," said the other agent.

The first frowned. "He should have. You, Nye. Do you know anything about this."

Jeremy shook his head emphatically.

"Alpha Orpheus says that we should retrieve the other humans as well, if possible," said the first agent.

"That's great," said Jeremy, his smile strained.

"However, he said that we should make sure that all of those who return with us have only the highest opinion of the GIW."

"I see," said the second man, drawing his pistol.

This was enough to drive Umbra into action.
Chapter 69

Chapter 69: I Know What You’re Thinking

"Inanna," said Mirage. "That's the third group. The goddess who invaded the underworld. Fitting, I suppose. She died, though. She was resurrected later, but still."

"Dammit, I'm not doing this!" exclaimed Theta.

"Agent Theta," scolded Alpha.

Theta cursed at Alpha. "Inanna. They're not a rescue detail."

"Theta-"

Mirage cut the man off with a flick of his hand, the gag regrowing.

"They're after a target," continued the man. "One that could get rid of all you freaks. But if we're here when the Bomb is triggered, we're all dead."

"The Bomb?"

Theta licked his lips. "I heard one of the science guys call it Project Ophiotaurs."

"What?" exclaimed Sam.

"What's wrong?" asked Danny.

"Ophiotaurs was a creature whose blood was supposed to kill gods."

"Wait," said Danny, closing his eyes. "A target that could take out all ghosts... A bomb... A god killer..." Danny rubbed his head. These were puzzle pieces, and he was so close to putting them together, but he was so tired, and so many other things had happened in such a short time.

"My god," said Maddie, suddenly. "When did you split up?" she demanded. "Tell me," she insisted, when the agents and the just stared at him.

"About twenty-four hours ago," said Theta.

"My god," repeated Maddie, raising a hand to her hand. "Are you insane? If you succeeded, do you have any idea what would happen to Earth?"

"Mom?" said Danny. "What's wrong? What are you talking about?"

"Danny, do you remember back when your father and I were researching the link between the Ghost Zone and the real world?"

"Yeah?" he gasped. "You don't mean... They're not... They can't, they tried before and I- we stopped them!" He stood, clenching his fists, green blooming in his eyes, and took a step towards the agents. "You're trying to destroy the Ghost Zone? How? Where? Don't you know that will destroy earth as well?"
"What are you talking about?" asked one of the agents.

"The Ghost Zone and the real world are two sides of the same coin," said Maddie. Danny's breath caught in his throat. "Events in one effect the other. If you destroy one, you destroy the other. You have to get in contact with them, tell them to stop."

"How do you-"

"I'm an ectologist. My husband and I built the world's first ghost portal. I know what I'm talking about."

"We know who you are, traitor b-" He cut off with a shriek, as a vine tightened around his ankle.

"You will show respect to my guests," said Mirage, his voice even.

"We can't contact them," said another agent. "Our radios haven't worked since we came in, and before that, they were almost out of range."

"Ancients," said Danny, running a hand through his hair. "We have to- We have to stop them. How... I need... You..."

"I'll take care of these," said Mirage, still playing the part of Phantom for the agents. "I'll make sure that Dash, Paulina, Valerie, and the twins get to a safe place. The rest of you go to the Door."

"Right," said Echo, practically picking up Danny. "Hurry," he said.

"Put me down," said Danny, as soon as they were out of sight of the group. "Echo, put me down. I've got to- We've got to get everyone who can fight. Everyone who can be a distraction. Everyone who can get here in time." Echo put him down, and Danny ran a hand through his hair, striding forward. He pulled on his core, triggering his transformation into Phantom. It hurt. Danny ignored it. He didn't have a choice. (Rather, he had a choice. He had had a choice. He had just made it long ago. He had made it when he died in the portal. This was the reason he existed.)

All around them, bells began to ring, every clock in the doorless town going off at the same time. The bells of the churches, the town hall, and the clock tower in park were the loudest, clearest, ringing out a complex melody.

"Danny," said Maddie, "what are you planning on doing?"

"Fighting. We have to get through the agents outside the Door. At least one person, to spread the word, so that something can be done. If we can beat them... Then we take their vehicles. They have to have them. A lot of them, to get so many people here. Then we need to find Inanna. Stop them. Get to them before they get to the Core." He stopped. "You'll need to get protective gear, all of you. The Core is dangerous. For humans and ghosts, but for different reasons. Your suit won't cut it, Mom."

There were now dozens of wisps swirling around Danny. A pair of ghostly cats slunk out of an alley. Other things fluttered and swirled in Danny's wake, phantasms and formless specters, ghosts that would never survive outside the Ghost Zone, ghosts that had never shown themselves to the Harmonians, and wouldn't have shown themselves now, except that Danny has asked them to. He began to speak to them, explain what had happened, giving them instructions, asking for information.

"I might know a shortcut to the core," said Danny, "depending on where we come out."

"How?" asked Tucker.
"Clockwork showed me, once, said I might need to know, but he wasn't sure."

"How could he not be sure?" asked Maddie. "I thought that he could see the future."

Danny groaned. "Too complicated to explain." He swallowed a giggle.

"Danny?" said Jazz, suspiciously. "Are you..? What did you tell the wisps?"

Danny glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes burning bright. "I need all the energy I can get."

"Danny, you know that isn't healthy."

"Doesn't matter. Everything's over if we can't stop Inanna."

"Is that our house?" said Maddie.

"The Door is where the Door is."

"In your room?"

"No. The basement."

They entered, Maddie, commenting softly on how similar everything was, how even many the stains on the carpet had been copied from the original FentonWorks. The only difference was the lack of electronics, the detritus of invention, and the signs a four-person family leaves in its habitat.

They went down the steps. The two GIW agents were tied to a pipe, deep cuts on their legs. Umbra was helping Jeremy, checking him over for injuries.

This was the first time that any of the others had seen Umbra, but they were growing used to the shadows now. All they did was blink. Echo introduced him, briefly. He looked like Danny's human form. He wore what looked like a military dress uniform, all black, complete with a tasseled sword.

More ghosts filed in behind the group. Maddie looked like she was about to crawl out of her skin, but she was restraining herself.

"What's going on?" asked Jeremy. "Who are you?"

"I'm Phantom," said Danny. "This is mine," he said gesturing around himself. "I'm sorry. We don't have a lot of time. The friends of the people who attacked you," he hooked a thumb at the agents, "are trying to destroy the universe. Literally. We need all the help we can get. Do you mind?"

"Wh- What's the plan?"

"Not much of one."

Shade came down the steps, into the basement. He had his rifle slung over his back, and a dozen sets of headphones in his hands. "These are modified to cancel spectral noise," said the shadow, offering one to each of the humans. He then unslung the rifle from his back, and offered it to Maddie. "Here, take this. I won't be able to leave the lair. Valerie is trying to follow you, by the way. I think she knows where we were going. She is unhappy about what happened. I don't think that she understands how close she came to dying."

"It is always a shock," said Echo. "The first time someone you trust tries to kill you." He looked pointedly at Maddie. "This is your last chance." He went to the other room, and started to pull out drawers.
"So that's what I had to say?" asked Danny, fiddling with a piece of equipment that Shade had given him. "Two sides of the same coin, and then you would have gotten it?" If circumstances were different, Danny would have been hurt, would have been angry, but as it was, he didn't have time. Even as he said that, he was thinking of ways to fight, to survive, to protect. To make sure that everyone lived, that the worlds continued spinning. To save everybody. To not die.

"Danny," said Maddie softly.

"It is the same thing," said Danny. "It's fine though. We don't have time. Maybe you could explain to Dad, though."

"Echo," said Sam, getting the shadow's attention. "Were you and Mirage really going to use Undergrowth's mind control on those guys?"

Echo blinked at Sam, pausing his search. Then he smirked. "You don't think that we'd waste something as precious as truth on the likes of them, do you? We don't know the first thing about mind control."

Sam let out a breath that she didn't even know she was holding.

"Bit too sinister for you? Too dark?" teased Echo lightly, going back to his task.

"Sorry," said Sam. "Just... I don't like that kind of thing."

"I get it. If it makes you feel better, we handle the plants is completely differently than what Undergrowth does." He paused. "I might have stabbed them. I would have stabbed them."

"Now that's sinister. What are you looking for?"

"Hey, I have an idea," said Tucker.

"Yeah?" said Danny, his interest zeroing in on Tucker.

"Their radios," said Tucker, "do you know why they're being blocked? I mean, if it's something that's being done, like, if they're being jammed, or if it's just because they don't have enough shielding from spectral noise?"

"They're being jammed," said Mirage, flicking into existence. "Sorry. There was a bit of a mutiny. They're fine, they're all in safe places," he hastily assured everyone. "They're just in a lot of different safe places."

"The Guys in White?"

Mirage smiled. "They're in significantly less safe places. Tucker, do you want us to stop doing that? I
don’t think that the ones out there will listen to reason. Or nonsense. Or anything else, really. Or...
Oooh. I think I know what you’re thinking. I could mimic a voice, if not a face.”
Chapter 70

Chapter 70: At the Threshold

It took them a while to work out what to say. None of them had really 'heard' the agents trying to make contact. The lair was present throughout, but the lair wasn't intelligent in the way that humans and ghosts were. It did not know what had been said, could not know what had been said, in much the same way that it had not known who or what had, or still was, camping outside the Door.

But Danny had heard quite a bit, flashing through his head in a moment of panic. That's how he had known that this group, which had been in the lair, was named Eurydice. He just had to remember what had been said. How to make contact properly, without arousing suspicion, to make them lower their guards just enough to get into a good position to attack.

"This is Agent Alpha-Eurydice calling Agent Alpha-Orpheus. Over," said Mirage, his voice enough like Alpha's that it made the hairs on the back of Danny's neck stand on end.

"Alpha-Eurydice, this is Agent Alpha-Orpheus. How are you calling? Over."

"We have eliminated the ghost jamming our signal, and have secured several members of the beta target group. We have not yet located the alpha targets. Permission to send beta targets through to your location. Over."

"How many persons? Over."

"Four. Over."

There were several minutes of silence, during which time everyone held their breaths.

"Send them through. One at a time. Over."

"Affirmative. Sending the first one now. Over." Mirage put the radio set down carefully. "Okay, Sam. Are you sure that you want to do this?"

Sam nodded, and stepped towards the Door, checking her Fenton Phones one last time, then the weapon she had been given. They had decided that they couldn't send Maddie through first, because she would be shot, nor Danny, nor Jazz, as they hadn't been able to find out whether the GIW was after only the adult Fentons, or all of them, and, even in human form, Danny was looking a little ghostly (also, there was concern about what might happen to the lair if Danny died). The shadows couldn't go through, because they couldn't leave the lair. The wisps and other ghosts, like Maddie, would be shot. That left Sam and Tucker to go through and provide distractions.

The Door was in the same place that the Fenton Portal was in the original FentonWorks, but it looked completely different. Instead of a swirling green hole in the wall, it was an actual, rectangular door, made of dark, gray-black wood, with silver fittings. There were subtle patterns of stars,
snowflakes, and gears etched into the silver, and the fittings themselves spread out over the dark wood like frost.

Sam laid her hand against the Door. It was icy. She took the frigid doorknob in her hand and turned it.

There was a kind of membrane in the doorway. A shimmering, undulating surface between the lair and the outside. Sam had never seen anything like this in the doorway of a lair before. Then again, she had never seen a lair under attack before, so maybe this was normal.

She could see straight through it, but, somehow, she knew that the agents on the other side, in all their white-uniformed glory, could not see her. This would make things easier, Sam hoped.

She stepped through. Again, it was strange. It wasn't entirely unlike stepping through the portal. But it wasn't entirely like it, either. It tasted of lime, fire, and salt. It tasted like tears and blood. It clung to her as she passed through, reluctant to let her go, begging her to turn back, to be safe, to be cared for, to be happy, always and for all time.

(Sometimes Sam wondered what Danny would be like, if he had died all the way that day. She liked to think that he would be the same, but she wondered.)

"Identify yourself!" ordered an agent.

"I'm Sam Manson," she said, enunciating clearly. She didn't need to fake the slight quiver of fear in her voice.

"Samantha Manson?"

"Yes."

"Step forward."

Sam followed their instructions. After a while, a woman who Sam immediately pegged as a public relations/psychologist type (She felt only slightly guilty about this. She hated putting people into boxes, but as they had tried to kill her... Well...) came out and took Sam to a tent. There were benches, cots, and medical equipment in the tent, as well as a few doctors. The woman had introduced herself, but Sam hadn't been listening. The woman had said a lot of things, actually. She seemed to think that Sam was in shock.

The Fenton Phones buzzed, and Danny told her that Tucker had just come through. Just a few seconds now. Once Tucker reached the ring of fortifications around the Door, he would give her a code word, and they'd act.

Sam stared at her feet, looking at a tuft of grass sticking up through the white sheeting that was the tent's floor. It was a lustrous green-purple color, typical for grass in and near the Wastes, assuming that said grass was healthy, which it often wasn't. The Wastes were called the Wastes for a reason, after all, and it wasn't because they were a prime vacation destination.

She listened to Tucker, who was talking nervously through the Fenton Phones. He was just babbling nonsense, saying anything inconsequential that came into his mind. It wasn't a bad strategy. No one would suspect him of anything after he commented on the color of the tents, the clothes, the barriers, the weapons, everything, three times already.

"But, you know," he said, voice tiny through the Fenton Phone's speaker, "what I'd really like to do, as soon as I get home is eat a Nasty Burger!"
That was the cue. Sam's hand flew to the button on her wrist, and she depressed it.

Danny stepped through the Door not even a second later.

He opened his mouth, and Wailed.

Ectoweapons have ectoplasmic components. They often also rely on spectral signals and frequencies to function. For example, a standard blaster has both ectoplasmic conduits to bring charged liquid ectoplasm from the cartridge to the firing mechanism, and uses spectral frequencies to induce the ectoplasm to travel along those conduits.

This meant that ectoweapons were vulnerable to things like high volumes, and certain frequencies of spectral noise. Spectral noise like the spectral disruptor put out.

Of course, the spectral disruptor was designed to avoid the frequencies that GIW weaponry operated on, and Danny had broken it, but it was a good place to start. Between Maddie, who was a trained scientist specializing in ectology, Danny, who could sense ectosignatures and hear spectral noise, Shade, who had all of Danny's skills, but was less distracted by massive ectoenergy influx, and the need to recall what protocols the agents had been using to communicate, and Tucker, who was a technical genius, it wasn't too difficult to make what Maddie described as a pulse bomb that would target the GIW's weapons and tools.

It likely wouldn't do a lot of damage, and it wouldn't last for long. At best, some weapons might explode, overload, or begin firing continuously. However, it definitely would stop the weapons from functioning.

This is what Sam brought through with her, hooked into the activation button of one of her wrist-rays.

Unfortunately, there was only one spectral disruptor. So Tucker got something different. Something more oriented towards taking out humans. It was a grenade. A flashbang. He didn't know if the lair had had it to begin with, or if it had come through with the agents. He didn't care. He just needed to give Sam the signal, and take out the agents guarding this side of the Door long enough for Danny and the other ghosts to come through.

As soon as he said the trigger words, Nasty Burger, he pulled out the grenade, pulled the pin out, threw it away, and dove away to the side, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his ears. He kept his
ears covered even after he saw the flash of light through his eyelids, and heard the *bang*.

Danny was coming through, after all, and the plan was to make a lot more noise.

Danny Wailed, and Wailed, and Wailed. It wasn't nearly as strong as it normally would be, but that was a good thing. Danny wasn't able to target the Wail as well as he would like, and he didn't want to hurt Sam or Tucker. Although 'target' was probably the wrong word. The Wail was a strange and terrible power, and it seemed to affect different things, different people, in different ways, and Danny had little conscious control over the effects.

Behind him, ghosts streamed out from the Door. They weren't strong ghosts, many of them weren't even corporeal, or visible, but even weak ghosts could be lethal, under the right circumstances.

These were the right circumstances. The agents weapons were disabled by the disruptor, the agents themselves were disabled by either the flashbang or Danny's Wail. The agents' clothes were made to be ghost-proof, so they either went for the few exposed places, like faces or wrists, or ripped off the clothing entirely.

The ghosts were angry. They were not, in the grand scheme of things, particularly aggressive ghosts. They were followers, more than leaders. They liked having quiet existences. They liked staying in one place, subtly haunting it. Nothing big, nothing flashy. However, the GIW had invaded their home, had hurt the person that had given them sanctuary, and now they were trying to kill everyone, destroy everything.

Like all ghosts, they had a reason to exist, a reason to want to continue to exist. The end of the worlds did not fit into their plans.

Danny saw an agent run by with both of his hands missing. He saw another clawing at his eyes as wisps flew in and out of them intangibly. Other ghosts were pushing agents off the sides of the floating island. Some of the agents were fighting one another.

Then there was Tucker, shooting at the few mobile agents with a FentonWorks blaster. It didn't do much damage, but it knocked them back. He caught sight of Sam, briefly. Jeremy had gotten a gun as well, and was firing for all he was worth.

Then he felt to his knees, spent. Wisps swirled around him, replacing the energy he had lost. Spots danced in front of his eyes, and his rings slid over him as he lost hold of his ghost form. He felt, more than saw, his mother next to him, felt the hairs on his arms stand up as she fired her ecto-rifle.

But, before Danny got back on his feet, the sounds of battle began to die out. He scanned the carnage. Surprisingly, he felt very little about the corpses. He suspected that he was getting Obsession-induced tunnel-vision, and that once this was all done, assuming that he survived this, he would feel terrible.

The wisps and ghosts gathered around him, whispering, singing, telling him what they had found.

"I've never seen these kinds of ghost before," mumbled Maddie, sounding confused.

"You wouldn't have," said Danny. "They couldn't survive outside of the Ghost Zone, and they're
usually entirely imper-perceptible. They found the transports." He gestured away, to the edge of the little island, staggering a little. He thanked the little ghosts in their own sibilant tongue, and told them to go, to scatter, to spread the word. "We've go to go," he said.

Sam and Tucker rejoined them, little worse for wear, then Jeremy, a deep cut running across his cheek, breathing heavily. "What're we doing?" he asked.

"You four are finding protective gear, and I'm going after them. After Inanna. I know this area. I can get in front of them."

"Then what?" demanded Sam. "Danny, you're in no condition to fight."

"I don't know. Slow them down, I guess." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I should be better than nothing, and I should be less affected by the ectoradiation in the core than a human, and more stable than a ghost."

"Dude, that's suicide," said Tucker.

"Then hurry up and find protective gear before I get one of their glider speeder things to work. They'll probably be Egret-10's..." Danny trailed off, muttering to himself about different types of GIW gliders, and their various good and bad points.

"Remember," said Sam, although Danny wasn't sure who or what she was responding to, "this is the kid who landed the space shuttle once."

"What?" said Maddie. "When was this?"

"Technically speaking," said Tucker, "never."
Did you hear that?" asked Meg.

"Hear what?" asked Alex cupping her ear.

"That," said Meg. "The screamin'. You don't hear it? It sounds kinda like someone dyin.'"

"Yeah," said Tess, slowly, looking over her shoulder. "Jeez, it's been a while, since I've heard somethin' like that."

"Hey," said Adrestia. "Wasn't Phantom supposed to have something like that?"

"You don't think-"

"Yeah, I do think. Come on, kiddos, we've got a victim to find."

"Addy, I think that maybe you might need to, like, maybe think that sentence out a bit more, you know what I mean?"

"Why?"

It took some trial and error to get enough gliders started up, consuming time that Danny was loath to waste. He waited a minute, then, for the others, vibrating with worry. Then he couldn't take it anymore. He had to go, go now, or everyone would die and it would be his fault. He couldn't afford to wait. The worlds couldn't afford to wait.

He hopped on the nearest glider and twisted the throttle, pulling the handlebars up. Yes, he could try and fly on his own, but he was so weak now. The wisps had restored his energy, but they couldn't fix his injuries, couldn't undo the wear on his body. It was better to let the glider do the work.

"I can't believe he left without us," said Maddie, again, angrily zipping up the front of the bulky, and somewhat overlarge suit she had stolen from one of the GIW tents.

"We can," said Sam. "That's why we have a tracker on him."

"You what?"

"Have a tracker on him. The Boo-merang just wasn't cutting it, anymore," said Tucker, tapping away
on his PDA. "I'll ride with Sam, Jazz can ride with you. Um. You, what's your name again?"

"Jeremy. I don't think I caught yours, either."

"Sam, Tucker, Jazz, Maddie," said Sam, introducing all of them. "Have you ever driven a motorcycle?"

"Yeah, I had a bike."

"Well, this is a bit more complicated, but I think you'll be able to figure it out."

"Okay," said Tucker, "I know where Danny is now."

"How often does this happen that you need to have a tracker on him?"

"It's actually more because he keeps getting kidnapped, or stranded, than because he runs off," said Jazz, pushing Maddie towards one of the gliders. "And going ahead is probably the right decision, from a saving-the-world perspective, if not from a keeping-Danny-alive perspective. I mean," she said, perching behind Maddie on the glider as the older woman tried to decipher the controls, "we really aren't going to make much of a difference, if they're as heavily armed as the other ones. The lair gave us a massive advantage. I just hope that the shadows get everyone out in time."

Ellie would have laughed if anyone described what she and Danny had as a psychic link, but, ultimately, that's what it was. Not a strong one, like you'd see in melodramatic teen romances (Ellie spent a lot of time in libraries), but a link nonetheless.

They couldn't do anything silly, like read each others' minds, but they did occasionally get impressions of what the other was feeling, or doing. Ellie was on the receiving end more often than not, in her opinion. Danny was way more emotional than she was. The poor kid was always stressed. He should take a vacation every now and again.

On the other hand, once he had called her on a phone whose number he definitely shouldn't have known to demand to know why he had just had a vivid dream about fighting a Yakuza gang. That was over half an hour after Ellie had tangled with said gang, but still.

Then, sometimes, being on the receiving end could be a benefit. Like, it had only taken her a week to pick up Spanish, because Danny was already fluent, and sometimes she'd have an instinctive reaction to something that she'd never experienced before, only to find that Danny had. It came in handy, especially during fights, although it wasn't as convenient as the actual memories she shared with him, and it was certainly more confusing.

In any case, Ellie often got flashes of fear, pain, anger, and confusion from Danny. These were usually followed up by a sense of victory, and that odd, bone-deep satisfaction, that satiation, that happiness, that came from fulfilling one's Obsessions. Ellie tried not to worry too much about it. Danny was strong. He had saved her. He saved everybody.

(Sometimes Ellie wanted to go back to Amity Park, to help him. That was one of her Obsessions, too, inherited from him, but she was afraid. Afraid that if she went back, she would become as tied down, as trapped as he was. If he had ever asked her to stay, to help, maybe she would have. But he
asked different questions. Unselfish questions. Like, Are you happy? Are you safe? Do you have enough money? Do you want to stay? Do you want to meet our parents? Is there anything I can do for you? So she didn't.)

But what had happened a few days ago was anything but normal. The only thing that she had ever experienced that even came close to what she was feeling from Danny, was when she was destabilizing. When she was melting. When she was dying.

Needless to say, she booked it back to the States.

Once there, she stopped for a moment in a diner (even with natural portals doing much of the work, crossing the Atlantic was hard), only to discover (the diner had a TV tuned to a national station) that Danny's entire class had been kidnapped by a ghost, and that Amity Park was now crawling with GIW agents.

That meant that Ellie had a lead.

She had started going through a list of all the ghosts that had enough of a grudge against Danny to want to do something like this, and was strong enough, or tricky enough, to carry it out. The list was surprisingly short. Physical fights generally had a different connotation among ghosts than humans. It was more of a rivalry thing, than an enmity thing. The fights weren't quite 'all in good fun,' but few of the intelligent ghosts that regularly came to Amity Park actually wanted to hurt Danny.

Sure, Skulker talked about it all the time (and he had chased Ellie a few times before Danny had made it clear that Ellie was Off Limits) but whenever he had the chance to 'end the hunt,' so to speak, he didn't take it. Yes, Ember did try the mind-control thing nearly every time she thought she could get away with it, but she didn't do anything except make people go to her concerts. Okay, Johnny and Kitty caused chaos everywhere they went, but that wasn't entirely their fault. That list went on. Danny had even managed to broker tentative truces with some of them. After all, he had nothing against their Obsessions, just the methods they used to follow them.

But, the other list. It was short.

There was Aragon. The Dragon Prince of Maddingly blamed Danny, Sam, and Tucker for a number of things, including stealing his kingdom, turning his sister against him, and ruining his wedding. But Ellie would have expected to hear something on the news about a giant angry dragon tearing up the school.

There was Walker. Maybe. The Warden of the Wastes didn't like to leave his prison, and, last they spoke, Danny had been working on some kind of cease-fire with the rules-obsessed ghost. So maybe she should cross him off the list.

It could be Spectra. Ellie counted herself lucky that she had never met the woman. Danny's stories about her, when he could be convinced to talk about her at all, and her description in his ghost files were disturbing in the extreme. But she was more subtle than this. If she was going to go after Danny and his classmates, she would have used shapeshifting, or overshadowing, not a straight-up kidnapping.

Undergrowth was another possibility, in terms of power and motive, as was Vortex, and possibly Nocturne. But this didn't seem to fit their styles.

Ellie briefly considered Sobek, but he preferred a straight-up fight. Then the Mountain King, Baba Yaga, the Man With Golden Hands, Greenbeard, Long Wang... None of them felt quite right.
The news had said something about technology acting up right before and after the kidnapping. That might indicate Technus, but Technus was one of those ghosts who almost seemed to like Danny.

There was always Vlad... But he would never bring so much GIW scrutiny down on himself. He was smarter than that. More cautious than that. And he liked Danny too much to bring that kind of GIW scrutiny down on him.

It took Ellie until she found a natural portal to wonder if, maybe, Danny hadn't been kidnapped by a ghost at all, and that the story was a ruse on the GIW's part. She paused then. That made sense but... At the same time, it didn't. Why would they take an entire class of random humans, if that was the case? In Ellie's opinion, the GIW were evil, but that didn't mean that they had no morals at all. They hated ghosts, but surely they wouldn't go after Danny's class just to provide a cover story.

No. Danny was in the Ghost Zone somewhere, and Ellie was going to find him and help him get out of whatever mess he had gotten into.

She flitted through the portal just before it closed.

Then she realized that she had no idea where in the Ghost Zone Danny could be, and the Ghost Zone was a very large place, even if one was only considering the space that roughly corresponded to Earth. She sighed.

The only thing that she could really do, other than just fly around blindly, was ask around, try to see if anyone had heard anything.

It turned out that no one had seen Danny recently. However, a large number of people had been asking for him. Including Vlad Plasmius and the Gracious Ones. Whoever they were. Ellie was having trouble getting much of a description out of people except that there were either three or four of them, they had wings, and they were scary. That wasn't much of a description. Even Vlad's vultures fit it, more or less.

Then, after emerging from a rather noisy restaurant called Second Chance, she ran into the will-o-the-wisp. Ellie didn't know a lot about wisps. She tended to avoid them, for health reasons, but rarely encountered them in the first place. They lived in other ghosts' territories, and Ellie didn't have one, and wasn't interested in stepping on other peoples' toes. Generally speaking, they left her alone, too. They were shy little things, most of the time.

But this one trilled excitedly, urgently, at her, and tugged lightly at her sleeve. Ellie didn't know the wisps language, not really, but Danny did, so she got the general impression of what it was saying, which was mostly hurry hurry hurry, and, danger, disaster, with one or two cries of help thrown in.

Ellie couldn't ignore a cry for help any more than Danny could. Besides, knowing Danny, and the way that coincidence worked in the Ghost Zone (i.e., there were no coincidences), there was something like a seventy-five percent chance that he was involved.

Okay, so she was just making up the percentage. But still.

She followed the little ghost for some time, hoping that it wasn't leading her into an ambush. Wisps did have tendencies in that direction, after all. But it didn't. At least, it didn't lead her into an ambush meant for her.

The wisp had brought her to what was probably normally a very cozy little floating island. It had purple grass, a few furry trees, white tents, the remnants of explosions, a fair fair amount of blood, a large number of unconscious and possibly dead GIW agents, and a door.
Well.

A bit of cautious checking revealed that most of the agents weren't dead, and that a lot of them were tied up, one way or another. Ellie really didn't know how to feel about that. She'd never wished anyone dead, but the GIW were monsters. The things she'd seen them do... She shivered.

It looked like they had been mounting, or about to mount, an assault on the door. Bad idea. Doors like that lead to lairs, and while it wasn't impossible to defeat a ghost in their own lair, it was the next best thing. You'd need a weak ghost, with a poor connection, and possibly an externalized lair... Which didn't seem to describe whoever had done this at all. Ellie knew that if she had a lair, and these people were camped outside it, she wouldn't have come out until they left. Which this ghost had done, before beating the living daylights, and in some cases the living, out of the agents.

Ellie touched down lightly in front of the door, tilting her head as she examined it. It felt oddly welcoming, for something surrounded by so much carnage. She touched it, very lightly. It felt a lot like Danny. Was he behind the door? Or... Was this his door? Was it hers? Their ectosignatures were similar enough that it would be hard to tell-

"Excuse us!" called a voice, jolting Ellie out of her reverie. "Do you know what happened here?"

She jumped, whirling, green fire in her hands. Four women, one with four arms, the other three with wings, were hovering several meters above the island.

"Ohmigosh," said one of the winged women, the one with a single braid, her hands flying to her mouth. "So cute." This one began to sink towards the ground, but kept a respectful distance from the spooked (ha) Ellie.

"Did you do this?" asked the four-armed woman, sounding vaguely impressed.

"Uh," said Ellie, lowering her hands, deciding that the women weren't going to attack her. "No. I don't know. I just followed this guy here."

The women exchanged glances, and one of them, the one in the red dress, whistled at the wisps, created a ball of light, and made an inviting gesture. The wisp came away, and started singing at her.

"You're Danielle, right?" asked the four-armed woman. "I am Adrestia. These are my crew, Tess, in the red, Meg's the one having a conniption over how cute you are, Alex is the corpse poker."

"Hey, like only fifteen percent of these are corpses," protested Alex.

"How do you know my name?" asked Ellie.

"We have a description of your cousin, which you match, except that you're pretty obviously a girl," said Adrestia. "Do you know where we can find him, by the way?"

"Why are you looking for him?"

"We think that he might have been involved in a crime. Not as in, you know, he committed a crime, but that he might be a victim of a crime."

"Yeah," said Alex. "Cause your cuz seems like a pretty chill dude, from what we've heard."

"And, like, a solid rep is tough to get here in the Realms," said Meg. "Gosh, your hair's, like, so pretty. What d'you do to it?"
"Uh, wash it?"

"Meg, you want to tone it down a bit? You're freaking her out." Adrestia examined the door behind Ellie. "Do you know whose door that is?"

"No," said Ellie.

"Hey, Addie?" called Tess. "We've gotta problem. Like an ultra big problem."
Chapter 72

Chapter 72: Too Close

"So you're saying," said Maddie, her voice slightly raised, "that his Obsession is making him do this? That it's alright, because it's his Obsession?" Despite how fast they were going, there was little wind. "That anything would be fine, just because it's his Obsession?"

"No, Mom," said Jazz. "We've been over this. You're getting hung up on the Obsession thing. It doesn't replace a person's morality. It just adds an extra dimension. Actually, not even that. It's- If you wound up becoming a ghost, you'd probably be Obsessed with ghost hunting, like you already are. You wouldn't kill someone over ghost hunting, would you?"

"No," said Maddie.

"There are probably a lot of things that you wouldn't do. It's the same for ghosts. An Obsession isn't something that you'd do anything for, it's something that you want to keep existing for. Something you'd live for. I've read some papers, there are some good research organizations here, don't laugh, I'm serious, and they mostly agree on that. Some of them focus more on the regret angle- Anyway. It isn't something that's controlling him. His Obsession isn't even remotely sinister. It isn't something you should be worried about, especially not now. Please, let it drop. Careful! Watch out for the door!"

Maddie angled down sharply to avoid the floating object. Then she caught sight of Sam and Tucker diving into a swirling green whirlpool. "That's the shortcut?"

"Looks like it! Hold on tight!"

Ellie stood by awkwardly as the four women spoke to one another in rapid-fire Ancient Greek. Then, three of them broke off, flying away at high speed.

"Okay," said Adrestia. "We've got to do this fast, kid."

"My name is Ellie."

"Right. You've heard of Libra?"

"Yeah?"

"Okay. So, you should go to Libra. That's probably the best thing you can do for your cousin, right now. Then-"

The wisp interrupted, singing urgently.

"What? This is his? Why didn't you say so in the first place? Sheesh." Adrestia strode up to the door, and rapped smartly on it.
The door swung open immediately, revealing someone who looked identical to Danny, but who definitely wasn't him. "Oh, good. Ellie," he looked relieved.

"Who are you?" she asked, taking a step back.

"I'm Mirage. I'm a shadow." He looked up, at Adrestia. "They've got a bomb of some kind. They're heavily armed. They're headed to the core. Danny's gone after them, along with five humans. He's injured pretty severely, but that was the only option we had. Ellie, you can't go."

"Why?"

"Because if you go, and Danny fades, you're the only one keeping this lair intact, and there are a few hundred people in here."

"What, seriously?" asked Adrestia. Then she shook her head. "Never mind. I have to go."

"Please," said Mirage. "Save him."

Adrestia made a face and no promises before withdrawing, and following the other three women.

"Okay," said Ellie. "I want an explanation."

"Right," said Mirage. "That will take a while."

Danny came out of the portal, his skin tingling with the sensation of high energy ectoplasm. This wasn't good. His core was too damaged to deal with all the energy he was taking in. He could feel himself shedding energy as fast as he took it in, leaking through the cracks. He could feel it eroding him. But he needed it. He didn't have the strength to fight otherwise. He sped closer to the core, glowing green mist swirling off the surfaces of the speeder.

It was hard to see far under these conditions. Danny shut down the motor and let momentum carry the vehicle forward. He could hear better this way, without the growl of the motor. He could feel better this way, without the disruption in ambient spectral 'noise.' (Which really wasn't sound at all.)

He could hear the song of the Core like this, curling around his own core and brain, but not, quite, touching either of them. He could hear the portal behind him, so different from the music of his own portal.

(None of it was song. None of it was sound. He sometimes saw it. Sometimes it was ice on his skin, or shed heat, or a smell. His human brain did not always know how to interpret the signals it got from his core, even with his 'ghost brain' acting as a go-between.)

He drifted, or, more accurately, dropped, directing 'down' towards the Core. He knew that he couldn't get too close, that most ghosts that did dissolved, broken down, stripped of their ectoplasm until they were nothing more than their core, and were absorbed into the Core. Only a ghost with rock-solid sense of self, massive self-confidence, could dare the Core and survive.

Then he heard it. Engines. Many of them. One much larger, deeper, than the others. That was it. That was them. Briefly, Danny restarted the glider, reorienting it so that it felt towards the GIW
group. Towards Inanna. Towards Danny's probable death. Then he shut them down again. The quieter he was, the less likely they were to notice his approach. He'd never show up on their ghost-detectors. There was too much ambient ectoenergy. His own would be entirely masked, impossible to differentiate from the background.

Danny bit his lip. He could see them. He didn't like what he was going to do. He couldn't say that he preferred a fair fight, exactly. When the safety and happiness of his friends were threatened, he'd use every trick available. However there were... Rules. Equivalencies. Levels. The force he spent was equal to the force he received. He was always careful not to go to far, when he was fighting ghosts weaker than himself. When he fought humans, like his parents, Valerie, and the GIW, he never struck them.

Except for what he had done a few hours before.

Except for what he was about to do.

The thing was, there was reciprocation, with the ghosts. Most of them, anyway. Not the jerks, like Undergrowth and Vortex, but most of them. These people, though, these humans... Really, it was difficult to even call them people. They were going to destroy everyone and everything. It didn't matter why. It didn't matter if it was out of some kind of fanatic hate, or loyalty, or if it was for a cause, for money, or anything else, really. The fact that they were here meant that nothing short of death could stop them. It meant that any ghost that they had encountered between here and wherever they had come in had been ended, reduced to nothing.

Danny couldn't afford to give them anything even approaching a fair fight.

He raised the rifle (stolen from the GIW and so lethal) to his shoulder, sighting along the barrel. Doing this in free fall would be unpleasant. He almost wished that he had a bigger weapon. He licked his lips, and lowered the gun. Too far. He couldn't trust his vision at this distance, nor could he trust his aim. Perhaps he could... Ah. There. Yes. The glider was equipped with a 'real-world' object detector. (The name made him roll his eyes. As if the Infinite Realms were somehow fictional.)

He flicked it on. There were guidance systems. This could be a distraction. He toggled on the motor, too, and jumped away, altering his course, falling towards the Core and around it, orbiting, simulating gravity with his mind. Then he stopped, anchoring himself. He was between them and the Core, now, with the glider coming up behind them.

He waited, waited, waited, until they were distracted by the glider's arrival, then he raised his rifle and fired. Once, twice, three times, and then the knew that he was here. They were shooting back now, and, gosh, some of those were big. He dropped out of position, dodging a massive blast by a hair.

He was doing this as a human. He didn't dare do it as Phantom. He didn't want to be shredded to nothing, and with the way he had been treating himself lately, how he had been injured, how his core had been shaken, he didn't want to risk it. Not yet.

Two of his shots had hit. Only one had been immediately fatal, but from the way the other was convulsing, it looked like the ectoplasm, ectoenergy, and whatever else was here, because there was definitely something else, were enough to give humans problems, and that piercing their protective suits would be sufficient. Good.

(Beyond the immediate issue, the need to save the world, Danny worried that the others hadn't put their stolen suits on properly. Would their small measure of liminality help them?)
Danny swung around, up and down, back and forth, trying to keep his path unpredictable. Most of his shots were going wide, and the GIW were still advancing. He needed to push them back. He needed to get rid of that bomb, he needed to get rid of that long, white-painted cylinder. He needed to reduce the number of deadly projectiles coming his way.

He needed to be closer.

He fell towards the GIW agents, shooting all the time, stabilizing himself with tiny bursts of flight and telekinesis, willing himself to stay properly aimed, deflecting shots with shield-fragments. He couldn't spare the focus to do more.

Then he was among the agents. The rifle quickly became ineffective in the close quarters. He couldn't get it around fast enough. Several of the agents withdrew, backing away so that they could take advantage of the rifles' long range. Danny didn't let them have a clear target. Friendly fire was his friend in this situation.

He made a small, razor-sharp knife of ghost ice. Constructs weren't working well, here. It was the Core. Its will was stronger than his. His was nothing, compared to it. A candle to sunlight. A candle that would be overwhelmed and fade away.

Ghost ice wasn't like normal ice. Danny could manipulate both. However, only ghost ice could be formed into an edge no wider than a single atom, and harder and more durable than steel.

There was almost no resistance as he sliced through their thick protective suits and skin. It was almost as if he were intangible.

With his other hand, he directed his shields, deflecting the shots he couldn't dodge. Every so often he switched to telekinesis, pushing the agents off balance, striking buttons on their gliders and sending them haphazardly in all directions.

He wasn't able to dodge or block every shot, every strike. They grazed him with an electrified net, once, and he fell, back to the Core, unable to resist its presence. A bullet went through his leg. His core was cracking. Whenever he got too far from the other agents, the more distant ones took shots at him. One of them had some kind of rocket launcher.

Danny was fighting tooth and nail, and there was as much exhilaration in it as there was desperation. It was adrenaline, yes, but also the fulfillment of his Obsession. He hated it. He would have preferred nearly any other ways to deal with his Obsession to this. He hated people being in danger, and now everybody was. He hated hurting people. It grated painfully against his morals. Yet here he was, killing people. Doing this terrible thing. Committing this sin.

What they were doing was worse. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

Still, he was being pushed back, loosing ground to the agents. Closer and closer to the Core. Almost too close.

A bullet tore through his arm, and he hissed, dropping. That hurt. That burned. Poison. For ghosts. Danny was not, entirely, a ghost. He was living, so he'd live.

"What are you?" demanded one of the agents, a tall man, with the Greek letter beta written on his shoulder.

Danny brought himself to a halt, and reversed direction. That was what this fight was missing. Witty banter. He snarled. Not his best work, no. "If you are Inanna," he said, "then I am Neti!"
He didn't see the missile until it was too late. It didn't quite hit him, but it blew him backwards, closer to the Core. He struggled to stabilize himself, to work out which direction would take him away from the Core, to do so much as see clearly, to hear above the tinnitus afflicting his ears. He could feel the ectoplasm around him thicken, thoughts and feelings not his own wrapping around him, lovingly. He was too clo-
Chapter 73

Chapter 73: We Swear

It was Tucker who spotted them first, the three, then four, ghosts coming up behind them. This was good, because it gave them a chance to convince Maddie, who was once again armed, as trigger-happy as ever, and currently very high-strung on account of Danny's suicide mission, not to shoot them. That was very good, because as they got closer, the ghost detector on the glider began to scream.

"Hey!" called one of them, a woman with black hair and four arms. She was the fastest, having come from behind to join her companions. "Are you the ones with Phantom?"

"Yeah!" said Tucker. "Who're you?"

"We're with Libra! We're looking for the Guys in White. You have their trail?"

"Danny does! Probably. We have his. He thought they were going to the Core, this was his shortcut."

"Okay," said the woman. "Lead the way!"

"Got it!" said Tucker. He glanced at Maddie, who looked... weird, behind the faceplate of the protective suit. Like she had finally realized that everything Danny had told her was true. That ghost law was a thing, and that ghost law enforcement was standing, well, flying, right next to her.

These people would arrest her if they knew what she had done. Gosh, Danny would be freaking out so much if he was here right now. You wouldn't be able to see the freak-out. Danny had learned how to hide them, but it would be there.

As it was, though... If Tucker hadn't been worried that the government would cut his friend up, he would have probably... He didn't know. Done something. Told someone. He liked Mr and Mrs Fenton, but the situation with Danny bordered on neglect, even ignoring the whole 'hunting his alter-ego' thing.

Then shapes began to emerge from the ectoplasmic fog. A green-tinted island, almost invisible against the green background.

It was made of spears, swords, and other weapons. White-suited bodies were impaled on it, their machines shattered against the ground. A smaller, darker figure stood at the center of the island. Danny. But also... Not Danny.

There was something wrong. Something off. Once Tucker had been blind to this kind of thing, but he had since forced himself to learn. The world had forced him to learn. Danny had been impersonated too often, mind controlled too often, for Tucker to ignore.

Of course, the costume change, and the way that the ectoplasm swirled around Danny's frail, slender form was pretty much a dead giveaway (and there was the pun. Danny would be so proud.). Overall, Danny didn't go for capes, especially long, tattered, black ones. He also usually didn't have ice in his hair. Or fire and lightning licking up his arms. He didn't like either in general, really, although he could use both.
Oh. And there was the island. It was clearly a construct. Danny wasn't terrible at creating ectoplasmic constructs, but he simply wasn't this good at it.

He could tell that Sam had recognized it too, from the way she tensed. They had all been ready for a fight, but not this kind of fight.

"Danny?" called Maddie, setting her glider down and swinging off it. She wasn't attuned to the signs, clearly. Of course she wasn't. She hadn't even noticed that Danny was dead.

Tucker would give her points for not recoiling from the carnage, though. Even he was sort of freaked out. This wasn't like Danny at all. Which was another clue, come to think of it. Danny wasn't this flashy. Typically. He had his moments, just not when he was injured so badly. Danny was more... efficient, was how Tucker would describe it. Economical. Yeah. He wouldn't have wasted time or energy on tearing a guy literally in half. Nor would he have wasted it by staying in ghost form after the fight was won.

Sam landed, too. "We aren't here to fight you," she said, trying to stave off a disaster. "We just came to help Danny fight the Guys in White."

Danny turned, and Tucker's suspicions were confirmed.

Danny's eyes were weeping. Greenish, faintly glowing tears streaked his cheeks, putting Tucker in mind of Fractal's chalky blue tears. His eyes themselves were covered by a luminous green film. Danny's eyes, his pupils, iris, and sclera, were distinct and visible behind it, but only just. It put Tucker in mind of the time everyone had been mind controlled by Undergrowth. But the fire and lighting in his hands faded away, leaving only his gloves.

One of the ghost women made a noise of surprise. They knew what was going on here, Tucker realized.

"Who are you?" demanded Maddie. She had her hands on the rifle she had been given, but she did not raise it. Good. She was beginning to understand the damage that she could do Danny.

Danny's lips curled into a smile, and the person controlling him began to speak, their voice unlike any other Tucker had ever heard. It echoed, like any ghost's, including Danny's, tended to do, but it was also layered. It sounded like a dozen or more people all speaking in perfect unison.

"My children, you, I think," they said, nodding to the ghost women, "know me. But to humor your question and borrow a turn of phrase..." They lazily, yet delicately, stepped over a corpse. "If these are Inanna," Danny's hands lifted in a dismissive, yet encompassing gesture, "and this precious little one," they raised Danny's hands, and pressed them to his heart, "is my Neti, then I am Ereshkigal."

"You're the Queen of the Underworld?" asked Jazz, sounding confused.

"Hm. I suppose that's one interpretation." With another gesture, they smoothed the island, the weapons, but not the corpses, running together, vanishing, rendering it less immediately dangerous to walk on.

"No. You aren't the Queen," said Sam. "You're the Core, aren't you?"

Danny's head tipped to one side, the gesture almost familiar. "Yes. It isn't so strange, is it, that so many of your predecessors called the underworld and its ruler by the same name? It is only natural. Still. Clever little one, aren't you? I see why he loves you so." Then Danny's costume rippled, changing even more. The ice in his hair was a crown, now, one made of silver and icy flowers. His clothing was the odd, part-medieval European, part-Asian, part-Egyptian, part-Celtic mix that served
as the Ghost Zone's equivalent of international high fashion. A sword hung at his hip. The jewelry, embroidery, and other decoration was deceptively restrained. The smile broadened, sharpened (if Tucker couldn't see where Echo came from before, he could certainly see the resemblance now), and they spoke again, as they stepped closer. "Do you like what you see?" they asked, almost teasingly. "This is only what may yet be, not what will be. My eldest children debate this part," they touched the crown, "even now. You, my little ones," they said, now looking at the ghost women once more, "if you have the ears of your elders, tell them this, that this," a hand was pressed once more to Danny's chest, and his eyes burnt bright, "is the one that I want, and no other. Tell them that if they deny me this, then I shall sow such chaos, wreak such destruction, that the years of Pariah's rule shall seem like nothing."

The ghosts bobbed nervously. "As you have commanded it," said the four-armed woman, "it shall be done."

"Good," they said, returning to their former, languid stance. "Now, for what you may ask. Fear not. These," and again, they gestured at the corpses, "shall be punished accordingly. I shall allow you to have the ones that remain in the lair this one shares with his cousin, and elsewhere. Our people must have a clear villain in the face of this near disaster. Their sense of justice must be satisfied, lest it spill out onto the less deserving."

"Um," said Jeremy, still clinging to his glider, and looking like he already regretted speaking. "I'm sorry, sir, um, ma'am, I'm not quite following here. What, what do you mean 'shall'? Aren't they already dead?"

They scoffed. "Didn't you know? The armies of Hell are comprised of sinners. What greater sin could there be, than this? Than what they have done, to even make this attempt? Their souls shall be bound to their bones, even as their flesh rots, and they shall be buried beneath the black castle until they have repaid their debts, and redeemed themselves. If they can." The smile they wore was cruel. "At the least, it shall be a very long time, for such an affront." They were quite close to the five humans now.

"Hey," said Tucker, suddenly. "Where's the bomb?"

"Where it can do no ill." They closed Danny's eyes, and pulled a sigh. "This one, he is so suited for this. A cup of ice cannot hold water for long, and humans, you are not cups at all, but this one..." another sigh. "But he has cracks. He must rest soon." One by one, they fixed those present with a piercing gaze. "You will bring him to Imhotep. He is closest. You, my vengeful ones, you know the way?"

"Yes," said one of them, "we do."

"Good. But first, a gift. Not for you, but him. To you three who are his best beloved, I give my blessing, my permission, and one more thing."

They lifted off the ground, startling Tucker, who had somehow forgotten that yeah, duh, ghosts can fly. They moved swiftly, planting a kiss on first Sam's forehead, then Tucker's, and then Jazz's. Danny's lips were cold. The spot where they had kissed him tingled, and he rubbed it, confused.

"Why...?" asked Sam, recovering a little faster than Tucker.

"You will find out soon enough." They drifted back to the ground. "Catch him," they said, looking up at Jazz.

The film cleared from Danny's eyes, and the additions to his costume vanished, dissolving into
ectoplasmic mist and dissipating, leaving him in his usual suit, blood- and ectoplasm-stains clearly visible. Now it was Danny staring up at Jazz, and he looked terrible. Beaten, bruised, and bleeding. The ectoplasm in his eyes receded, revealing their natural blue. Then his aura flickered, and went out. His suit began to unravel, and his hair bled black. Soon, he was human again. His eyes rolled back, and he crumpled, Jazz barely catching him. He slipped through her fingers intangibly, at first, but she caught his shirt, and dropped down with him, making sure that he didn't hit his head. Maddie was down with them in the next moment.

Then Tucker and Sam slid over. Danny's eyelids were fluttering, and he moaned, a ghostly, keening noise. This reminded Tucker way to much of the Accident. Sam was picking up on it, too, or he'd eat his hat.

"What did it mean, that it wanted Danny?" asked Maddie, her voice strained.

"I don't know," said Jazz. "Come on, we've got to get him to a doctor."

"We'll take him," said the four-armed woman. "We'll be faster, and I don't think that you'll be able to carry him on those... things." With one of her arms, she gestured to the gliders.

(Tucker noted peripherally that the 'corpses' were sinking into the ground.)

"We can make an oath, if you'd like," said one of the winged women. "And, like, we're with Libra, so, you know. Rule of law, and all that." She frowned. "I guess that, uh, Addy's the only one actually in Libra, though? We're just, like, what's the word? Independent contractors. Yeah. But we're cool."

"Jeez, Meg. That was, like painful. But, yeah, we'll swear on anything."

"River Styx good?" said the third winged woman. "I mean, it's not as good as doing it with the actual water, but, whatever."

"Yeah," said Sam, "that'd be a start."
Chapter 74: Sensible

Danny wasn't entirely unaware of what was going on around him.

He could tell that he was in a place with a lot of green light. He could hear the rhythm of urgent speech above the rushing blood in his ears. His sense of touch was overwhelmed with pain, but there were places of greater and lesser sensation. His mouth tasted of blood and ectoplasm. He couldn't breathe through his nose.

But one of the perks of not being entirely human was access to non-human senses. So he knew, despite his traditional five senses being more-or-less useless, that Jazz, Sam, and Tucker were nearby, as well as maybe one or two other humans, and a few unfamiliar, but fairly powerful, ghosts.

He didn't know if this was a good thing or a bad thing. The last thing that he could recall was getting blasted by one of the agents' weapons, tumbling towards the Core, and then... He didn't know. He couldn't remember. He had the vague, uncertain, memory of something... filling him? Like he was an empty and willing cup, or a puppet that needed a hand inside it.

(If he had been awake, he would have shuddered. He would have cringed.)

Based on that, and the presence of the ghosts, there were two possibilities. One, the GIW agents had beaten him, but then his friends and/or the ghosts had shown up, and beaten the GIW. He liked that possibility. That's the one that he wanted. But then, possibility two was that GIW agents had beaten him, then moved on, and Jazz, Sam, Tucker and the ghosts had just shown up, and they were all going to die very soon. He didn't like that possibility, but it was more likely than not.

Well, there were worse ways to go than among friends.

Although, now that he thought about it, it was possible that Jazz, Sam, and Tucker could catch up to the agents, or at least disable the bomb. The agents didn't know that destroying the Ghost Zone would destroy the material plane. They would have an escape plan, a delay on the bomb, time to get away, and pick up the other agents. Something. Anything. Danny tried to communicate this to his friends, but he couldn't move. He would just have to hope that they would reach the same conclusions. They were smart. They were geniuses, and if he could think of it, so could they. Hopefully. Gosh, he wished that they had had more time to think, to plan, before rushing off after the agents, but he hadn't dared to risk it.

But then... They were still here, with him. They weren't trying to save him, at their own expense, were they? At the expense of the worlds? He'd be fine. Well, probably not, but he definitely wouldn't be fine if the world ended! No, they wouldn't do that. So perhaps the more hopeful option one was the correct one. That was good. Good.

So when one of the ghosts picked him up taking him away from his friends, his family, he dredged up the energy to protest. It was a small, pathetic protest, and it didn't have any effect, but it was the principle of the thing.

(He wanted his friends. He needed them.)

Then he felt motion, movement, acceleration. The ghost was taking him somewhere. They were
taking him away from the Core. He didn't know how to feel about that. Most of the time, when a ghost was carrying him somewhere, it was a bad thing, but Danny couldn't sense any hostility from this one.

Still, he was hurt. Everywhere. Hadn't been able to take an inventory of injuries, due to being... Well, he couldn't exactly call himself unconscious. He was thinking. Immobile, maybe. (He needed to learn more medical terms, considering how often he needed to use them.) Unresponsive! There it was. He knew he could find the right word.

It wasn't like he had anything better to do right now, though, so he might as well start his injury inventory, do as well as he could.

At the very least, he had a headache. Probably a concussion. His arm felt like it was broken. His nose was clogged, probably with blood, so it was probably broken, too. Breathing hurt, so add ribs to the list of things that were broken, and also a sore throat, from all the yelling (Wailing) he had done earlier. His leg felt hot, and so did his shoulder, so either they had been burned, or shot. He rarely got shot with actual bullets, so he wasn't sure how that was supposed to feel. Bad, probably, but 'bad' described how he felt in general, and he doubted that he had been shot everywhere, seeing as he was still (half) alive. Blood loss was a thing he was suffering from, but that was less of an issue in the Ghost Zone, especially where the ectoplasm was so thick.

(He, Sam, and Tucker had discussed this exactly once, before deciding that 'So, we're floating in ghost blood right now?' was not a question they wanted to examine too closely. It wasn't entirely true, anyway.)

All of that was without getting into the absolute mess that was his core.

If Danny had been properly awake, he would have been making every effort to get to the Far Frozen. However, Danny was not properly awake, and he was becoming less and less awake as time went on.

(He wondered if he was dying. Fading. He hoped not. He at least wanted to live long enough to see if the worlds had been saved.)

His ghostly senses were beginning to fail. He didn't have a good grasp on them all the time, and he often had trouble interpreting the information they gave him, but he had come to rely on them just as much as his human senses. If he lost both sets...

(If he died like this...)

(At least it wasn't quite as painful, anymore. Not as much as the first time.)

The thought scared him, and he struggled to stay awake. But it was futile.

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Adrestia felt it when the child in her arms let go of the final threads of consciousness. Poor thing. Adrestia shuddered to imagine what he had been through. At least now he could get the help he deserved.

Meg and Alex flew to either side of her, struggling to keep up. Tess had been left with the humans.
Partially to make sure that Phantom's three fрайmates could find the way to Duat Hospital, partially to keep an eye on Madeline Fenton. Considering Hades' threat, making sure the child in her arms didn't fade was more important. Adrestia was more than old enough to remember the rule of Pariah Dark.

But there was the other thing...

"Meg," she said, "Alex, go find the High Council. Tell them what happened."

"But, Addy," started Meg, "the High Council is, like, sequestered! You know that!"

"Yeah, and I also know that a bunch of fanatic humans tried to blow up everything and Hades just said that if he doesn't get this kid, he's going to cause a freaking cataclysm, so go un-sequester them."

"Dude, we're not gonna leave you-" tried Alex.

"You are, Alex."

"Um, no," said Meg. "Alex isn't. I'll go, but you need backup, okay? You've, like, literally got your hands full, all four of them. I am gonna blame you, though, if they fry me, got that? Just like, FYI. Later!" she called, as she peeled away from the other two.

"So'm I," said Alex. "If she gets, like, ended, I mean. I'd probably have to fry you, you know?"

"I get it, Alex. Just, I'm trying to head off a disaster here, if that's really what they're arguing about."

"Just, she's my sister, you know?"

"I know."

"We're cool then?"

"Yeah."

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Maybe she was a suspicious person, maybe she was paranoid, but Sam suspected that 'Tess' had stayed for reasons other than the stated one. Maybe it was the was she kept glancing at Maddie. Maybe it was the weapons on her belt. Maybe it was a whole host of other things.

Most likely though, it was because 'Tess' was friends with Adrestia, (as in, Adrestia the Inescapable, inspiration of one of the Greek goddesses of vengeance,) and her sisters were named 'Meg' and 'Alex.' Those names were too similar to those of another trio of vengeance goddesses to be a coincidence. Sam was thinking of Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone. The Kindly Ones. The Gracious Ones. The Eumenides. Or, if one was brave and unwise, the Furies.

So, it was, in Sam's opinion, likely that Tess was sticking around to keep an eye on Maddie, so that she could arrest her, and haul her in front of the courts. Danny wouldn't be happy. Hopefully. Hopefully, he would be alive to be unhappy.

She wished that the glider could go faster. Of course, if they could go faster, the GIW agents would have been faster, and they would all be dead. So. Yeah. Best not say that one out loud. Not that Sam
thought that Desiree would try to destroy the Ghost Zone, but the wishing ghost didn't always have complete control over her power.

She focused on flying the stupid glider. She didn't want to think about what could have happened. She didn't want to think about what had happened.

This Imhotep had better be able to help Danny. He'd better be at least as good as Frostbite. Otherwise... Sam didn't want to think about otherwise. She didn't want to think about all the bullet holes in her friend. Or the bloody gashes he had everywhere. Or the way he was coughing up blood. Or how blood had began to pour from his nose and ears only seconds after the Core had released him.

She wasn't sure that she had ever seen Danny quite that badly beaten.

Once they were farther from the Core, they started to see ghost animals and other ghosts. None of them attacked, however. In fact, many of them fled as the gliders passed by. Sam didn't want to examine the why of that too closely, either. She had to wonder, though, how many ghosts had been ended for the GIW to get as close to the core as they did.

(She wondered if Danny would join that number.)

It was a relief, when Tucker announced that the tracker had come to a halt, and a greater one when the hospital came into view. With a name like Imhotep, Jazz had expected a pyramid. She wasn't entirely disappointed in that regard. The hospital looked normal overall, like a high-end modern hospital, but its tallest building was topped by a step pyramid, and its signs were printed in Hieroglyphs and Greek. Oh, and there were outside doors on all floors, instead of just the ground floor, but that was normal for ghost-constructed buildings.

They abandoned the gliders in a parking lot that was largely occupied by chariots. They didn't know how to turn them off, so they didn't bother wasting time trying to figure out how. It was hot here. Hotter than Jazz was used to in the Ghost Zone. Jazz hoped that Danny, with his affinity for cooler, cold, and even freezing temperatures, wasn't too bothered by it, although she supposed that the Core wouldn't have suggested coming here if they thought it would harm him.

Tess was the only one who could read the signs, so she led the way. Jazz, Sam, and Tucker had all learned a little Greek, but only enough to be polite to the denizens of Pandora's realm, not enough to decipher medical terms, or even to get directions without a whole lot of hand-waving. Danny was the one who was good with languages. Tucker had his PDA, with its translation tool, but Jazz would bet that this wasn't typical, human Greek, or Ancient Greek, this was Ghost Zone, several thousand years' diverged, Egyptian-influenced Greek. Tucker's PDA would be of limited utility. It was also, judging from some of his muttering, about to run out of battery.

(Most of his muttering was about how he hated hospitals, and how Ghost Zone hospitals should be more creepy than Earth hospitals, how Spectra had better not show up, and how this was really a tech expo.)

She led them into the main building, stepping into an atrium. It wasn't exactly bustling, but there were a fair number of ghosts going to and fro, and there was a receptionist situated at a desk in the
center. Its decor was Egyptian-styled, with Hieroglyphs and carved into the walls, bright, stylized paintings, and gold fittings.

"Stay here," said Tess. "I'm gonna find out where they've gone." She walked up to the receptionist's counter, and began to converse with the blue-skinned ghost woman there.

"Tucker," said Maddie, "where's Danny?"

"I think that that's what she's trying to find out," said Tucker, not looking up from his PDA. His skin was a bit pale. He could deal with being shot by joking, but not a hospital... Go figure...

"But you have a tracker on him. We don't need to wait."

"Mom, really? Are we really going to do this? If you took a moment to think about it, you'd realize why that was a bad idea. I mean, I mean that, sure, we can go through walls here, but then we might run into a surgery, or a sick ghost, or gosh, who knows what. Humans don't react well to that kind of surprise, what makes you think that ghosts will? And if we don't go through walls, we have to go find our way through the normal way, which would be harder that you'd think. A lot of these places, they don't have what you would consider normal floor plans."

The receptionist nodded to Tess, and picked up an old-fashioned phone from its cradle on her desk. She began speaking into it.

"Look, Tess will come back, and tell us where he is and, more importantly, how he is. Because we might not be able to see him, he might be in surgery, or something, did you see all those-"

"Jazz," interrupted Sam. "Breathe. Danny will be fine. He's always fine," she muttered, sounding like she didn't really believe it.

Jazz opened her mouth, to say what, she didn't really know, but then she saw the tall, muscular, ghosts in 'Security' uniforms approaching. "Guys," she said instead, "do you see..?"

"Yeah," said Sam, turning defensively.

"Don't fight," warned Tucker. "Hospitals in the Zone usually operate under truces. If we start a fight, everyone here will be after us. I hate hospitals..."

Then Tess walked back over, slipping in between the security guards. "I'm kinda making an assumption here, but you're Maddie Fenton, right?"

"Yeah, that's her," said Jeremy. At Maddie's death stare, he raised his hands defensively. "Hey, I don't know what's going on here, and I don't really know you guys. First Mirror shows up, and then we're evacuating, then these lunatics show up, and then the world is ending, and now we're here, so I'm just..." He waved his hands helplessly.

"I'm sorry, dude," said Tess. "Sounds like you've had a rough time. Anyway, Maddie Fenton, I'm putting you into custody. Or, asking the hospital to put you in custody. Whatever. Uh, you don't really have any rights, exactly. Libra'll give you an advocate, if you can't attract one yourself. Eventually. I'm not gonna force you to say anything. Not my job. Ugh. This is hard. Look, you guys, just take her, will you? And just her, okay?"

"Look, Mom, don't fight them," said Jazz. "We'll come back for you."
Chapter 75: Not Dead to the World

Tess brought them, sans Maddie, to a small waiting room. Adrestia and Alex were waiting there, the later flipping through a magazine.


"Thanks, Tess."

"Yeah, whatever. Where's Meg?"

"Sent her to the High Council meeting. You know, Alex, you can go try to catch up with her, seeing as you were so up in arms before."

"Nah. I'm kinda abrasive, if you haven't noticed."

"Trust me, I've noticed."

"Yeah, Meg is more calm. Like, you know, soothing."

"Okay, that's great," said Sam. "Really, but I want to know how Danny's doing."

Alex and Adrestia shared a glance. "We don't really know. Imhotep took one look at him, and carried him off to an operating room."

"Actually," said a smooth, deep voice, "I go by Dr Hope, now, Adrestia, if you don't mind. I take it that you four are his fraidmates?"

Jeremy shook his head. "I have no idea what that means."

"'Fraid' was originally a word for a group of ghosts," explained Sam, quickly, "but it refers to a more specific relationship. It's kind of a family by choice thing. But, yeah, the three of us are his fraidmates. Jazz is actually his biological sister, too."

"It's true," said Adrestia, leaning back in her chair, and putting one of her hands over her eyes. "Vetted by Hades themselves."

The tall, bald, teal-skinned ghost smiled gently at Jazz. "It's always a pleasure to meet one of the steadfast," he said. "If you three would like to come with me to a private room, we can discuss his condition. I'm afraid that the rest of you will have to stay here. Hospital regulations."

"No problem," said Adrestia. "We want to pick this guys brain, anyway."

"Hey," said Alex, frowning, "didn't you write the regulations? I mean, bein' in charge and all?"

The doctor gave her a blinding smile. "Which is why it would be so terrible for me to break them. This way, please."

Jazz, Sam, and Tucker then followed Dr Hope to yet another room, this one smaller, but with more comfortable looking chairs, more muted decor, and no magazines. A large window looked out over a
courtyard with bright red trees and a blue pond. There was some kind of giant water snake in the pond. Jazz could see its coils. Typical Ghost Zone nonsense.

"Alright," said Dr Hope, settling into one of the chairs, and motioning for the others to do the same. "We have managed to stabilize Daniel's human half, however, we have yet to fully treat his wounds, and we simply do not have the ability to repair his core. Do you know of any adult ghosts in his fрайd that we can contact?"

"Well," said Jazz, "there's Clockwork."

"Pandora," said Tucker.

"Frostbite," said Sam.

"Ah," said Dr Hope. "I won't ask how two of the seven Ancients is on your list. Unfortunately, we cannot contact them. They are in seclusion, in the High Council. Chief Frostbite on the other hand... I will have to send someone to him as soon as possible. Does Daniel have any allergies that you know of, or unusual reactions to substances? Or are there specific substances that he reacts well to? Substances that he has taken in the past?"

"I've got a list that I can give you," said Tucker, lifting his PDA slightly. "I, um, need a power socket, or something, though. This is about to run out of juice."

"There is one behind your chair," said Dr Hope, handing Tucker a pad of paper. "Would any of you three consent to donating blood? We have been supplying him with ectoplasm and saline solution, but that will only last for so long."

"Well, yeah," said Sam. "Sure. We're all type O, right?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so. I'm O-positive, though."

"I'm O-positive, too. Danny's O-negative," said Jazz.

"I'm O-negative," said Sam.

"Alright, we'll get a nurse in here to draw blood. In the meantime, Jazz, correct?"

"Yes?"

"I want to ask you to accompany me back to the operating room. We are still working on removing all the foreign objects in his system, and we have been considering some rather... aggressive techniques to solve some other issues. His brain is suffering from mild swelling, and we believe that he is also suffering from internal bleeding. The issue is that, not knowing what his unique physiology will accept, we have not been able to sedate him properly. We hope that your presence will help to calm him, until we have found something that we can use."

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When the doctors set up the ectoplasm IV, inserting the needle in Danny's arm, Danny began to regain a small sliver of consciousness. The ectoplasm, while not highly energized, carried enough energy to do that. It wasn't even as strong as it had been when the ghost had taken him from his
friends. His senses were scrambled, dim. His memory of events leading up to this was all but nonexistent, blurred images of home, of school, of his lair.

He could feel pain. (Always, always, pain. Pain everywhere.). He could tell that he was lying on something hard and flat. He could tell that his clothes had been removed. He felt exposed, vulnerable. He could feel people touching him. People he didn't know. Touching him everywhere.

There was no way that he could move. He could hardly even conceive of movement. Instead, he curled, terrified, in the darkest, deepest corners of his mind, trying to hide, trying to protect himself. Almost, he tried to bury himself, but, despite his fear, he couldn't bring himself to cut even this tenuous connection to reality, to willingly blind himself, to render himself ignorant.

Unknown to Danny, the doctors operating on him paused. They were ghosts, after all. They could feel fear, and a variety of other emotions. But, in this case, fear.

This surprised them. They rarely had the opportunity to treat a liminal spirit, but even in their limited experience, they knew that they should not be able to feel his emotions this strongly. For a full ghost, they definitely wouldn't be able to feel them. Normally, a ghost re-absorbed almost all of their excess emotional energy before it even left their body. Yes, a liminal spirit was a bit different, but these waves of fear couldn't be accounted for with just that.

They could not stop entirely, however, despite how frightened the child was. They had to stem the bleeding first. They had no way to calm him.

They checked his pulse. It was fast. Too fast. Another problem. They checked his temperature. They hadn't the slightest idea what it was supposed to be. Too many questions, not enough answers, and the child was bleeding out on their table.

The operating room phone, a new addition, lit up. It didn't ring, that could startle the doctors, instead, it was attached to a bright red light. The doctors ignored it, a nurse answered it.

"Some of his fraidmates have arrived," he said. "Humans. They're sending them over."

Dr Hope nodded, and stepped away, pulling off his gloves. "I will talk to them. Hopefully, they can tell us something about his history."

A nurse helped Jazz get into a set of pale green medical scrubs, and gave her a mask, and a cap to cover her hair. Their color was just a little more vibrant than the scrubs used in the human world, a little closer to ectoplasm green.

The nurse then led Jazz into the operating room.

Her breath caught in her throat. Danny looked terrible, worse than she had ever seen him, and he had been pretty bad the last few days. He was bleeding, his blood glittering, inhuman, swirling with ectoplasm. His scars were livid, pulsing, weeping clear, greenish fluid where they were cut shallowly, and thicker ectoplasm where they were cut deeply. His skin was pale, his body patchworked with ugly bruises, bullet holes, gashes, burns, and tiny splinters of metal. There wasn't a clear square inch of skin on his arms and hands, and little more than that on his torso. His face was only a little clearer, earlier, most of the cuts had been partially hidden by the tears his eyes had shed.
Or maybe Jazz just hadn't had the time to register them. The ghost women had spirited him away almost immediately after he had collapsed.

"Here," said Dr Hope, motioning her over with one hand. "You can stand here. Hold his hand."

"He'll know I'm here?" she asked, her voice cracking, her gloved fingers wrapping around his bruised ones.

"Almost certainly," confirmed Dr Hope. "Please do not move, we are still trying to close these wounds."

"Dr Hope," said one of the other doctors. "We've brought the lapis forceps and the," the ghost's speech devolved into something complex and foreign-sounding.

"Excellent. These are to remove the bullets," said Dr Hope. "Our initial examination revealed that they are constructed of highly toxic materials. We wanted to remove them immediately, however, we had to consider our own safety." He picked up the first tool, which looked like a long pair of tongs with small, thin, square, blue stone plaques stuck to the ends instead of normal grippers. "You should talk to him," he said.

"I'm here, Danny," said Jazz. "It's going to be okay, we're going to help you." Then, realizing what would most care about. "You did it, Danny. You stopped them. We're all safe, now." She continued to ramble on, giving Danny what she hoped were gentle reassurances.

Dr Hope's hand hovered over Danny's chest. "There we go," he said, softly. "That's it, that's good, keep on like that." He lowered a visor over his eyes, adjusted the lamp over the operating table, and leaned over Danny.

He carefully inserted the forceps into one of the bullet holes in Danny's shoulder. There was an uncomfortable squelching sound, and Jazz cringed, her hands tightening around Danny's. A moment later, Dr Hope pulled a green-gray bullet from the wound, and dropped it in the equally blue receptacle that the other doctor had brought. That doctor began to pack the wound, and tape a bandage into place.

"There is one," said Dr Hope. "Eight more to go."

"Eight? He was shot eight times?"

"Thirteen," said the doctor. "The other five passed through. We marked the ones with bullets still inside with pink. He's doing awfully well. Don't worry. Don't worry." He went after another bullet. "It looks like the amount of toxic substance in these is very small. He is doing very well. You are both doing very well. Sana, how is that gash on his leg doing?"

"I almost have it stitched up," said the third doctor.

"Good," said Dr Hope.
Chapter 76

Chapter 76: Meanwhile, Back on the Farm

Ellie, after some debate, both internal and external, decided to haul the surviving GIW agents into the lair. Mirage had reasoned that they would be less likely to cause trouble that way, where the shadows could keep an eye on them. Ellie tended to agree, but this felt *gross* somehow. Ellie was already feeling rather attached to the lair, and she had hardly even stepped into it.

She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She had never liked being tied down, and this was definitely an anchor. At the same time, it made her feel close to Danny, and she liked that. In a lot of ways, he was her only real family. Sam and Tucker were friends. Jazz was great, Ellie loved Jazz, but Ellie still didn't know her all that well. Not really. Not as Ellie. She knew her through memories inherited from Danny. Although Danny had introduced her to Clockwork, and Ellie really liked him, really wanted to get to know him better, she still wasn't completely comfortable with the older ghost. Not like Danny was.

(She had talked about that with Jazz. Jazz had theorized that her bad experience with Vlad had made her distrustful of all adults.)

The shadow, Mirage, dragged the agents away, one by one. Well, dragged was probably the wrong word. The shadow was swinging the unconscious agents over his shoulders, and then jogging away, up the stairs.

After Ellie had dumped the last one over the threshold, she finally stepped over herself.

"You aren't going to be seeing us at our best," said Mirage, apologetically.

"Is this Danny's house?" asked Ellie, curiously. "I mean, is it modeled on Danny's house, because this pretty clearly isn't Amity Park."

"It's modeled on Amity Park, actually. This part is, anyway."

"This part?"

Mirage smiled at her, as they walked through the kitchen. "This place is pretty big. I think you'll like it."

"I hope so."

They walked out the door, which was oddly, but, Ellie felt, appropriately, not a door at all, but only a doorway, only an opening. There was a large, woody, thorny hedge to the left of the doorway. Ellie saw the outlines of bodies in the hedge. That looked like where the shadow had tossed the agents. This was confirmed a moment later, when Mirage threw the last agent onto the hedge. It almost seemed to *eat* the agent.

Ellie was a lot of things right now, but not surprised.

The plants all over the roads were interesting. There were a lot of different flowers, lacy, fluffy flowers. Looking closely, many of the denser bunches were situated to cover bloodstains. The sky was very pretty, very reminiscent of the aurora she sometimes saw when traveling in the arctic circle.
It was, however, faded, gray, in places. They darkened as she watched.

"We're still trying to fix that," said Mirage. "Those monsters... We stopped the worst of what they would have done here, but they still did quite a bit of damage." Then he brightened. "I should tell you, that we actually have quite a few people living here, as semi-permanent residents. Danny was... Sort of upset that we didn't tell him right away. Usually they live here, but we evacuated them to deeper in, because of the Guys in White."

"Okay? Is that why Danny was here?"

"No. That story is, um. Harder."

"Oh," said Ellie, rubbing the back of her neck. "I wish I could be with him."

(She could tell that Danny was scared, that he was hurt.)

"He'd be happier with you here," assured Mirage.

"If you say so," said Ellie. "I'll take your word for it. But I want that story."

"Well, I guess it started with the assembly..."

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The inhabitants of Harmony and the visitors from Amity didn't quite know what to make of one another. Both groups were used to ghosts, both were liminal, both lived in similar, identical, in some ways, environments.

However, they groups were very different. The group from Harmony was much larger, of course, and consisted of many age groups, instead of almost entirely children. The people of Harmony also considered ghosts to be part of their group, not outsiders, not nuisances, not menaces. The people from Amity, especially Jack, had some trouble with that. The people of Harmony tended to get along well. Danny's classmates typically did not. The people of Harmony, while in a relatively strange place, were inured to such places. They had traveled through the Ghost Zone, or, in their parlance, the Outside to get there. Those from Amity were used to Amity, which, while strange, was only one place, and was fairly normal most of the time. For certain values of normal. In any case, they had spent their lives in the 'real' world, not counting a brief stint in the Ghost Zone when Pariah Dark had invaded.

Now, the people of Harmony were used to welcoming new groups of people. Every one of them had been 'new people' at one time or another, stumbling through the mystery that was the Ghost Zone, and the lair. All of them had needed help, or wanted help, and they had been given it. But they couldn't deny that these particular newcomers were especially difficult.

The students, Jack, and Mr Lancer had awkwardly been placed with the other children and their parents, and Anthony Trent had awkwardly made his way back to them, to speak with Jack and Mr Lancer. Well, at this point, mostly Mr Lancer. Jack was thoroughly distracted. Distracted by the surroundings, distracted by the ghosts, distracted by the people.

"I have to admit, I'm a little confused," said Anthony. "How did you get in here in the first place without going through Harmony?" Anthony had asked this question already, and had gotten a rather
evasive answer. "I would understand if you said that you don't know, but that doesn't seem to be what you are saying."

"Well, I don't entirely understand the logic behind it, but..." Mr Lancer trailed off, glancing at his students and Jack. "Some parts aren't exactly nice. Or public knowledge"

"We could go elsewhere to discuss it," said Anthony.

"I can't leave my students."

"I can understand that, but my people want answers."

"So do we," countered Mr Lancer.

"I can explain," said Mirror. Mr Lancer jumped. The way the shadows could appear so silently, without any warning, unnerved him, even though he'd had a few days to get used to it. Anthony, on the other hand, seemed unaffected. Perhaps he was just inured to the way ghosts moved, having lived among them for... Actually, Mr Lancer wasn't sure how long these people had been here, and he'd heard some of the students speculating that they weren't people at all, but more shadows.

Mr Lancer didn't believe it, but it was an interesting theory. Something that he might see in a discussion of a literary work. Maybe he should give them all extra credit for this ordeal.

"So," said Byron, having selected the most approachable-looking of the newcomers to interrogate. "You're from Amity Park, right? That's what you guys said before?"

"Yeah," said Mikey, sticking close to Ricky.

"That's in America? Or Canada?" asked Sonia.

"Which state?" asked Charlotte, who had managed to rejoin the older children. "America is the one with states, right?" she whispered to Alice.

"Um, yeah, America," said Mikey. "Wh-What- Uh. Where are you from? Originally?"

"And how did you get here, anyway?" asked Ricky.

"Uh, we walked," said Ryan.

"Let's see. I'm from California, Alice is from Britain. Ryan, where are you from, again?"

"Australia," said Ryan. "But my Dad was from Florida, so we spent a lot of time flying back and forth. You know how that is."

The blank stares he received from the Casper High kids told him that this was not the case. He shrugged.

"I'm from New York. Upstate, not the city," said Sonia.

"I'm from Washington," said Teddy. "But I had cousins in France. That's why I was on the plane."
"Not me. My whole family just fell into a hole one day. We were on a road trip to Arizona," said Bobby. "Oh. I was from Oregon, though. Willamette Valley."

"I'm from Germany. I was going to be an exchange student," said Ben.

The other children from Harmony chimed in, filling out the list. The younger ones, those around Charlotte's age, often didn't know where they had originally lived. They had known their street addresses, and occasionally they knew the city they lived in, but there hadn't been a reason for them to know either of those for years, much less the state that they had lived in. Or province. Not all of them had been from America.

Valerie didn't know how she had gotten into this situation.

Yes, she could trace the chain of events from this moment back to the assembly, more or less, she was still a little fuzzy on what had happened between Danny and Phantom, but physically, she knew what had happened to herself. Still, she just couldn't understand how those events had happened.

She had seen down the barrel of that rifle. She had been sure that she was going to die. That she was going to be killed. By a human. She would have expected a ghost to do it, but not a human. Not a person.

Now, after an unproductive attempt to follow her ex-boyfriend, his mom, his two 'besties,' and a bunch of creepy ghostly shadows, she was sitting in a house. Drinking tea. With a tiny old British lady and her grandson.

The grandson was the one who had picked her up off the street. He had been dressed in dark clothes, and now, in his kitchen, was still carrying an ectoweapon slung over his shoulder. He was kind of hot, actually. For an older guy. He almost looked like an older Danny. It was incredibly frustrating, though, that he had insisted on bringing her home, and disrupting her search for Danny.

The old woman gave her another cup of tea.

Nathan and Lester had stayed in the house at first. They weren't crazy, not like Valerie, and the A-listers. Who knew if there were other people with guns running around here? At least the shadows had caught all the ones here, and the shadows had never evinced a desire to kill them. The opposite, relly. The shadows had protected them.

The screams, though, had been... The screams had been bad. The twins had retreated to a back room to wait them out. When Mirage had brought them back out, smiling encouragingly and flecked with red dots, they hadn't seen any sign of the agents whatsoever. Not blood, not bodies, not drag marks. Nothing. The streets were all vines and toothy flowers, joined, while Nathan and Lester hid, by blue and violet grasses.
Mirage had led them, quickly, quickly, quickly, away from where the agents attacked them, and to a house where two old ladies pinched their cheeks, and called them sweetheart, and sugar, and apparently thought that they were their grandchildren, or nephews, or something. Then Mirage had left. A young woman had popped in briefly, checked on the older women, glared suspiciously at Nathan and Lester before muttering something about looking for more soldiers to shoot.

"I hope Valerie's okay," said Lester, wistfully.

"This is all your fault," said Nathan.

Paulina had, of course, tried to follow Phantom. Following Phantom was always the right choice. Sooner or later he would realize that she was his one true love. Not Manson or Gray, no matter what that shadow, Mirage, had tried to suggest. No one turned down Paulina, gently or otherwise. She'd wear him down eventually.

In the meantime, Phantom would keep her safe. Like always.

Of course, she got horribly lost in the meantime. Until she found her own house. Or the copy of her house? She wasn't sure how things worked here. She walked in. The inside had been changed, beyond the doors. It looked like someone else had been living there. Someone who liked to collect carved wooden animals.

It made her skin crawl. This was her house! Well. No it wasn't. Paulina knew that. But it felt like it should have been.

She found a room where there were fewer wooden animals, and settled in to wait.

Dash tried to follow Paulina, at first. She was his friend, even though he didn't always understand her, and they didn't always get along.

But Dash was dizzy from all the blood he had lost, and his ear hurt. He was practically deaf. (Not to mention scared, but Dash Baxter didn't do scared.)

He thought that she was probably going towards the Fenton place, seeing as she was going after Phantom, and the Fentons had all that ghost stuff. He had been to FentonWorks maybe a dozen times before, to get tutored by Jazz, mostly, and everyone knew where the Fentons lived. It was hard to miss, with all the neon. But this Amity, or Harmony, or whatever, was just a little bit different. All the plants threw him off, and he couldn't see the neon's glow. It reminded him of... Something. One of those too-common missing days. Whatever. It didn't matter.

What mattered was that he was lost. He had never been in this part of town before. He bet that it was where the nerds lived. He walked into what looked like a re-purposed Nasty Burger (re-named Quick Eats) and peered over the counter. He was hungry. Maybe he could get some food here.
Chapter 77

Chapter 77: End of Meeting

Meg was too nervous to touch down, but she did pause outside the meeting room doors.

It had been surprisingly easy to get into the Panopticon, the Observants' fortress, sanctuary, and office building. She, like her sisters, like Adrestia, had a reputation. A terrifying reputation. She might have been a bit... wild, in her youth. She didn't exactly regret it, actually, she wouldn't have changed anything even if she could have, but she didn't always like it when people shied away from her like that. Even when it was useful. Which it was now.

She breathed in deeply, a habit picked up from some of her Dead friends, and looked down at herself. She wasn't entirely presentable. Her normal clothes were great for everyday, casual use, and for her job, but for interrupting a High Council meeting? Yeah, no. Not if she wanted to live through this.

She closed her eyes, and focused on altering her form. Her braid twisted into a bun on the nape of her neck. Her clothes became a blouse and skirt. She kept her scourge, of course, curled on her hip. She debated for a while on the wings, before deciding that they were a bit too much, and would probably get in the way in the room.

She knocked on the door, half-cringing. The almost inaudible murmur of voices stopped. The door was thrown open a minute later by the practically gleeful pair of Clockwork and Pandora. It looked like she had just interrupted a screaming match. The flickering Crown of Fire drew her attention for a moment, but, in the grand scheme of things, it was unimportant.

"Who are you?" shouted Issitoq. "How dare you interrupt a meeting of the High Council?" Towards the end of the sentence his voice pitched up into a scream.

"Um-"

"Don't you yell at my granddaughter's best friend, you bloated eyeball!" Themis yelled back, shaking her fist at the other ghost.

"Better a bloated eyeball than a blind bat!"

The ravens objected strenuously to the implied slur against bats, no offense meant to Lady Themis. Bats were part of their constituency. And not blind, as it so happened.

Themis ignored Issitoq. "How are your sisters doing, dear?"

"They're okay. I mean... They are doing alright. Um-"

"Answer my question!" thundered Issitoq.

"You had better have a good reason for being here, girl," growled Undergrowth. Other High Council members chimed in, their voices growing progressively louder.

"Let her speak," said Nephthys. "You will never learn her purpose otherwise." The Ancient Master of Death was practically draped over the back of her chair, staring at the ceiling, her veil clutched in
one hand.

This set off another round of abuse, this time directed at Nephthys. If Meg hadn't known that this was how High Council meetings always went, she would have been terrified. As it was...

Meg froze as attention turned to her. The speech she had planned to make flew out of her head entirely. "I- um. We- The Core was attacked. By humans. The Guys- The Group for Interdimensional Warfare."

"What?" breathed a Court Magician.

"The GIW attacked the Core. They were stopped, by a ghost named Daniel Phantom." Issitoq gagged.

"Oh. Of course," said Clockwork, almost sighing the words. Then, worried, "Is he-?"

"Silence, slave!" snapped Issitoq. Meg nearly choked. Even for the foremost Judge, and de facto regent of the Infinite Realms, that was too far. But the leader of the Observants continued, "The only care I have for your abomination of a pet is that it is destroyed before it does any more damage. Clearly, it caused this disa-" Issitoq was cut off by a low, deep growl.

The Tiger, in all its electric-blue and lightning-white glory, stood, stalking towards the unfortunate eyeball. "You will speak to the Ancient with respect," said the Tiger in a deep, rumbling voice.

Pandora spoke, then, "No matter if you are his benefactor, no matter if you hold his indentures, he is not your slave."

There was a murmur of agreement. Even some of Issitoq's allies thought that he had gone too far with his insults.

Issitoq responded with a defensive hiss of disgust and disdain, and communicated the bare minimum of apology by nodding his head. "The fact stands," he said, "that his pe-" the Tiger growled again. "That Phantom would be entirely unsuitable as King."

With that, Meg finally recalled the real reason she had come. She cleared her throat. "Um, excuse me?" she said, when that didn't obtain a response. She was again rewarded with the disconcerting attentions of the High Council. "The Core appeared to us, using Phantom as their mouthpiece. They named themselves Ereshkigal, gave Phantom's sister and two friends their blessing, and charged my sisters and I with telling you that if they don't get Phantom, that the upheaval and ruin of Pariah Dark's time will seem like nothing."

"I didn't know that Sumer was back in style," mused one of the Court Magicians.

"I don't think it is," said Meg. "I think that-"

"How do you know that it wasn't just Phantom, playing the game that its master taught it?" asked Issitoq.

"I swear that what I have said here is true," said Meg. "If you know my name, then you know how I feel about breaking oaths. Besides, it was pretty obvious. You wouldn't be questioning it if you saw it, sir."

"And what is your name?" asked a Raven.

"Megaera," she said, "scourge of the unfaithful, destroyer of warlocks."
"Why aren't your sisters here with you?" asked Themis.

"Oh! Alex, that's Alecto, she went with Adrestia, to bring Phantom to Duat Hospital. Tess was helping his human friends find the way. Phantom, he was- He was hurt. Badly. We- I think that he was injured before he fought with the GIW."

Clockwork made a surprised noise (the human equivalent would be a gasp, but the ghostly version was more of a squeak), and immediately opened a portal, vanishing through it before Issitoq could say anything.

"Well," drawled Nephthys. "I think that's that for this farce of a meeting. Smith, I will contact you once the Council of Ancients has finished its deliberations, which I suspect will not take terribly long." She freed herself from the chair, and walked out.

Pandora nodded, sharply, in approval. "I also wish to see my great-nephew, so if you all will excuse me."

"Ah, wait a moment, Pandora," said Nocturne. "Here," he said, holding out a fist, fingers down. Pandora held out one of her hands, and Nocturne deposited a tiny star into it. "A sweet dream, for the child."

"Thank you, Nocturne. I am sure that he will appreciate it." Pandora left. Nocturne sat back down, curled up in his chair, and fell asleep again. Then, very slowly, he faded out, disappearing to who-knows-where in his own quiet way.

Fright Knight left next, his muttering about the Panopticon's stables interspersed with comments about the Observants' habit of overreaching their authority, and how he longed for a good old benevolent dictatorship. Then the Tiger left, the Ravens still using him as a perch. Smith made his exit, quiet and unobtrusive as ever. Themis and Ma'at smiled nastily at the chief Observant, and made their way to the door. Themis grabbed Meg's elbow on the way out, and steered her to the door, leaving Issitoq alone with his puppets, the two criminal Ancients, and the fading Crown of Fire.

Clockwork appeared in the lobby of the Duat Hospital, his sight still obscured by the Observants. They would pay for this game they were playing with his child's life. Someday... Someday he would end Issitoq. It might not be by his own hands, but it would be by his will, one way, or another. He would tear the Panopticon apart, until not one stone laid upon another. He would destroy the Observants, ruin them so thoroughly that ten-thousand years hence their fate would still be whispered of, still be feared.

But for now... The fact remained that Daniel was his child. He could find Daniel without his temporal powers, just as Daniel could often find him. But there was an even easier way.

He descended on the receptionist's desk.

"Where is Daniel Phantom?"

"Theater 43. I'll call," said the woman immediately, pointing towards a hallway, and picking up the phone. Clockwork flew down it, literally and figuratively. He could help Daniel better than any doctor here, although they were all very good, and Clockwork would certainly thank them for any
work they had. He knew how Daniel's body worked, and there was a reason that people said that time healed all wounds.

The first of the double doors swung open as Clockwork approached, propped open by a nurse. "Lord Clockwork," he said, by way of greeting.

Clockwork opened the next set of doors himself. He briefly registered the presence of the doctors, nurses, and Daniel's human sister, but his attention was drawn to the boy on the table. "Oh, Daniel," he said.

"Lord Clockwork," said Dr Hope. "We've been working on Daniel's more superficial wounds, however, we haven't been able to touch the more serious issues. His core has been seriously damaged, several organs are bruised or otherwise damaged, he is suffering from exhaustion, he has a minor concussion, there are several toxins in his bloodstream, and his temperature and heart rate are fluctuating severely. If not for his unique status, he would have faded."

"I see," said Clockwork. "Excuse me." He stepped past the doctors to stand next to Daniel. He lowered his hand to Daniel's chest. He could feel the child struggling to breathe, feel his core trying to repair itself, stuttering and wavering. "Oh, my poor sweet child," he murmured. "You've been so abused." Even Clockwork could not hope to repair Daniel's core when his body was in this condition. Well, in truth, Clockwork could not repair a ghost's core with his usual methods. Especially not Daniel's. Accelerating his core's time... Daniel would experience every minute of it. No. That would not be kind. Not kind at all.

He would have to repair Daniel's core in a more traditional way, and for that... For that, he would need help. Dr Hope would be a great help on that front. Or, he would have been, if Daniel had known him.

The best human equivalent to the core was the brain. However, not only was the core a thinking organ, it was an intimate one, and a powerful one. A ghost reduced to their core could still feel, was still aware of their surroundings, at least in part. Many ghosts could also still do a lot of damage, even reduced to that most vulnerable state. Clockwork had no doubt that Daniel fell into that category. If anyone that Daniel did not absolutely trust touched his core, he would react badly, and that would only hurt him further.

However, Clockwork could begin fixing his other wounds. There were dozens of them, although none of them were as dangerous, or as injurious to his health in the long term, as the core injury.

"You have been flushing his system, correct? Exchanging his blood for new?"

"Yes, of course," said Dr Hope.

"Good," said Clockwork. His hand moved towards one of the wounds. He moved his hand to one of the more serious wounds. "What toxins?"

Dr Hope recited a list. Most of them would have been meaningless to humans, and even to most ghosts. The terms were archaic. Dr Hope was an old, old ghost. Clockwork was older.

"Good," said Clockwork again, this time more softly. As unpleasant as those were, and as sick as they would make Daniel feel, they would not cause complications with Clockwork's method of wound healing. "I'm sorry, Daniel, this will hurt, but it will make you feel better."

Daniel gasped as Clockwork started, and Jazz hissed as his hand tightened around hers. Oh, it would be so much easier if Clockwork could simply erase the wounds, replacing the injured
areas with the same area from an earlier time, but without full access to his temporal powers, that wasn't an option. He didn't know where, precisely, Daniel had been for the last several hours, and reaching back farther than that wasn't possible at the moment. Localized acceleration was the only good choice, although it would put more strain on his body and core.

Clockwork moved to another wound, and the doctors started to cut free the stitches. Daniel whimpered, but otherwise didn't move. "There we are," said Clockwork. "Here we are. You'll feel better, soon. This will scar, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to bear more."
It took time—Hah!—but soon all of Daniel's surface wounds were sealed, and many of his bruises had faded. Then the doctors took Daniel, put him on a stretcher, and wheeled him to an empty, well-appointed room. They very carefully placed him into the room's bed, and covered him with a blanket.

Jazz sat down on the opposite side of the bed from Clockwork. The two of them had only met a handful of times, and she looked nervous.

Sam and Tucker were shown in a moment later. Sam was pale, and in a wheelchair, a bandage wrapped around her arm. She had apparently given quite a bit of blood to Daniel. Charming young lady.

Clockwork's vision was still blocked. His desire to murder Issitoq was increasing by the minute. By the second. He dreaded having to explain his question to these children. He had to know what had happened. He needed more than Megaera's story. He needed to know why Daniel's core was so badly damaged. Ereshkigal could be rough, but they would not have caused so much damage to someone they liked.

He sighed. This was one situation that more time wouldn't help.

Once the children had stopped staring at him, they had given him a very thorough explanation. Pandora had arrived before the end of the tale, bearing Nocturne's gift, and the children had had to start over again, to fill in the other Ancient.

Clockwork was, well, horrified, by the end of it. Anyone would be, upon finding that their child had been through such an ordeal. Pandora was openly furious. The Ancient Master of Hope had never been good at hiding her emotions. Perhaps she would join Clockwork in destroying the Observants. Now was not an appropriate time to ask such a question, however. Justice, and revenge, would have to wait.

Pandora leaned back, sighing. "What a disaster," she said, putting a hand over her eyes "and not one of us Ancients there to stop it."

"It isn't your fault," said Samantha. Over time, all of the children had become quite comfortable with Pandora. Her realm, Elysium, was the one the group visited most often, although Daniel visited Clockwork more. "The Guys in White are the bad guys here."

"Perhaps," said Pandora. "But as Ancients, taking care of such problems is our duty."

"You don't talk much about that," said Jasmine. "Being an Ancient, I mean."
"Yeah," said Tucker, wedged into a corner, looking like he was trying to convince himself that he wasn't in a hospital. "I always thought that it was just, you know, sort of a title? Because you beat Pariah Dark?"

"Alas, no," said Pandora, laughing. "No. There are very few empty titles here in the Infinite Realms. No, there are several duties and privileges attached to the role of Ancient. We are among the most powerful of ghosts in the Realms, chosen by previous Kings. Among other things, we protect the Realms, and especially the Core, from threats that cannot be otherwise turned aside, we advise, protect, and monitor the King, and, when a King falls or fades, we choose the next one."

"So... Wait. What about Pariah?" asked Samantha. Clever girl. "Did you choose him?"

"Unfortunately, yes," said Clockwork. "I did. He was not always an evil man, nor was becoming such his only future."

"I did not," said Pandora, crossing both pairs of arms. "But he defeated me, so my disagreement was moot. He was powerful. It took all seven of us, even Fright Knight, Undergrowth, and Vortex, to defeat him in the end." She sighed again, her fiery hair flickering as she removed her helm and ran her her hand through it. "You know, Inanna was a real person."

"Really?" asked Jasmine.

"Yes. She lived in a time when the borders between the Realms and the material plane were very thin. Thinner than they are now. She was what you might call a sorceress. I was very young, back then. Doubtless you could tell the tale better, Clockwork."

Ah. No, best not. He did know more about that particular incident than most, but some of the details were not ones that he wished to share at this juncture, and he didn't want to lie to Daniel's friends. "You tell it, Pandora. You have already started."

"She was a powerful woman," said Pandora, "and an ambitious one. She knew of ghosts. She was the great-granddaughter of a fairly powerful ghost named Enki. She knew of of the Ghost Zone, and of the Core- Ereshkigal, as they identified themselves to you. She knew of the powers available to ghosts, and specifically the king of ghosts, and wanted them for herself, without dying. You begin to see the problem?"

"So, like Freakshow?" asked Samantha.

"Something like that," agreed Pandora. "Her only motivation was power, she did not particularly care where that power came from. She also did not entirely understand how the Realms functioned, much like the Guys in White. She thought that she could fall upon it in a time of weakness, and conquer it, just as with a human kingdom."

"It was a difficult time here in the Realms. We were entering an interregnum. Our most recent king, Gugalana, had just passed on. It is rare, but it happens. Inanna found a natural portal, again, these were not as rare in those times, and rode through with her army."

"Her army did not fair well in the Realms. They mutinied within days. Inanna on the other hand... I suppose that it would be fair to say that she thrived here. She knew all of the then-modern methods of controlling, manipulating, and harming ghosts. She pioneered many of them. In some ways, Jasmine, she was not unlike your parents. When she chose to make war on the Realms, she carried with herself seven great weapons. She reached the area that we call the Periphery, the edge of the Core. There she was delayed by a ghost that came to be called Neti."
"Came to be called?" asked Jasmine.

Pandora smiled. "Not much was ever known about him. The word Neti meant gatekeeper, which was how he identified himself. Neti destroyed her weapons one by one, until she only had her innate abilities. By that point, the seven Ancients of that time were able to come together, and defeat her. She was punished for her arrogance. Severely. However, Enki petitioned for mercy, for her release, and he was on the short list of those who could be the next king, so she was released. But... not before she was changed."

"Changed how?" asked Tucker. It appeared as if he had been recording the story on his hand-held computer.

"According to the most popular rumors of the times, she was made liminal and taken to the River Styx. However, others said that an exchange was required of her. That the agreement was that her husband had to take the punishment in her place." Pandora raised her hands in a gesture of either confusion or abnegation. "I never knew. As I said, I was young then."

Pandora had given Danny Nocturne's dream as soon as she had arrived, placing it on his forehead, and watching it sink in, before joining Clockwork, Jazz, Sam, and Tucker in conversation.

The little dream star sunk down, down, down, into Danny's dreams, illuminating them, pulling Danny out of the confusing, drugged, painful miasma that he had been in until that point. It pulled him down, deeper, farther away from the surface of his mind, farther away from the pain. He let it. He followed it, his natural curiosity taking over.

The star described a twisting, rainbow path, flying faster than Danny could. As it passed through the murk, it made the darkness darker, and the lights brighter, turning the dreamscape into a starscape.

Danny was immediately distracted. He chased the little lights that chimed and rang, giggled and whispered at him like will-o-the-wisps, cuddling up against him and giving him little kisses. Danny was charmed. He could taste sugar when they hit the high notes. They were bright and beautiful. They led him onward, onward, onward, the glittering trails of light they left behind them braiding together in a complex pattern that made Danny dizzy and excited.

He was happy happy happy and he didn't know why. Didn't care to examine why. It felt like all his family was gathered around him, or most of it, and that was always a good feeling. He liked it. He couldn't see them, but he knew that they must be nearby. Which was nice. But where...?

The false stars cuddled up against him like puppies. So nice. Then they flitted away again, Danny chasing them at high speed. He tagged one of them, and they chased him for a while. But they were faster than he was, and he half-wanted to be caught, so that they would snuggle with him again. He liked that. They were so soft and warm.

He followed them again. They led him to the first star, which was much bigger, much brighter, and hung, scintillating, in open space. The little lights flew into the larger star. Danny tilted his head, examining the star. "Pretty," murmured Danny, and he touched it.

It pulsed under his hand. It was cold, and friendly. He cuddled up against it, and fell into it, like it was a door, or a portal of some kind, and came out in a very different, much greener, starscape. He
could see canvas-covered beings flying back and forth, and a kind of nebula-looking thing in the middle-distance. Ever curious, he flew towards it. This looked familiar. Were those Nocturne's sleepwalkers?

Reclining on the nebula, his starry body merging with the surroundings, was Nocturne. Danny was still a little wary of Nocturne, even though he knew that his attack on Amity had just been a test. Danny paused.

"Mister Nocturne?" he said, hesitant. He was never sure how to address the Ancients. Calling them that... It seemed rude, like he was calling them old, or something, and calling them 'master' felt wrong, too. 'Lord' would be correct, but usually felt too out of place.

"Hello, Daniel," said Nocturne, sleepily. "Are you enjoying your dream?"

"Y-Yes, sir," said Danny. "This is a dream?"

Nocturne leaned down. He was in his 'giant' form. Danny dropped a little, reflexively. The larger ghost traced a line down Danny's cheek. "Come now, we both know that you already knew that. Don't worry. I just want to make sure that you have all the rest you need. If I was doing anything else... Well, Clockwork would be very cross with me, wouldn't he?"

"I guess so," said Danny.

"What would you like to dream about, little one?"


"We all want to keep our loved ones close," said Nocturne, nodding. "An evening of adventure, I think, would suit you well. A childhood memory, but, altered, given a hint of the fantastic. A sea voyage." His sharp fingers ran down the back of Danny's neck. Danny bit his lips, and tried not to fidget. "Here," said Nocturne, finally, offering Danny a star.

Danny took the tiny light in both hands, then raised it to his lips and swallowed it whole.

He hoped that this would be a good dream.
Chapter 79

Chapter 79: Permissions

Ellie had, at first, feigned a general disinterest in the lair. She didn't want to get the shadow's hopes up, or her own. But, soon, she found herself intensely, obviously, interested in her surroundings. Gosh, those stairs were so cool. But, she did have other things on her mind...

"Didn't you say that there were people in here?" she asked. "Other than, you know, the Guys in White?"

"Yes," said Mirage. "There are. Lots of people. There are even some still upstairs, in town. We can go back, and I can introduce you, if you'd like? Or we can skip that and go forward. Danny's Dad is down there. Did I mention that?"

"Can't remember," said Ellie.

"Or," said Mirage, "we could ignore both of them and play a game. Did Vlad ever teach you chess? Or, ooh, checkers. Checkers is good. Or a word game. Or concentration. Have you ever played concentration? I have cards. Or we could track down another couple of people and play doubt. Or we could figure out how to play tarrock. Or bridge! I think I have a rule book somewhere, but it's just so weird. I don't understand bidding at all. Or, um, what else do I have? I think, Candyland? Yeah. And trivia games? It would get really confusing, because we've only got the one board, and, like, not a full set of cards for anything. But it would be really cool, thorough, random, trivia, don't you think? Oh, and we've got a library. A big library. Not as big as Ghost Writer's, or the Library of Tongues, or anything like that, but big, you know?" The shadow bounced, excited.

"So... Name something that the library is bigger than."

"Um. Most city libraries, I think, but not libraries in really big cities. I think that it's about the same size as Clockwork's, actually." He bit his lip, staring up, thinking deeply. "Yeah. I think so. Did you ever see that?"

"Hm," said Ellie. "Yeah. Just a couple of times, though. His place is weird."

"Yep. So, up, down, ignore the lot of them? Fly away?"

"Mhm. Haven't decided yet," said Ellie. She jumped up, onto the railing, then sat on it, swinging her legs out over the void. "Does this have a center?"

"Yeah," said Mirage. "It's like a die. One of the fancy ones that you use to play Dungeons and Dragons with." He held his hands out, and formed a twenty-sided polyhedron out of ectoplasm between them. "It's a little like this, only with, um, more dimensions, I guess?"

"What's at the center?" Ellie asked, peering down.

"Want to see?" asked Mirage, mischievously.

"Maybe later," said Ellie. "How about you show me who's upstairs first. Anyone I know?"

"Valerie."
"Really? Cool. I haven't seen her in ages. Take me to her!"

"Are you sure? She's a little... You know. She's a hunter."

"Yeah, but-

"She tried to hurt Danny. She tries to hurt him all the time." His eyebrows were knitted together, and he looked up at Ellie petulantly. "I know that he forgives her, but... She's so trigger happy. She's so angry. I'm worried."

"About what?"

"That she'll take her anger out on you. She was almost killed, she'll be looking for someone to take her anger out on. We've got her with Mrs Ormolu and her grandson, and Mrs Ormolu is a tiny old lady. Not threatening or ghostly at all."

"I see," said Ellie. "I still want to see her." She flipped over, dramatically. "You'll protect me, won't you?" she said, pressing her hand to her chest.

"Well, yeah. So, want to bring a game to break the ice?"

"May-" Danielle broke off as a green blur ran right into her, knocking her off her feet. She rolled over, coming up in a defensive stance before taking note of who it was who had knocked her over. "Cujo!" she exclaimed happily. "Where have you been, my dog? My doggo? My dig-dog-diggity-doggity-dog? My best best besty dog? My fave?" She giggled as the small green dog licked her face. "No, for serious, where have you been? I missed you." She almost whined the last two sentences.

"Some of the time," said Mirage, "he's been here. He's really good at getting around." He bent down to scratch the little dog behind the ears. "He's a little like you and Danny, isn't he? With the transformation, the portals, and all."

Ellie snorted. "They do say that people wind up looking like their pets, yeah?" Her smile faltered. "I guess I shouldn't visit Valerie with Cujo, though." She sighed. "You know, considering that story Danny told me and all. I want to see the other people upstairs, though, okay?"

Mirage bowed extravagantly. "Certainly, my lady."

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It took hours for Danny to wake. Nephthys peeked in, once, but excused herself quickly. Jazz had nothing against the ghost, but having the Ancient Master of Death sitting by Danny's bedside (Jazz didn't think 'deathbed') would be something of a bad omen. A number of wisps flew in, cuddling up to Danny. The doctors had given them very specific instructions about ectoenergy output, so as to not inhibit Danny's recovery. Dora had stopped by, though she couldn't stay for long. She had duties, as Queen of Mattingly. Poindexter visited, as well as a whole host of other young ghosts. Ember had come by, but had been so loud that everyone else chased her out. Johnny and Kitty had sent a card, via the Unstoppable Mailman. Several of the Far Frozen had come in, before stepping out to talk to the doctors. Clockwork had gone with them, briefly, before returning. Then the Unstoppable Mailman had come back, with a much larger packet of mail.
At that point, Jazz stopped paying attention to the comings and goings happening in the room. There were just too many of them, and she was exhausted. Still, she couldn't go to sleep. She had to stay awake until Danny was. She was just... She knew that core damage was the equivalent of brain damage, and she was worried that he might not wake up.

But then he started to make these tiny little sugar sweet mumbling noises. Literally sugar sweet. Somehow, they put the taste of sugar in her mouth, and raised the hairs on the back of her neck. Ghost stuff could be weird like that. They could hear half-formed words and names in the mumbles. Mostly their own names, as it happened, and words like 'fluffy,' 'hug,' and 'boat.' Yeah. Jazz didn't know what was going on with that, either. But whatever dream he was having seemed to be good, at least. Not that Jazz had doubted Nocturne, exactly, just...

Honestly, she was a nervous wreck, right now.

But then, Danny came, softly, slowly awake. He smiled sleepily at all of them, before grimacing. "Owww," he complained.

"I'm sorry, Daniel," said Clockwork.

"Not your fault," slurred Danny. "Hm. We're not dead?" He frowned, blinking. "Wait... I'm dead... Clockwork? Are you dead? Oops that's rude. Sorry, sorry. What's wrong with me?" He whispered the last sentence.

"Do you want that list alphabetically, chronologically, by body part, or mentally?" asked Tucker, looking at Danny.

"Mm," said Danny, pushing himself back into his pillows. "Where am I? It's hot."

"Duat Hospital," said Jazz.

"Egypt?" asked Danny.

"It was founded by those who might be described as Egyptians, yes," said Clockwork, gently brushing hair out of Danny's eyes.

"Oh. Okay. That makes sense." He blinked, slowly. Then sat up suddenly. "The Core! The Guys in-" He gasped, clutching at his chest, falling back. Clockwork caught him, and lowered him to the bed.

"It's alright," said Clockwork, "they were defeated. You helped."

"Good," said Danny, breaking off into a high-pitched moan. "Hurts," he complained.

"I know," said Clockwork. "You have been severely injured, Daniel. That's why you're at a hospital."

"Far Frozen?"

"We couldn't get you to the Far Frozen in time," explained Jazz. "Adrestia brought you here as fast as she could."

"Who?" asked Danny weakly.

"Adrestia the Inescapable," input Pandora. "She works for Libra as something of a bounty hunter and an investigator. I suppose that the best equivalent in human terms would be a detective, if I recall my modern human law enforcement correctly."
"I believe you are correct, or nearly so," said Clockwork. "However, it should be noted that the terms are not interchangeable. In many ways, Adrestia's role is more akin to that of a marshal, or a county detective, rather than a police detective."

"Um," said Danny, squinting up at the older ghost. "If you say so?"

Clockwork patted him lightly on the shoulder. "My apologies, Daniel." The gentle smile Clockwork wore faltered. "You have wounds all over your body, and your core in particular has been wounded. It isn't something that will heal on its own, unfortunately. Not for quite some time, in any case. It's something that must be treated by hand."

"Oh," said Danny.

"I will need your permission to do so," said Clockwork.

Danny frowned. "You don't need my permission to do anything," he said. Well, mumbled, really, but Jazz was well versed in Danny's mumbles. His waking ones, in any case.

"In this case I do, Daniel."

"Okay," said Danny. "Okay."

Clockwork ruffled his hair, and Danny leaned into his hand as he withdrew it. "I think that I will ask you when you are more awake."

"Hm," said Danny. "It's hot, here."

"I know, Daniel. We have been arranging for your transfer to a cooler climate."

"Hm?"

"We will bring you somewhere cooler as soon as possible," clarified Clockwork, "and Frostbite is outside, talking to the doctors here. He will come in soon, and then you will feel cooler."

"Kay," said Danny. "I think- Mm. Ugh. I don't feel so good..."

"Hey," said Tucker. "Should we maybe tell a nurse or someone that he's awake? Isn't that what people do in movies?"

"No need," said a nurse smoothly, wheeling a cart into the room. "This is a ghost hospital, after all. Are you hungry, love?" she asked Danny. Danny shook his head, wincing. "Alright, I'm just going to take your vitals, then."

"Okay," said Danny.

As the nurse checked Danny's heart beat and temperature, he dozed off again. The nurse pulled back after checking blood pressure, and sighed. "We have guest facilities," she said. "You shouldn't sleep here."

"Why not?" asked Sam.

The nurse raised an eyebrow, and gestured at the crowded room. "Do you really need me to answer that question? In any case, it may not be healthy, for humans. When injured or ill, many, though not all, ghosts tend to either be silent, or make a great deal of noise. Much of that noise is beyond the normal human hearing range. It is my understanding that subsonics tend to negatively impact humans. I am several years out of date with current human medical research, but I do make an effort
to be aware of effects that ghosts can have on humans. And of effects attributed to ghosts."

"Oh! I read about that!" said Jazz. "They cause hallucinations!"

"But- We help Danny when he's hurt all the time, and he doesn't do either of those things. I mean, he keeps talking, and we don't hallucinate."

"That we know of," said Tucker. "Some of the things we've seen, they're weird enough to be hallucinations."

"Yeah, but we all see them," said Sam, a little annoyed.

"It is possible that he doesn't do either of those things," agreed the nurse. "He is liminal, after all. They are rather strange, if you don't mind me saying so."

"That is true," said Pandora.

The nurse sighed, once more. "In any case, if you do decide to sleep elsewhere, anyone who works here can direct you."
Chapter 80

Chapter 80: Looking

It would be wrong to call Themis gleeful, when Adrestia and the Eumenides made their report. Or wrathful. Rather, she was suspended somewhere between the two emotions.

She was also, well, cautious. Justice might be blind, but it wasn't deaf. Themis had just spent the last several hours in a meeting discussing making Phantom King of All Ghosts. The Ancients, who would make the final decision about the matter, were clearly leaning towards making him King. Equally obviously, the Observants would do anything to keep that from happening. She knew that this trial would, inevitably, have political consequences. That fools and unrelated persons from all over the Zone would come to stake an interest in the outcome.

It was a good thing that Libra was in charge of this case, if only by virtue of finding it first. From the way that Ma'at, who was standing next to her, was reacting, the third Judge had something of a soft spot for the young ghost as well. She had hidden it well during the meeting, but now it was coming out. Or maybe it had just developed. Themis was close to developing one herself, if only to spite Issitoq.

But, well.

Justice was blind. She had to remain impartial.

Sometimes it grated on her, that the Ghost Zone no longer had a true police force. Her people tried, but their jurisdiction and area of interest was sadly limited. They were, overwhelmingly, lawyers, clerks, and judges. There were a few 'correctional officers' but, well, most of those weren't exactly people that you wanted to empower to deal with people before their guilt was determined. Unfortunately, true police forces were relatively new, when compared to the broad sweep of history. There weren't a terribly large number of police officers who had become ghosts thus far, and many of those were lured into Walker's service, and Walker was just, well... He would benefit from a visit to the University of Ys' Psychology Department patient care department. His Obsession was completely out of control.

"Adrestia," she said, making her decision, "I want you and Astraea to go back to young Daniel's lair, and collect all other witnesses that you find there. You should also take Miss Watson, so that she can examine his lair. This has the makings of a complex case, and we must have all relevant evidence." She thought a moment longer. "And I believe that we should make a case against any surviving GIW agents as well. Attacking Ereshkigal," said Themis, using the name that the Core had most recently introduced themselves as, "has been Sacrilege for as long as I can remember, and I doubt that they could reach Ereshkigal without breaking the Taboo of Murder. Not to mention all the attempted murder their actions imply. Also, whatever they were trying to do in front of young Daniel's lair is unlikely to have had friendly intentions. Find out what it was."

Ellie was talking to Mikey and Ricky (they were pretty fun, actually, except that Ricky was being
difficult), and the two little old ladies that they had been waiting with, when she felt the Door open. That was weird.

She and Mirage had collected all of the Amity Park people in Harmony except for Valerie, and she had been feeling pretty good about the whole thing. The Door, though... That put her guard back up.

"Echo is looking at it," said Mirage, quietly, not quite whispering. "Shade and Umbra are standing by, but they're still keeping an eye on the agents."

"Who is it?" asked Ellie, her voice pitched just as low. Even so, Ricky and Mikey were staring at her strangely.

"I think- Huh. Interesting. It's the people we talked to earlier, except more of them? One more, anyway."

"Yeah? Is she Greek, too?"

"I don't think that the winged ones were Greeks, were they? Greeks usually do the four armed thing."

"Only usually, and that's only the Greeks who weren't ever actually Greeks. The Dei."

"I know that," said Ellie. "I'm not completely uneducated. Just, you know, mostly, and, uh, not at all formally." She blushed, suddenly, and looked away, abruptly finding herself looking straight at Ricky. Somehow, she blushed harder. "Okay, we're just going to step outside for a second, okay?" She grabbed Mirage's wrist, and pulled him outside.

"So," said Mikey, "there totally was a girl version of Phantom. The website was right. Pay up."

"I don't have my wallet," grumbled Ricky.

"What, why?"

"I don't know. It was gone three days ago, when we woke up. Was it just three days ago?"

"I don't know. I stopped trying to keep track when my phone died."

"God," said Paulina. "You two are such freaks. Everyone knows that the best info about Phantom is on-

"Oh, don't you worry, dear heart," interrupted one of the old ladies, hobbling over to Paulina with a bowl of red hard candies. Mikey had tried a couple of them. They were all cinnamon, as far as he could tell. He had been hoping for cherry. "Want a bonbon?"

Paulina made a face. "Uh, no thanks. This figure doesn't keep itself."

Dash reached over her shoulder, and took two of them, gagging visibly after putting them in his mouth. Yeah. Cinnamon.
"Um," said Ellie. "Hello?" Okay, so she and Mirage hadn't just 'stepped outside.' They had gone to meet their guests, and Ellie was now shouting at them from down the road. It wasn't totally, one-hundred percent polite, but Ellie just preferred for first (well, second) contact to be at a bit of a distance. Considering what had apparently happened to Danny, she thought that was fair.

"Hello there!" called Adrestia.

"My cousin had better be okay!" said Ellie. Okay, yeah. That wasn't really polite, either. So sue her.

"We took him to a hospital," said Adrestia, reverting to speaking volume as she got closer. The sisters stayed in the background, bickering with each other. The newcomer stood by, quietly. "He'll have the best doctors in the Zone after him, I'm sure."

"Don't you mean, looking after him?"

"No? I mean, have you ever seen a doctor after an active patient? Just awful. Terrifying. I can tell you from experience. But, uh, these aren't the bad kind of doctor. These guys swear by the Hippocratic Oath, and all that."

"Okay. And you... five are here because?"

"Oh. Yeah, this is Miss Watson. She's an investigator. Forensics, you know? She's here to look at things."

"What if I say that I don't want her to look at things?" asked Ellie, more inquisitive than aggressive.

"Well, we'd leave. But you do want the people who hurt your cousin found and punished, right? Speaking of, we're also here to pick up witnesses. Anyone who saw anything. Oh, and the agents. We noticed that you must have dragged them in? I doubt that you want to keep them, although it is your prerogative if you do. Seeing as they attacked your lair."

"No we don't want them." She glanced around, searching for Echo.

A sigh came from behind her ear. "I'll take you to them," said Echo. "I would have liked to... Oh, forget it. I'm not using a euphemism. They deserve to be punished. I've been doing that."

"Libra will do that, too," said Adrestia, "and more thoroughly."

"It isn't my choice, anyway," said Echo, flippantly. "Which one of you want to do this?"

"I will," said Alex.

"I'll go with you," said Tess. "But only to prove to you that I'm scarier."

"Oh my gosh," said Meg. "You're both scary. Give it a break."

"Yeah, but you're the least scary," accused Tess.

Meg glared. "Take that back," she hissed.

"Quit it, you three," said Adrestia. "Meg, you're scary, too, but you can be consistently friendly, too, unlike these idiots, so you're with me, getting witnesses. Okay?"
"Got it, Addy."

"Okay, nice. So. Danielle. Mind introducing us to your guests?"

"Okay, first off, call me Ellie."

Jazz, Sam, and Tucker did not, of course, leave the room. Pandora did have to go, now that Danny had woken up. Like Dorathea, she had a country to run. That left the three of them with Clockwork.

Danny slept quietly, eerily silent, for quite some time. But then, when the last of the sedatives the doctors had given him started to wear off... Then he started to dream, his eyelids fluttering as his eyes twitched back and forth beneath them. When he started to dream, he started to mutter and moan. He started to toss, almost pulling his IV out twice. Once, he sat up with a start, clearly not truly conscious, but babbling, hysterical. They soothed him back, with difficulty, Clockwork doing most of the work.

But after that, Danny kept almost waking, caught between partial awareness and whatever nightmares he was having. He kept tossing and turning.

Then he started making these little, indistinct, sobbing sounds, these tiny, pained, pathetic keens, and reaching out, grasping at the covers. Sam had almost climbed into the bed with him, his nightmares always seemed to lessen with human contact, but Clockwork beat her to it. Danny curled into the older ghost, whimpering.

"He is not well," said the old ghost. "He might harm you. He would not mean to, he would never mean to, but look at the railing."

Sam did, brushing her hand along the frigid metal. There was an impression in the metal where Danny had seized it in his earlier panic. "You will be able to fix his core, won't you?" asked Sam. (She remembered those few, agonizing moments on the day of the Accident, when she was so sure Danny was dead. She couldn't go through that again. She couldn't lose him. She would go crazy.)

"I will," said Clockwork, confidently. "But it will take time, and unfortunately, I cannot accelerate matters as I usually do."

"Because of the Observants?" asked Sam.

"Because of Danny's powers?" asked Tucker.

"Both are factors," said Clockwork, "but, no. It is simply a result of the function of cores. Imagine, Tucker, for a moment, if I were to accelerate your device, there, while you had the camera on. It could record hours in a moment. To accelerate a thinking organ... Well, much the same thing would occur. I doubt that you would wish that on Daniel. In any case, doing it that way it might not work at all, regardless of other factors. Cores are complex. We will have to look at his first, before we can determine the best treatment."

"Indeed, Lord Clockwork," boomed Frostbite from the door. Sam jumped. She knew that ghosts were quiet, and she was used to ghosts sneaking up on her, but it still startled her sometimes when
someone as big as Frostbite managed to enter a room without making a sound. He smiled in greeting, but his face quickly grew grim again. "We have finished preparations to transport the Great One."
"You want us to leave?" asked an aggrieved citizen of Harmony.

"What? No, no," said Adrestia hurriedly. "We are just asking if some of you will come with us, to testify to the courts, while we put that guy," she hooked a thumb over her shoulder, at Jack, who was being glared at (and tied up) by Meg, "and his wife on trial."

"For what?"

"Murder," said Meg. "Kinda. It is sorta more complicated, you know?"

"But what could we possibly testify about?"

"All sorts of things," said Adrestia. "You live in part of the crime scene, which is also the victim's lair. We also want you to testify against the people who attacked your town. And, yeah, I know that most of you didn't see anything, but, at the very least, your inconvenience and suffering will be taken into account during sentencing. It might take a while, but as soon as you're done, we'll bring you back."

Adrestia scanned the human population of Harmony hopefully. Many ghosts had already agreed to come, so as to honor the bonds of vassalage and debts of hospitality they owed to Phantom. The humans looked a little dubious about the whole affair. Adrestia sort of understood.

It had been a long, long time since she had been in a similar situation, but she could remember, barely, a time when she had lived in a small, isolated community. Back then, she, too, had been dubious about new things from the beyond, especially when those new things wanted something from her. The attack by the agents would have only worsened their view of outsiders.

But then a man stepped forward. "If what you say is true," he said with a pronounced Scottish accent, "then it would be remiss of us to not go with you."

Others began to step forward, then, but they all agreed. They wanted more information before they actually left.

Ellie was only sort of listening to the negotiations taking place between the adults behind her. She knew that she should pay more attention, but the kids from Harmony were, in a word, awesome.

Ellie hadn't had a lot of contact with kids her age, unless she counted Poindexter, Ember, and maybe Dora. Ellie actually wasn't sure what Dora's age was. She had met other child ghosts, but most of the time she had only met them once, or twice, without any expectation of seeing them again. These guys, though, she would probably see them again. They lived in her lair.

"... and then," said Byron, laughing, "she stuck it up her nose! Can you believe it?"
"That's nothing," said Ellie, "wait until I tell you the prank I played on Danny this one time. You know those pullover sweatshirts with the big pocket in the middle?"

As Ellie told the story, her eyes drifted over to the Amity Park group. They were... Less cool. Actually, factoring in Paulina, who was scarily obsessed for a human, and Dash, who was loud, grating and boastful, Ellie didn't know how Danny stayed sane. Some of them were okay, she actually kind of liked Mia and Hannah, but at least half of them were actively unpleasant. Including the teacher, who kept staring at her.

"...of course," Adrestia was saying in the background, "we will also be taking everyone from Amity Park."

Ellie sighed internally. She really didn't want to have to spend any more time with the Amity Park people than she had to. They might start growing on her. The horror.

Valerie didn't know what was happening. That had been happening a lot, lately, and she wished that she had questioned Danny and his friends more thoroughly when she had the chance.

She wasn't with the tea-drinking old woman any more. The grandson had come in, bringing a strange ghost woman behind him. Valerie had, of course, attempted to defend herself. But almost as soon as she fired the first shot, she found herself loosing consciousness, her vision going black.

The next thing she knew, she was tied to a chair in Danny's house while two people whispered behind her.

She hated ghosts.

Danny woke up while the doctors and nurses were moving him onto a gurney, and insisted that he could walk just fine, and fly better. He couldn't, of course, but his rhetoric was so convincing that they compromised with a wheelchair. Danny was fine with this. This way, he could see where he was going, and he could hug the stuffed animal that Sam had picked up for him from the gift shop.

(He wasn't entirely sure what animal it was supposed to be, but it was black, and very soft, and he loved it.)

She had also tried to give him a flower earlier, but he had tried to eat it. He wasn't entirely sure why he did that. He didn't usually eat flowers. Well. Broccoli was technically a flower. So was cauliflower. He ate those.

The corridor outside the room frightened him. The lights buzzed too much, and the noises from the other rooms put him on edge. They were wrong, and people were hurting, and he had to do something, do something now, he had to fix this, he had to help them, protect them, this was his fault, the agents, the Guys in White, they were here, and they were going to hurt him, hurt
everybody, hurt so much, hurt everything, everywhere, everyone, he had to stop them, and what was that noise?

It was then that he noticed that he had climbed, backwards, out of the chair, up onto Frostbite, who had been pushing it. He was half-buried in Frostbite's, thick, cold, white fur. It muffled the sound, and he pushed closer to Frostbite. The soothing, icy hum of the larger ghost's core was clearly visible to Danny.

After a few minutes, he allowed himself to be coaxed back into the wheelchair. It was then that he noticed the needle in his arm. He kept trying to pull it out, but Jazz kept stopping him. That meant that it had to stay in. But it was in his arm. He didn't like that.

He knew that he was sick. That there were a lot of things wrong with him. He knew that he wasn't thinking clearly. He just couldn't help himself.

Then they got to the elevator, and Danny was instantly distracted by the shiny buttons. They were so round, and they had so many different colors! They were in Egyptian too, and Greek, which was always fun. He pressed one, and went to press another, but Jazz stopped him. He frowned up at her, but then Clockwork said something about 'ghost elevator,' and gave him a smile and a small nod.

That must mean... That must mean that Clockwork wanted him to press the buttons! All of the buttons! He would press all of the buttons! For Clockwork!

He smushed his hands onto the buttons, giggling when they lit up. A pair of little ghosts, (wisps, he pulled out from his memory, with some effort) drifted down from the vicinity of the ceiling to watch his work. That gave him an idea he (usually?) couldn't communicate well with the wisps, because they used colors, not just sound, but now... Now Danny had all the colors!

He tried to tell Tucker this. Tucker just had to put buttons on his Pretty Detention Activator and everything would be a-okay! It would probably be better at math, too. Calculators had buttons. And now Danny remembered where he left his calculator. It was in that one tree, in the park. He had forgotten, because, well, Technus, and then no sleep, but now he remembered! He was the best, and now he was going to pass that math test. Where was Mr Lancer?

"I don't know," said Tucker. "Probably back in the lair."

Danny stared at Tucker. Could he read minds now? Wait. Oh. Danny was just talking. That explained all the weird looks. Okay. Yep. Oh, and here he was, changing colors now. Too bad that just 'red all over' didn't mean much to the wisps by itself. He sunk down in the chair, blinking.

"I'm sorry," he said, suddenly, the words spilling out of his mouth like snakes. He knew, because he had caught a ghost disease that did that once. Make snakes grow in your stomach. It was gross, and it kind of hurt, too. "I don't think I'm quite right, here. I think its too hot. And there are," he frowned, searching for the word. "Sounds? I think I messed up."

His friends and family told him that he hadn't messed up. They sounded so sure. Danny had to believe them. But then why did he feel so awful?

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the Far Frozen," said Frostbite. "We have better facilities for cold core ghosts."

"And it is closer to Long Now and your lair."

"I need to think up a name," said Danny. "Or maybe I can make Ellie do it. Yeah. Are we flying?"
"We are riding, Daniel," said Clockwork.

"Dora is lending us one of her carriages," explained Sam. "It just got here."

"Oh. Okay," said Danny.

The elevator doors dinged open, making Danny jump. He tried to interpose himself between his friends and whatever whoever had opened the doors bad bad bad bad, but there was nothing there. Just an atrium. A kind of normal place. He giggled at the inscriptions on the walls. Most of them were just names of donors, but some were stories, or jokes, and they were funny.

As Frostbite wheeled him forward, Danny waved cheerily at the other people in the atrium. But he paused when he came across a mother and child.

"Jazz," he said, "where's Mom?" He had the feeling that something bad had happened to her, that she had been in some kind of danger, that she had been hurt.

"She's fine," said Jazz, stiffly, not meeting his eyes.

Danny made a questioning sound in the back of his throat. "Where?"

Jazz looked down at him. "If you'd like, I can go check up on her," she said.

"Stay with her?" asked Danny.

"If you want me to," said Jazz.

"Please," said Danny. He didn't want Jazz to leave him, but he was worried. "Where's Dad?" he asked, less worried about his father, for some reason.

"Still in your lair," said Jazz. "With Mr Lancer and your classmates."

Danny blinked. "I have a lair?" He narrowed his eyes. "Is this about me cleaning my room? Because it isn't that messy."

"No, Danny, your room is fine. Do you still want me to go stay with Mom?"

"Yes," said Danny. "I want a hug first."

Frostbite stopped pushing the chair, and Jazz came around to hug Danny, carefully avoiding the IV. "You get better soon, okay?"

"Okay," said Danny.
Chapter 82

Chapter 82: Informed Consent

Maddie had, of course, tried to escape. She had even managed to get out of the room, once, by passing through the wall, a bizarre experience. However, she had been found, and brought back, this time with a beady-eyed orderly to watch her. They glared at one another for hours. Maddie was sure that she would have won the staring contest, if ghosts had to sleep.

Unfortunately, they either did not, or this one was just particularly well rested.

(Maddie found herself questioning all her assumptions about ghosts. Danny slept. Perhaps others did, too.)

Maddie found herself nodding off.

She wasn't sure how long she had slept before the door of her makeshift prison opened. She started, awake and wary.

"Hey, Mom," said Jazz dully. She had great, dark circles under her eyes, and her long red hair was half-tucked into the back of her shirt, which was new, as were her pants. She supposed that she should have expected that. The clothes that Jazz had been wearing earlier had been blood spattered, as were the clothes that Maddie was still wearing.

"Jazz," said Maddie, rising from the uncomfortable chair she had been given. "What's going on? How is Danny?"

"He's being transferred to a different hospital," said Jazz. "He can get better treatment there."

"What, where? When are we leaving?"

"We aren't. Danny asked me to stay with you. So I will. I think that Libra's going to send people to pick us up."

Maddie sat down, heavily, disappointed. "Danny is alright, though, isn't he?"

"He isn't well," said Jazz. "Everything that happened to him these past few days, it's catching up with him. He isn't pushing it back anymore."

"But, he'll be okay?"

"I think so."

Maddie ran her hands down her face. "Thank goodness." She paused. "What do you mean, it's catching up with him?"

"He isn't entirely in his right mind," said Jazz, a little reluctantly, glancing at the orderly. "He was having nightmares, earlier. Bad ones. Even Clockwork wasn't able to completely close all of his wounds. They keep opening back up. He got a nosebleed, earlier, too. They've got him on an IV, blood and nutrients. They've taken him off the sedatives, though, so that's good. He has a fever. They think that something might be infected, but they can't tell what."
"What do- What are they- What are they going to do for him? He isn't a ghost, they can't treat him like one."

"They aren't going to. They know about Danny. Just about everyone knows about Danny."

"Except us," said Maddie.

"Yeah, well." Jazz shrugged, bit her lip, and crossed her arms. She refused to look away, though. "The main problem is all the damage to his core, so they're going to fix that first. The concussion is a major complication, but that will heal on its own, as long as he doesn't get hit in the head again. The swelling is already going down."

"How?" asked Maddie.

"Honestly, I don't know. I don't think that they do, either."

The carriage was painted red and white, and was drawn by two pairs of fiery white horses. It was large, wide, and there was a bed bolted to the floor between two sets of plush benches. There was no driver.

"It's an ambulance," said Danny. He was a little more lucid now than he had been earlier, he didn't feel so hot, so feverish, now that Frostbite was near, but his tone was still distinctly dreamy.

"It does look like one, doesn't it?" said Clockwork, taking a moment to ruffle Danny's hair. Danny wondered if he was pleased because of the buttons. That didn't sound right, though. Danny frowned. No, it didn't make sense, for Clockwork to be interested in elevator buttons. Clockwork was the Master of Time, not the Master of Buttons. That sounded like something Technus would say.

(Speaking of Technus, Danny was displeased with him. He couldn't quite recall why, but it must be serious. Something about the gym?)

(Did clocks even have buttons? Or just those little knob thingies?)

"Stopwatches have buttons," he said out loud. His frown deepened. "That didn't make much sense did it? When did you get me into bed?" (Unspoken: How did they get him into bed? He didn't want to go back to sleep.)

"No," said Sam, "and a couple of minutes ago."

"Oh. Okay. Grandfather, I think that I'm more awake, now. Probably."

"Yes," said Clockwork, "you are. But let us bide a moment longer. There is no hurry."

"But I thought-"

"Shut up, Tucker. Everyone knows that you don't think."

"Hey," complained Tucker.

"Tucker thinks!" protested Danny. "He's a member of homo sapiens sapiens! I know I said sapiens
twice, but that's the full designation! That means that he thinks! Unless he's brain dead. Or secretly a robot." He turned wide, frightened eyes towards Tucker.

"Dude, I can't tell if you're joking or not. Also, why do you even know this stuff?"

"I don't know!" exclaimed Danny. Then he whimpered, pressing hands over his ears. "My head hurts."

"Sorry," said Sam, "are we too loud?"

"No," said Danny. "Just hurts." He pulled the blankets of the bed up around himself, and was pleased to find a block of ice at the foot of the bed. He put his feet on it and mumbled contentedly, his discomfort momentarily forgotten.

He did doze off, though he didn't mean to, and he didn't notice until he woke up, screaming about white suits and the smell of bleach. He decided that he must have been dreaming with his other brain, and left it at that. (How many of those did he have at this point? And he teased Jazz for being brainy.)

"What's going on?" he asked, fuzzily, once he got his emotions under control. "Are we there yet?"

"Almost," said Frostbite, peering out the window.

"I'm thirsty," said Danny. It really was more of an observation than a request, but he was pleased when a glass of water was pressed into his hands. He drank it, slowly, savoring the soothing effect it had on his throat. He must have been screaming for a while. "I think I'm awake, now. I want to know what you needed permission for."

"In order to repair your core," said Clockwork, his tone resigned, but patient, "we must touch it. We may even have to remove it from your body for an extended period of time."

Danny blanched, mid-sip, almost sucking water up his nose. "That hasn't really worked out for me in the past."

"I know," said the ghost, patting Danny's knee. "That's why we have to ask. Still, this won't be like those times. We would remove your core from your body, but we would not attempt to disconnect it, as you have noted, that would not go well, and we will not be attempting to separate the ectoplasmic and material parts of your body, which is what causes most of the other problems."

"You'd better not let my parents hear this," said Danny, voice soft.

"Yes, well, that isn't to say that such an arrangement would be at all healthy in the long term. Without your core in close proximity, the ectoplasmic components of your body would begin to break down, despite your formidable will, you would be unable to maintain the focus, and the division of attention preserving them would require. Not to mention the issues that your core would have, suddenly exposed like that."

"A temporary ectoplasmic body would provide some relief for that problem," said Frostbite. From his tone, this wasn't the first time they had discussed this.

"Yes, but the instructions his core would be trying to carry out all incorporate, all rely on, a partially material body, and on the excess emotional produced by his human half. Without those components, he would, again, in the long term, become quite ill, or perhaps even starve. Then there are the mental issues..."
"What if you fed him, the second body, human food?" asked Sam. She glanced at Danny and shrugged. "Just curious."

Frostbite laughed. "Then you might wind up with two Great Ones!"

"I don't like the sound of that," said Danny.

"It would act more as a duplicate than anything else," said Clockwork, reassuringly. "With a bit of effort, you could reabsorb such a temporary body, even if it had gained material components. The mental side of things, the lack of close communication between your two 'halves,'" Clockwork, amusingly, used air-quotes, "would be the real issue. Your human qualities temper your ghostly ones, and vice versa."

"So we'd get super Danny and fun Danny again?" asked Tucker.

"No," said Clockwork. "Those personas were the result of another factor, one not at play here. No, what would most likely occur would be that those ghostly qualities that you suppress most often would come to the fore."

"What about the human qualities that I repress?" Danny said, only half-joking.

"You have more experience being human. You know how to deal with those."

"Oh. Okay. Do we have to do this second body thing?"

"Not necessarily," said Clockwork. "It is possible that your core will respond quickly to treatment, but, otherwise, if we anticipate the need for multiple treatments, over a period of time, it would be better to house your core in a temporary body, rather than subject you to the trauma of having your core removed repeatedly." He squeezed Danny's knee, somehow avoiding the bruise Danny knew was there. "Do we have your permission, Daniel?"

"Okay, but what are you going to do to, you know, treat it? My core, I mean."

"A number of things. Mostly, just providing your core with the energy it needs to repair itself. Perhaps removing the equivalent of scar tissue, soothing areas that are inflamed, providing structure in places where gaps or chips have appeared, setting and sealing fractures."

"You could change a person entirely, like that," observed Danny.

"Yes, we are aware."

"Okay," said Danny. He swirled the last drops of water in his cup. "I give you permission."
Arriving at the Far Frozen was something of a blur. Danny had only the barest glimpses of powder snow, towering mountains, and white skies before being whisked below to the sparkling, carved-ice caverns that housed their medical facilities.

Once there, the esteemed doctors of the Far Frozen insisted on running dozens of tests on Danny, which made him sulky; he didn't see how these were helping. But they gave him a lollipop, patted him gingerly, and told him what a good boy he was, and there was little he liked more than that, so he forgave them.

They phrased all their requests so nicely, too. They always asked, him to help them, to hold this thing, or that thing, to stay still, to drink this, to breathe, to cough. They said that he was helping them. He liked helping people. He was helping them. He liked that, even though he didn't like the tests.

They spent a lot of time distracting him, too. Giving him toys, and pretty little things. At one point he spent a half-hour utterly fascinated by an exquisite snowflake the size of his hand. Normal ice was beautiful enough, but ghost ice could twist into so many more shapes, could be so much more naturally intricate. Also, it didn't melt in his hand, despite his near-human body temperature.

Of course, after the half-hour, he ate it. He... didn't know why he did that, actually. It tasted good, though. Not as good as the lollipop, but good. He licked the lollipop. He wondered if this was the kind with an extra goody at the core. The outer part, at least, was blue-raspberry flavored. He liked blue-raspberry flavored things, and lime flavored things, and sweet things, and sour things, and spicy things.

He also, although he would never admit it, liked all the fuss they were making over him. Usually, he didn't like being treated like a child; he was a teenager, after all, and he had seen more in his short lifetime than most people ever did. But right now, it made him feel safe, cherished. Especially when it was Clockwork making the fuss. He really liked being tucked under the older ghost's chin, sitting curled in his lap, the edges of Clockwork's purple robe drawn around him like a blanket, as the waited for results.

Clockwork was telling him a story. He was trying really hard to pay attention, but it wasn't easy. He kept zoning out, distracted by the pretty patterns on the walls.

But then the results did come back. Danny didn't really understand them, except that he was really messed up, which he already knew. Apparently, the either the Mortifier, or that awful circle thing had fractured his core, and then his fight with the GIW had strained it even more, and then something about 'Ereshkigal' making his core bleed ectoplasm, which sounded pretty gross.

"What now?" asked Danny.

"Now," said Clockwork, "you go to sleep."

Danny nodded drowsily, his body already working to fulfill Clockwork's request.

"Stay awake for long enough for us to give you your medicine," cajoled Clockwork, with a touch of
sad humor.

"Okay," said Danny.

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Danny floated in a gray cotton sea of nothingness, partially bracing himself against the idea that he would be separated soon. He was scared, but he trusted Frostbite and Clockwork. They would take care of him.

So he waited. It was peaceful, here. His mind wandered in the nothing, simply resting, simply being.

Then there was the terrifying sensation of someone touching him, touching the deepest, most personal part of him, touching his core. It was gentle, not at all like the fiery grasp that had tormented him just a few days previously, but still there, and he trembled. But there was nothing more than that. Just a touch, as if whoever it belonged to was waiting for permission to do more.

It waited, just waited.

Slowly, Danny remembered what was happening. Slowly, he recognized the touch. Clockwork’s, and behind that, Frostbite. He felt kind of silly, now, for panicking. Maybe, he had recognized them, even at the first. He hadn’t woken up screaming, after all, nor had he done anything even less pleasant.

He relaxed, lowering the last of his defenses. The touch moved, cupping his core, drawing it upwards, and Danny lost even this, fragile, gray cotton dreamlike state, his consciousness running away like water.

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Danny woke, feeling weak and beaten, but otherwise surprisingly clear-headed. He blinked stinging and sore eyes, trying to force them to focus. They felt puffy. Bruised. Just like the rest of him. There was an odd tugging lightness fastened mostly to the center of his chest, but also to other points of his body.

"Clockwork?" he groaned, questioning, raising a hand, searching, and trying to lever himself up. A cold, supporting hand appeared between his shoulder blades, and another placed itself in his outstretched hand. Soft reassurances accompanied the touch. "Water."

"Here," rumbled Frostbite, and a cup was raised to Danny’s lips.

Danny drank greedily, and when he was done, his vision had cleared. Instantly, his gaze was arrested by the small, glowing, crystalline sphere floating in the air in front of him. It was small, only about the size of a marble, something that would fit easily in the palm of his hand. It was pale, bluish-white with touches of frost blue, ectoplasm green, and pale mint, covered with fractal ice patterns. It was very pretty. Maybe even beautiful. It had cracks in it, though, and it looked almost bruised, the coloring darker in some places than it should have been. (Although how Danny knew how this
There were faint, barely visible, filaments that anchored it to his body at every point, and gave the sphere an odd, fuzzy halo that wasn't simply the result of ghostly glow. He raised a hand to touch one of the more visible strands, watching the way the ones rooted in his hand flowed after it, noting the cool, soft sensation as his fingers passed through them. He wasn't surprised that they were intangible.

"I thought that you would like to see it," said Clockwork. "Before we did anything else."

"Else?"

"We stopped the bleeding. Sealed the cracks. Aligned the fracture."

"Oh," said Danny. He tapped the little sphere, then hissed, as a jolt of pain rippled through his... Honestly, he wasn't sure where it felt like it was coming from, only that it hurt. He wasn't quite sure what he had expected.

He absently rubbed his chest. He felt empty, hollow, now that he thought about it, but the feeling wasn't nearly as bad, (or as noticeable,) as it had been the last time something like this had happened. He still felt connected, but not pulled painfully apart. None of this was pleasant, but neither was it unbearable.

"What now?" asked Danny.

"Now," said Clockwork, gesturing to a clear glass tank full of brightly glowing green liquid in the corner of the room, "we immerse your core in pure ectoplasm."

"That doesn't sound so good," said Danny, remembering his last encounter with energized ectoplasm. He didn't want to feel like that again.

"Don't worry, Great One!" said Frostbite. Danny flinched. Frostbite was a little too loud, and he felt very vulnerable right now, with his core just floating out in the open like this, even though he knew that Frostbite would never hurt him. At a lower volume, Frostbite continued, at a lower volume, "Your core will know what to do with it. There shouldn't be any serious complications from this."


Frostbite wheeled the ectoplasm tank to the center of the room. Clockwork cupped Danny's core gently in his hands, and drew it over the tank. The threads connecting Danny to his core grew more tenuous, more transparent, as his core grew farther away. Danny drew his legs up to his chest, wrapping them with his arms. "What are these?" asked Danny, trying to touch one again. This was one of the thicker ones, leading to the very center of his forehead. The only one that rivaled it was the one buried in the center of his chest.

"Silver cord," answered Clockwork, a little distracted, beginning to lower Danny's core into the tank.

"They are roughly equivalent to a human's nervous system, although they do also carry various kinds of energy," elaborated Frostbite. "They are typically intangible. It would be extremely difficult for you to touch them, Great One."

Danny nodded, then winced. That made his head hurt. He still wasn't at all well.

Then Danny's core hit the ectoplasm. Danny gasped. Clockwork withdrew his hands quickly. The ectoplasm in the tank swirled, churned and sloshed. Occasionally, a recognizable shape thumped into
the tank walls. A hand. A foot. An eye. Once, a whole limb, jointed, skinned, but emaciated and skeletal, gripped the upper edge of the tank only to dissolve moments later.

It made Danny sick. Literally. He leaned over the edge of the table to vomit, his skin gone even paler than usual. This, this was wrong. This was... His insides twisted, moved, in ways that human intestines weren't supposed to, or at least it felt that way. He sobbed, and moaned, and barely heard Clockwork and Frostbite encouraging him to impose a more manageable form upon the chaos, something smaller, easier, than his original shape. Something simpler. Lower energy, lower maintenance. He didn't need all those finicky little connections, remember? Things didn't have to be absolutely perfect. It didn't have to have insides. (Danny's moved snakelike, wrapping around his spine, and he gagged). It was just a shell, just a shell. Like the shadows, and yes, they had heard about the shadows. Like the shadows, Danny, but even less. This didn't need to have its own mind, it had Danny's. It was a duplicate, but less. Think of it like a cast, like protective padding. That's all this was. He could do it, they believed in him.

Danny picked an image, a picture, a thought, a feeling. Smaller, simpler, easier. This was still him, still him, he couldn't pick something too far off, not when he could hardly think.

The sickening, slapping, squelching noises stopped, and Danny was able to breathe again, his stomach settling. He pushed himself up, to see what had happened.

Clockwork was fishing what looked like a small, naked, child from the remaining ectoplasm in the tank. That was him, Danny realized. That was the temporary body for his core.

Its hair was white, stark and snowy, no slightly silver underlayer. Its eyes, when they opened, were brilliant green, irises only slightly darker than sclera, and no pupils to speak of. Lips were thin, no darker than the rest of its utterly smooth, green-touched skin. It had Danny's face, of course. (Danny wondered if there was something wrong with him, that he was referring to part of himself as 'it.' He decided that there wasn't. He didn't call his arm 'he' after all. On the other hand... Or arm...)

Clockwork cradled the small child, making comforting sounds, and the boy clung to him, seizing Clockwork's purple robes in both hands. Danny felt a faint stab of jealousy, and then a stronger one of fear.

For most intents and purposes, Danny was human right now. What made him a ghost, what really made him a ghost, what made any ghost, was lodged in that child's (Phantom's?) chest right now. What if Clockwork... Danny didn't even want to think about it, but up until now, Danny had never interacted with Clockwork while separated. What if Clockwork wasn't interested in human Danny, with Fenton? What if he was only interested in the ghost, in Phantom? What if Clockwork treated his two selves differently? Danny had gotten used to that kind of thing, that split in views, in affections, in treatment, from... From, well, just about everybody, really, except for his few close friends. He didn't think that he could stand that behavior from Clockwork. He couldn't stand it if Clockwork gave his ghost half more attention than his human half, and he felt like he was shaking apart inside.

But then Clockwork walked over the ectoplasm splattered floor, and set the little Phantom down in Danny's lap. The child looked up.

Danny was immediately overcome with an extreme and exquisite sense of vertigo, like standing between mirrors, like looking into the abyss. He felt his Obsessions trying to attach themselves to the child in front of him, but coming up short, because the child was him.

When he came out of his daze, Clockwork was sitting next to him, an arm slung around Danny's
shoulders, holding him tight. Phantom was curled in Danny's lap, his lower half morphed into a ghostly tail that wrapped around Danny's waist.

"Let's get the two of you cleaned up," said Clockwork, voice soft, seemingly not caring about the ectoplasm and other filth the children were getting on his clothes.

"'M getting you dirty," mumbled Danny, pulling away.


Danny didn't exactly wake, after that movement of his core, of his self, but he didn't stay buried in the dark for very long. He couldn't see, couldn't hear, but that didn't bother him. What bothered him was how exposed he felt, like he was a made of live wires, of exposed nerve endings, everything around him, everything that could protect him, stripped away.

But, he could feel certain presences, two of them, strong ones. These were what he felt before. They were safe. They would keep him safe, despite how defenseless he was. He loved them. He wanted to be near them. He wished he could do something for them, considering that they were keeping him safe, and being so nice.

There was a third... something, nearby, but it just felt like more of himself. More Danny. Something he was tied to. Someone he was tied to.

Danny had to wonder how he had gotten here, floating and all but senseless. He couldn't really recall anything before this. But his thoughts were interrupted but the two large presences coming near again. They touched him, all over, everywhere, and they did things. There were points where Danny was tempted to lash out, but he didn't. Something told him that the presences were just trying to help.

His patience and forbearance was rewarded. Everywhere that was touched felt better. Then they paused. Then there was a singular, grating, snapping pain. It was like being jolted awake by being thrown into the pavement. Which he now remembered happening to him. He remembered things now. Some things, anyway. That was better, although he was still unsettled (dizzy? Was he dizzy? He didn't have eyes or ears to be dizzy with.) by the pain.

Then the presences withdrew for a moment, as if giving him the time and space to reorient himself and recover. But then they returned, much to Danny's relief. They soothed the still aching edges of the now-aligned fracture.

Then they stopped, and Danny resigned himself to the possibility that this was as good as he was going to feel.

The third something or other started to move. Danny paid careful attention. It touched him, and, simultaneously, a wave of pain and a wave of possessiveness swept over him. Mine mine mine mine mine, whispered and chirred the deep parts of his mind.

There was a lot of confusion after that. He couldn't properly interpret what was going on. He kept getting signal from somewhere else. Bursts of random emotions, thoughts, understandings. He knew what had to happen in a moment. He had to make a body soon, or something like that.
Honestly, that didn't sound like something that he could do, or, at the very least, it sounded hard. Unreasonably so.

But then it was happening, and he wasn't doing very well with it. He kept making bits and pieces, but it wasn't enough. They kept falling apart, kept melting. There was something missing, something to anchor to. He didn't like this at all. He was starting to panic.

Then he started getting more flashes. An image, a picture, a thought, a feeling. He latched onto them, and pulled inwards, fastening his mental fingers into the ectoplasm around him.

Suddenly, he had a body.

A body lying face down in two or three inches of ectoplasm, but still, a body. He felt weak. Too weak to even push himself up out of the ectoplasm. It was a good thing that he didn't breathe. Or did he? He didn't know. He couldn't remember.

He was pulled out of the ectoplasm by friendly hands. He recognized those. Clockwork! He loved Clockwork. He fastened himself to the older ghost, curling his hands into Clockwork's violet robes, even biting down on it, sucking at it, desperate, hungry, and knowing that Clockwork would give him what he wanted, what he needed.

Without warning, he was overcome with a sense of doubt and fear, and something deeper, more painful, more biting. He curled farther into Clockwork, trying to escape the feelings. There was no reason for him to feel this way. No reason for anyone here to feel this way, and he wanted it to stop, but he couldn't do anything, not like this, when he was so weak, and shaking, and broken, and missing so, so many pieces. He wanted Clockwork to stop it. He needed Clockwork to stop it.

And then Clockwork pulled him away. He had never felt so betrayed. So shocked. But then his rationality caught up with his emotions, and he knew that Clockwork wouldn't betray him. This must be a way to stop the other feeling. The feeling that was a lot like betrayal, when he thought about it. So he cooperated. Anything for Clockwork.

He was placed on the lap of a small, slender, teen. He looked up, and was struck with the sense that he wasn't supposed to be looking at the teen's face like this. That there was supposed to be something else, that it was supposed to look different, be seen from a different angle. Be looked at from inside. With different eyes.

But this sensation passed quickly, in less than a hummingbird's heartbeat.

The teen looked so sad, so frightened. He looked hurt. Danny felt his Obsession latch onto the teen, or try to. It was like trying to save a reflection in the mirror.

He was reminded-

-it was mirrors all the way down.

He couldn't quite sure who this was, but it didn't matter. This was someone who needed comfort, someone who was safe, familiar. He wrapped his tail around the teen, not quite purring.

(He hurt on the inside.)

The teen blinked, and hesitantly began to stroke Danny. That was good. Very good. Yes. Clockwork seemed to think so, too. He was sitting next to the teen, one arm wrapped around the teen's shoulders.
"Let's get the two of you cleaned up," said Clockwork, voice soft, seemingly not caring about the ectoplasm and other filth the children were getting on his clothes.

"'M getting you dirty," mumbled the teen, pulling away.

Clockwork held him tightly. "A temporary matter," said Clockwork, sending a smile down at Danny.
Chapter 84

Chapter 84: Rubber Ducky

Sam and Tucker were not allowed with Danny while he was being operated on. This was normal, this was reasonable. They understood. They knew that they couldn't, shouldn't be with him.

That didn't mean that they liked being shut out.

They were put in a nice room, given nice food, and visited by some of the younger members of the Far Frozen. 'Younger' being a relative term. They were children by the standards of the Far Frozen, and by ghostly standards, but to put their age in terms a human would understand, they would be hundreds of years old. The older ghosts were giving Sam and Tucker space. Care and understanding, and all necessities, yes, but also space.

They needed it. They were exhausted.

"You know what this always reminds me of?" asked Tucker, gesturing vaguely at the icy ceiling. Sam looked up. The ceiling was patterned with a mandala of periwinkle, mint, and frost colored lozenges.

"No," said Sam, quietly, laying on the fur-covered bed. Normally, she would be upset about the fur, but ghosts were weird, and skinning an animal didn't always destroy it. In any case, she had seen the giant hairy ice snakes that burrowed through the glaciers of the Far Frozen. These covers could be made from their shed skins. Of course, there were other ghostly animals that the furs could have come from. Sam just didn't really care. It didn't seem important right now.

"That ice hotel thing. You know, the one up in the arctic circle, that people go to for weddings."

"Yeah. I guess so," agreed Sam. "This is cooler, though."

"Probably colder, too," said Tucker, hugging his borrowed coat closer to his body. This particular room wasn't terribly cold, but it was chilly. The yetis had made sure that this room was human habitable, but they couldn't make it warm. This was the Far Frozen, after all.

Sam groaned. "You've hit Danny's level and you're still digging."

"Good," said Tucker, a little mulishly. "Someone needed to lighten the mood, even if it meant hitting it over the head with a shovel, and burying its corpse."

"That didn't make sense."

"Ghosts are lighter than air," groaned Tucker.

"When did your sense of humor get so morbid?"

"Well, it all started when I became friends with a spooky, pale-skinned, dark-haired, pushy, death-obsessed, weirdo, and my other friend died screaming in a freak lab accident."

"Ha-ha. Very funny."

"I thought so."
"Ugh. I'm so tired."

"Yeah, me too."

There were no hot springs in the Far Frozen, but there was a bathing complex. The temperature of the water in it would have given a human hypothermia within minutes, but it was more than comfortable enough for cold-core ghosts.

Danny- neither of them- were exactly human, anyway.

Human Danny (Fenton?) sat in the warmest of the pools, leaning back against the tiled wall, letting the water, which would feel frigid to just about anyone else, relax his muscles. He had his eyes closed. Behind him, Clockwork was shampooing his hair. The little Danny (Phantom?) was playing deeper in the pool, flopping around enthusiastically, splashing and making noises.

Fenton was making little noises of his own. Like he said, he liked being fussed over, sometimes, when he was feeling poorly, and he had felt very, very grimy.

Clockwork poured water over his head. Fenton hummed, and slouched, sinking deeper into the pool. Clockwork had rolled up his sleeves, and removed his gloves and watches. His fingers were long, his fingernails were short-cut, clean, with white ends, and his palms were more pale teal than royal blue. Danny, both of them, had found them fascinating.

(Danny had seen Clockwork's hands before, but it was such a rare occurrence that he was always fascinated. It was the same with Clockwork's hair, or feet, or, really, most of Clockwork's body parts. Seeing them bare was like seeing double rainbows. Danny always paid attention.)

"Could you duck under for a moment?" asked Clockwork, voice pitched so that Fenton knew that it really was a request, not a politely phrased command. "To rinse the rest of this out."

Fenton complied, slipping under the surface, eager to please.

A few seconds later, Clockwork was pulling him back up. "Not so long," said the ghost, concern apparent in every syllable. "You haven't recovered yet," he continued. "You need to breathe."

The little ghost, Phantom, was floating on his back in the water beside him, peacefully staring at the distant ceiling. Fenton allowed himself to be distracted by the child's appearance again. It had changed, just slightly. There were scars on his skin. Or, perhaps, he should say that there was a scar on his skin. The one that described Danny's death. Fenton looked at his own skin, his own scars, easily finding the one that matched the one on Phantom.

He jumped a little when he felt a comb going through his hair, then sighed.

Clockwork moved on to Phantom next. The little ghost had expended his childlike energy rapidly, and was now quite content to sit still, although he kept trying to hold onto Clockwork's hands. Fenton murmured at the little ghost, not sure what he was saying himself. The little ghost mumbled back. Again, Fenton had no idea what was said, but it was... Good? Maybe. Some kind of deep information transfer between two halves of the same soul. Danny sighed. He felt better.
Fenton pulled himself out of the water, onto the icy pool ledge. The thought that he should be freezing crossed his mind. Even like this, he wasn't exactly human. Phantom reached out to touch his foot, which was still under the water. His veins and arteries lit up, briefly. Fenton gasped, but didn't flinch, or pull away.

He noticed that, despite the shampoo, Phantom was staring straight up at him with wide, brightly glowing eyes. (And perhaps if Danny was a different person, he would have found it eerie, but he didn't. It was cute, in Fenton's opinion, how attentive the little ghost was.)

It was unbearable, waiting. Even with Jazz there. Although, in truth, Jazz's presence might have made the wait even more unbearable. She was unhappy with Maddie, and Maddie supposed that she had every right to be. Maddie had done unspeakable things to Danny.

"You said that Libra was going to come get us," said Maddie, finally, unable to stand the silence any longer. "Do you know when?"

"No," said Jazz.

That was the end of that 'conversation.'

Maddie tried again. "You mentioned earlier that you were studying ghost psychology?"

"Yes," said Jazz. She rolled her eyes. "You want to know-"

The door opened. "Hello," said a smooth-skinned woman in a white doctor's robe. "I am Doctor Moon. I am here to examine you." She stepped through the door. Her skin was green, and her head was shaved.

Maddie blinked. "We aren't injured."

"Ah. You misunderstand. I am a psychologist. As you are in the hospital, we believe that it is prudent, to examine you thus, before we hand you over to Libra."

Maddie scowled. "I do not need a ghost to-"

"Mom!"

There was another knock on the door. Two more women poked their heads in. "Hello!" said the one, a petite blonde with a pixie cut. "Are you Jasmine Fenton?"

"Yes?" said Jazz, inquisitively.

"Hi," said the woman, walking in and extending a gloved hand. She was wearing a neat suit and a knee-length black overcoat. "My name is Nettle, and I am an advocate. I was hoping that you would allow me to represent you in the upcoming trial." She smiled, revealing sharp teeth. "I know that this is awfully presumptuous of me, and that this must be a very difficult time for you, but you must understand the need for representation."

"Uh, yes, but, um," Jazz was shaking Nettle's hand, but was staring over the woman's shoulder.
"Oh, that gremlin back there is just Ivy."

"Hey!" complained the red haired woman.

"Believe it or not, we're partners," continued Nettle. "Nettle and Ivy, Advocates at Arms."

"What?"

"It means that we do trials by combat, too," explained Ivy, still half behind the door. "But not in the high courts. We aren't Champions. Just if you wind up on the bad side of a Realm's ruler, or court system. A small Realm's ruler, or court system. It's a case-by-case kind of thing."

"I see. Um," Jazz glanced at Maddie. "I don't suppose that you have anyone who could represent my mother?"

"We might know a guy or two," said Nettle, cheerfully. "Let's go discuss how you want the trial to unfold." She dragged Jazz off, out the door.

"Well," drawled Maddie. "That was convenient."

"It was, was it not?" said Dr Moon. She smiled dryly. "Except, I must say, that it was not a coincidence. I was hoping to speak to you alone, get an idea of how you think." She sent a significant glance towards the orderly, who nodded, and stepped out. "You were about to ask your daughter about ghost psychology," continued the woman, pulling a chair out so that she could sit directly in front of Maddie.

"You aren't going to take notes?" asked Maddie, crossing her arms. Recent events might have given her cause to reevaluate her stand on ghosts' morality, but she didn't appreciate being questioned, psychoanalyzed, by a ghost.

"No need," said Dr Moon, "I have a perfect memory. I will transcribe our conversation at a later time."

Maddie frowned, but fell silent. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I am a doctor. It is our duty to make sure that all those under our care are healthy, and leave healthy. Your body has already been examined. Now we examine your mind."

"Why?" asked Maddie, again.

Dr Moon tilted her head. "You have recently been through a rather, let us say, upsetting experience. It would be unusual for you to emerge well. Also, you are about to be detained concerning what one might call a disturbing crime. Even we ghosts have a certain requirement of sanity, when trying someone for such a thing."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Do not mistake me, mad or sane, all must account for their actions, and all must make account equally. Still, the mad are given consideration, and those that may be cured are often given... less final punishments. Those who cannot be cured are given less painful ones."

"And exactly what counts as sanity among ghosts?"

Dr Moon grinned. "You have hit the problem exactly. No, we do not use the same standards as humans do. Nor can one use the standards of, say, the Deathless, to determine the sanity of the Dead,
or the Undying. The Dead alone... Ha! Psychology is a complex practice."

"You'd think that being obsessed with one thing to the exclusion of all else would make things easier."

"Not at all. Obsession is only one facet of our existence, even if it is the most important one. The most vital one, if you would. Our country is made of diverse kinds. Like I said, take the Dead alone."

Despite herself, Maddie was curious. She was... Concerned, perhaps. Danny counted himself as being dead, and she had no idea what that meant to him. He had said that he acted like the Dead, in most circumstances. Maddie trusted Jazz, but she wouldn't say anything bad about Danny, and Maddie doubted that Jazz actually knew all that much about ghost psychology. She was still a teen, after all, and she hadn't even believed in ghosts until a few years ago. On the other hand, this person knew a lot about ghost psychology, or claimed to, but Maddie couldn't trust her at all.

"What about the Dead?" asked Maddie.

"Well, in the very broadest of strokes, for the newly Dead there are those who avoid new experiences and the unfamiliar, and those who actively seek them out. Why do you think that is?"

Maddie shrugged, unwilling to give anything of her thought process away.

"The first cling to nostalgia. They would have lived for what they already had. They had good lives, mostly. Lives that they enjoyed. Or at least lives that they would have wanted to keep. Things that they wanted to keep doing. Lives that they want to reclaim. Then, for the other, they had things that they still wanted to do, to see. They feel cheated in death, that their time was cut short. Or, they feel the need to make use of their second chance. To seize life, much like someone who had a near-death experience. Of course, as with all psychology, this is a sweeping generalization, and with time, all the Dead move past this." Dr Moon drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I see that this means something to you. Your son?"

"That's none of your business," snapped Maddie.

"Hm," hummed Dr Moon, the spectral harmonics of her voice making the hair's on Maddie's neck stand on end. Maddie was beginning to wonder if that particular sound was some kind of ghostly habit, or if it had some kind of meaning. Danny, as well as the shadows, had made similar sounds. "You do realize that the sooner you speak to me, the sooner you can acquire an advocate and be updated as to the condition of Phantom."

"Danny," said Maddie.

"Hm?"

"His name is Danny. Not Phantom."

Dr Moon raised an eyebrow. "I would say that it is both, and more. He has chosen to wear more than one name, and that is his prerogative. His choice. Would you not respect it?"

Maddie's lips twitched. "His name is Danny."

"Very well."
It was a tall, broad, yeti, Dr Iceclaw, who picked up the newly clean Fenton to put him in the wheelchair. Frostbite, who was, after all, the chief of the Far Frozen, hadn't stayed for the bath. He had other responsibilities, and the other yetis were more than happy to supervise.

Fenton wasn't terribly enthused about the wheelchair, but he had proven earlier, back in the operation room, that he couldn't be trusted to walk on his own. There was something broken in his ankle that hadn't been located earlier amid all his other injuries, and even without it, the bruises, cuts, and other fractures had made him unsteady. Not to mention the concussion he was still suffering from.

So, wheelchair.

Phantom was deposited in Fenton's lap a moment later, and burrowed into the teen's robe, squirming around so that he was tucked securely under Fenton's arm. Fenton, for his part, made room for the small ghost. He felt less hollow like this, with his other half curled against his side.

(Phantom felt less exposed, curled safely next to his other half.)

Fenton pulled his bathrobe closer to himself and his companion, shrinking inwards, making himself small and inoffensive. It was a defense mechanism. He only fully relaxed once Clockwork came to stand by him again. (He wondered when Clockwork would be leaving. Surely, the Ancient had responsibilities to attend to, just as Frostbite and Pandora did. He didn't want Clockwork to leave.)

"Here we are," said Clockwork, having finished putting his gloves back on. He had phased the water out of his clothes. He slipped behind the chair, and patted Danny on the shoulder. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," said Fenton. He shivered as Clockwork let a touch of intangibility wash over him, taking the last of the moisture with it. His hair stood on end with static. Clockwork smoothed it down and began to push Danny forward. "Can we see Sam and Tucker."

"Yes," said Clockwork. "But only for a moment. You need to sleep. Under medical observation."

"Okay," said Phantom.

After a few minutes, they reached a hall, and Fenton started to hear Tucker's voice echoing towards him from an ajar door.

"Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah? What?"

"Those agents..."

Sam groaned, and rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

"They were dead."

"So what?" said Sam, harshly. "They were trying to end everyone in the Zone."
Tucker rolled over and got up on his elbows, staring at Sam. "You'd think that you'd be a little more, I don't know, concerned about all of this, considering that you do the whole, you know, life is sacred thing every time I eat a hamburger."

"That's different," said Sam, annoyed. "Animals are innocent, and, well, we don't need to eat them to survive."

"We killed people, Sam," said Tucker, sounding haunted even to himself. "Like, really killed them. They're dead now." He paused. "You don't think that they'll, you know, come back to haunt us? Like, literally, not metaphorically."

"That's unlikely," said Clockwork smoothly, entering the room. "Hatred does not, in fact, make a good basis for Obsession. It is not something you live for, it is something you kill for. In any case, even if they were to return, if their primary Obsession was their hatred of ghosts, they would be compelled to destroy themselves. Their Obsession would literally tear them apart. Breathe, Daniel."

Danny gasped. His hands were wrapped around the armrests of the wheelchair, completely white. His eyes were huge, glassy. Tucker could tell that, whatever else had happened, whatever else had gone through Danny's head, he either hadn't realized, or hadn't processed, the fact that he had killed people.

(Tucker barely registered that there was a tiny Phantom sitting next to Danny in the wheelchair, staring up worriedly at the teen. That was something to cover when his best friend wasn't freaking out.)

"Oh, jeez," said Tucker, pushing himself into a sitting position, and then swinging himself off the bed. "I didn't- It isn't- I just... Danny, you didn't do anything wrong. You were protecting us. They were going to kill us, remember?"

"They were going to kill everybody, everywhere," said Sam, also standing, and cautiously approaching Danny.

The little Phantom stood up in the chair, and leaned forward, balancing himself with Danny's shoulder. "They weren't really people," he said.

"Thinking like that," said Danny, his voice breaking, "slippery slope, that- That's- Killing one person to save two- that reasoning, it isn't right, I- I don't- I shouldn't- Where would it stop? And they were people, I know that, I just... I don't... I killed them and I wanted to, I just..."

"Daniel," said Clockwork, his every movement and word exuding a kind of careful gentleness, "was that really your reasoning? It doesn't sound like you, does it?"

"Attacked without warning..." Danny had his hands in his hair now, and he was half doubled over. "I- I didn't even-"

"Daniel," said Clockwork again, this time more sternly. "Think back. The question isn't how, it is why."

"I was protecting the Core. I was protecting everyone. That's what we were doing," said the little Phantom, now hugging Danny.

Danny's breathing slowed, became more even. "I was... I was protecting. They were going to hurt, hurt the Core. I just... Oh."

"If they had gone away, I would have stopped. I would have let them," said Phantom.
"There you are, Daniel. You weren't trading lives. You weren't weighing them on scales. You were protecting those that you hold dear. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Danny, looking and sounding a lot calmer. "That's what I'm supposed to do." He breathed in deeply. "Yes. Okay. I'm... Okay." He closed his eyes and leaned back.

"So," said Sam, after a moment, "I know that you said that you were going to do the second body thing and all, but seeing, um, you two like this is kind of surreal."

The little Phantom giggled. Danny (Fenton?) opened his eyes again. "Yeah, not sure how I feel about this yet." There was still a strained quality to his voice.

"You're a cute little thing though, huh?"

The reactions of Danny and Phantom were nothing short of fascinating. Danny turned bright red, and, because he was only wearing a bathrobe, and the bathrobe had been knocked open somewhat by Phantom, Tucker could see the blush travel all the way down to Danny's waist. Phantom, on the other hand, blinked twice, smiled nervously, and then hid. Tucker burst out laughing.

"Too tired for compliments right now," muttered Danny, not looking at Sam or Tucker.

"You certainly do need to rest," said Clockwork. "You three will be able to talk more come morning."

Tucker sobered. "You aren't sleeping here?"

"No," said Danny, shaking his head and looking apologetically at Sam and Tucker.

"He has to be under medical observation," explained Clockwork. "That means that we must go back to the infirmary. This is not, after all, a common procedure. There could be unforeseeable complications."

"Couldn't you, you know, foresee them, though?" asked Tucker, frowning.

"Unfortunately, no," said Clockwork, "and that must be a story for another time. Sleep well, Samantha, Tucker."

"Bye, guys," said Danny, waving weakly.

"Bye, Sam," said Phantom, peeking out from inside the robe. "Bye, Tuck."

"See you soon, Danny," said Sam.

"Yeah," said Tucker. "Sleep well, and all that."
Chapter 85

Chapter 85: Conium

Danny, both of them, woke up hungry.

Fenton blinked himself awake. He had practically tied himself up in the blankets, and had curled himself completely around Phantom, who was squished up against Danny's chest. It was like he was trying to get back in, back to where he was meant to be. Phantom was barely breathing, of course, which sparked a tiny panic in Fenton, until he remembered that, oh, yeah, he was a ghost. He shouldn't be breathing at all. Phantom was purring weakly, however.

Fenton curled down farther, which was really the only motion he could make, wrapped up like he was, and nuzzled the little Phantom. (He wondered if this was going to cause some weird split personality issue later on. He was having trouble both emotionally remembering that this was part of himself, and remembering that he wasn't as connected as to that part of himself as he usually was. The way his Obsession kept trying to latch onto something, someone, who wasn't really there, didn't exist as a separate entity, was becoming a little distressing.)

Phantom squeaked, mumbled unintelligibly, and yawned, displaying sharp canines. "Food?"

"Mhm," said Fenton. "Needing that."

"Mm," agreed Phantom. He wormed his way out from the blankets, freeing Fenton to do the same, although Fenton was much more careful doing so. Fenton had all those wounds to deal with, after all.

There was a yeti standing by, supervising Danny, making sure that neither of them ran off. Phantom was perfectly fine with walking, or, more accurately, flying, but there was apparently some risk to having a large physical separation between Fenton and Phantom. This was news to Danny... Or, at least, it felt like news. He supposed that he could have been told earlier, and then forgotten. He knew that he hadn't been functioning very well before the operation. Separation. Whatever.

The yeti, who was a kind of apprentice to the doctor (things worked differently here than in back on Earth), helped Danny get ready for the day, and got Fenton into the wheelchair. After that, though, Fenton insisted on wheeling himself around. He had to learn, he reasoned. It had nothing to do with wanting to challenge Tucker and Sam to a high-speed wheelchair race in the near future. Nope.

The yeti directed Fenton and Phantom to the communal eating hall. Sam and Tucker were already there, glaring at each others' food choices, not eating. The problem, from what Fenton could see, seemed to be that they couldn't tell what was a meat and what was a vegetable, and had been too stubborn to ask. Usually, this wasn't a problem, they had been in the Far Frozen often enough to distinguish the two, but usually they weren't around for breakfast. The food choices for breakfast were a lot different than the ones for dinner, or lunch, or brunch, or that one meal the yetis had that happened in-between dinner and lunch.

The situation was especially funny, because both meals were comprised entirely of vegetable matter, and were really quite similar. Danny had spent considerably more time here. He knew what was what. They were the Far Frozen equivalent of pancakes and waffles.

"Hello," said Danny, wheeling up to the table and swiping a bit of food from each of their plates.
"Hey, Danny," said Sam. "Did you guys sleep well?"

"I slept okay," said Fenton.

"Me, too," said Phantom, stealing more food from Tucker's plate.

"I think that Grandfather put something in my drink before he left," said Fenton, casually.

"Really?" said Tucker. "That doesn't bother you?"

"No? Should it?"

"I don't know."

"Probably not. It sounds like you needed it," said Sam, "and the last time you were asleep without drugs you were having some pretty awful nightmares."

"Oh, okay."

"Yeah, so, Danny," said Tucker. "Do you know what this is, dude?"

"Yeah, it's, um, basically pancakes. It's a plant, squished up, turned into batter, and fried. Sam's is the same, except her's is baked. It is ghost stuff, though, so, I don't know." He shrugged. "Maybe you should see if there's like, human food around? This is probably fine though."

"Tastes fine," said Phantom, munching on more of Tucker's food.

"It does taste fine," agreed Fenton.

Then, of course, a whole troop of yetis came out of the kitchen bearing food. Mostly a kind of broth with long noodles, the equivalent of cereal. Fenton, Sam, and Tucker were given bowls with wheat noodles. Phantom was given one with more ectoplasm in it. Danny ate it very enthusiastically. Sam was a little more subdued, but warmed to it quickly, saying that it was very much like pho. Tucker was more hesitant, but he was hungry, and they had put meat in it.

Frostbite came and joined them then. Phantom jumped up onto him, burrowing into his fur. Frostbite laughed deeply, indulgently, and petted the small ghost.

The rest of breakfast was nice, peaceful, uneventful. The food was good, and was probably better for him than eating the 'pancakes.' It was certainly lighter, and his understanding was that lighter food was better after a person was sedated. Not that he was a doctor, or particularly well versed in sedative side effects beyond those of the sleep-darts Skulker used and whatever gas Vlad kept using.

But then a yeti came up to the table.

"Chief Frostbite," he said, inclining himself slightly. "Great One. There is a visitor for you."

"For me?" asked Fenton, confused. Everyone who knew he was here would just be shown in... Wouldn't they? Clockwork, Pandora, and Nephthys were all well known. Maybe it could be someone from the hospital? Or one of the Gracious Ones? Or Adrestia? Sam and Tucker had mentioned them this morning, while filling him in on what had happened while he was unconscious. Maybe he meant a visitor for Frostbite?

"Yes, Great One," said the yeti. "He called himself Hemlock."

Fenton blinked, then smiled. "Really? Hemlock? He's here?"
It was the yeti's turn to blink. "Forgive me great one," he said, "but how do you know this man?"

"Isn't he your lawyer?" asked Tucker, pulling out his PDA.

"Advocate," corrected Fenton absently. "And, yeah. He just came up to me one day and told me that he was going to be my advocate and he wasn't going to take no for an answer."

"Right," said Sam. "But wasn't that when you got wrapped up in that thing with the Feathers of Ma'at?"

"Yeah. So I guess that I needed an advocate that time." Fenton glanced at Phantom. "We needed an advocate?"

"Show him in," said Frostbite.

Hemlock was a fabulously ugly man in a crisply pressed green pinstripe suit. He was balding, and wore a long, curling beard. His eyes sparkled when he caught sight of Fenton and Phantom.

"Ah, little one, it is good to see you again, although we might have hoped for better circumstances, hm?"

Phantom giggled, and ran up to him, hugging the man's leg.

"Here is the very little little one," he said patting Phantom on the head.

"Hello, Hemlock," said Fenton. "How did you know I was here?"

Hemlock picked up the little Phantom, and walked forward, to the table. "You are my client, and you are currently involved in the largest case the Realms have seen in years. Even Vortex's trial did not cause such an uproar. I would say that knowing where you are is the least of my duties."

"It isn't like I pay you," said Fenton, still bemused by the whole situation.

"Money," said Hemlock, waving his hand dismissively. "Dear one, in this country I may live on the air itself, and air alone. All that is left is to feed my mind. Although, I do wonder why you do not rise to greet me?"

"Broke my ankle. The doctors don't want me to stand on it."

"Ah, physicians. A necessary bane of heroes everywhere."

Fenton blushed. "I guess."

"Now, I do need to talk to you, the two of you," he smiled, "about the outcome you would like for the trial. I would also like to offer the services of some of the more junior members of my community to your friends." He inclined himself slightly towards Sam and Tucker. "I would make the offer to you as well, Chief Frostbite, but I understand that the Far Frozen has its own advocates?"

"Indeed," said Frostbite.

"Well, then. I don't suppose that you have a place where I may speak to the little one and the little little one alone?"

"I'm not that small," complained Fenton.

"I am," said Phantom, arms still wrapped around Hemlock's neck (he was enjoying being small).
"Can we bring Sam and Tucker?"

"Anything you want, dear one, I am at your service, in this instance."

Fenton looked at Sam and Tucker. "You guys don't mind, do you? I know of dumped a lot of stuff on you already this... Week? Has it even been a week?"

"No idea, dude," said Tucker.

"It's more like we were all dumped into this stuff and then you fished us out," said Sam. "You aren't a problem, Danny. And this could be fun, right?"

"Actually, most likely not," said Hemlock.

"I'm not allowed to go with you," said Jazz.

"Why?" asked Maddie, her voice pitched low, glaring at the ghosts in the room.

"Somethin' to do with witnesses and corrupting testimony," said the ghost that had called herself Alex. "I'm not a 'legal professional,' and it sounds like crap to me, but, like, whatever. Not my problem. Yours."

"Uh, not yours, Jazz," added Tess. "This is just, you know. Procedure stuff. I mean, Ereshkigal themselves vetted you and, well, you've been given an honor, you know? Like, seriously." She flicked a stray braid back over her shoulder. "I don't think that somethin' like that has happened in, what, a thousand years? Two?"

"Sounds right," said Meg. She had been a bit more subdued than before.

"I'm a little more concerned about what's happening right now, sorry," said Jazz. "You're going to take me back to Danny, right?"

"Yep," said Meg. "Look," she said, noticing the look on Maddie's face. "This's just the same as in your world, right? Laws against, uh, messin' with witnesses?"

"Witness tampering," supplied Jazz.

"Yeah, that. If you stuck together, there'd be people who would say that you threatened this kid."

"Jazz is my daughter, I'd never-"

"Yeah, yeah," said Tess, "we all know how you treat your kids. Give it a break."

"If it makes you two argue less," said Alex, "we've got your husband. You know, the giant orange dude? And we've got legal representation set up for both of you, in case you don't wanna be co-defendants or whatever. But, seriously, we'll take you by force if we've got to. No pressure."

Maddie pursed her lips. "Fine," she said venomously. She turned back to Jazz. "Tell Danny that I love him. Tell him that I'm sorry. Please."
"Of course," said Jazz.

"That simply isn't going to work," said Hemlock.

Fenton frowned. "Why not?"

"Think, dear one, are the charges leveled against your parents untrue?"

"No," said Fenton.

"Are you going to lie to the court?"

"No," grumbled Fenton once again. (Phantom was too distracted by the shiny buckles on Hemlock's bag to be any help.)

"Do you think your sister will, or your friends, or any of the many witnesses to the crime?"

"Some of them will."

"But all?"

"No."

"Then don't you see, dear one, what the conclusion will be? And you know how people will react once something so egregious comes to light."

"But I'm the one who was affected, I'm the one that was hurt. Shouldn't it mean something, if I say I don't care? If I say I don't want them to be punished?"

"It will mean something," said Hemlock, kindly, "but put yourself in the position of the people who will be making the final decision."

"We don't even know who those people will be," mumbled Fenton into the table.

"No, we do not. Not in detail. But we can make generalizations. They will be fair-minded. Impartial, or at least as impartial as can be found, as can be agreed upon. Do you think that they would let off your parents with only a warning, knowing the damage that they could do, the damage they have done to you, their own child?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then, what is the next best thing to do?"

"Find a punishment we can all live with," Fenton mumbled, still face-down on the icy table.

"There we are," said Hemlock, gently. "Now, there are several options, but I think that you would prefer one that brings them back to the human world with you?"

"Yes," said Fenton, peeling himself up off of the table. "Nothing too intrusive. Oh, and, um, alive."

"Hm. Alright. I think indentures might be the best choice. Are there any ghosts that you would trust
"Clockwork," said Fenton instantly. "Pandora. Dora. Frostbite, of course. Um. Yeah. I think that's probably it. Mm. Nephthys, maybe." Danny liked Nephthys, but she was the Master of Death, and she had not always had the best of experiences with humans.

"Very good. We will have to discuss strategy with them as well, of course. Now, another possibility would be angling for trial-by-combat, but that is awfully risky, especially considering all the available potential champions."

"Okay, I'll try to remember that."

"I would not recommend trying to set yourself up as their champion, little one. There are enough people in this world who would like to cause you harm, and they do not care if harm is dealt physically, or by harming your parents."

"Okay," said Fenton. "What else?"

"A number of things... Once Lord Clockwork is involved, our options really start to open up." He rubbed his hands together. "Time is not a constant. A life sentence can be served in a heartbeat."

"I... I don't think that I like the sound of that..."

"Ah. A last resort, then?"

"Yeah."

"I see. I would like you to keep that first option in mind, but I will be researching other options as well. Now," Hemlock flipped his legal pad to a new page, "you are involved in another trial. Or, perhaps I should say, another set of trials."

"What?" exclaimed Fenton. "What are you talking about?"

"Uh, Danny," said Sam. "You do remember the reason you're so beat up right now, right?" She paused. "You know, the agents?"

"Oh. Yeah. Them."

"This will be much more straightforward. I am assuming that you do not particularly desire for them to be let off easily."

"Not really," said Fenton, slumping over the table once again. "I thought that all of the ones that went after the Core were killed, though?"

"Mhm. Likely not, in fact, but they belong to Ereshkigal now. They are far, far beyond the jurisdiction of the courts. No. What will occupy us are the creatures that did not make it so far. The ones that you defeated in and around your lair. Have you named it yet, by the way?"

"No," said Fenton, slumping down onto the table once again. "I don't really care what happens to them, as long as I never have to deal with them ever again."

"Very good," said Hemlock. "However, there is another issue with those trials."

"Of course there is," said Fenton to the table.

"There are those who might use this as a pretext to declare war on Earth."
"Oh. Yeah. That would be bad. Can we make that... Not happen?"

"It is rather unlikely, but I thought that I should warn you of the possibility."

"It wouldn't be so bad if it was just a war against the GIW, would it?" mused Sam.

"It'd snowball," said Danny. "They're part of the US government, remember?"

"Ugh. Yeah. I forgot about that."

"Could declare them wolfshead, though. Outlaw. Unprotected."

"Excellent thought," said Hemlock. "That may be just enough of a compromise to work."
Chapter 86: Mote It Be

"We are agreed then?" asked Clockwork. He, as the very eldest of the Ancients, was acting as chair.

The other four ghosts responded in the affirmative. Undergrowth and Vortex had been kicked out early on in the process. They had lost the right to participate in the discussion when they had thrown the full weight of their power and experience at a child and lost. In truth, Fright Knight had also lost that right, but he wasn't nearly as annoying, or as psychotic, as the other two.

"Then mote it be. Daniel Janus James Fenton-Phantom shall be the next High King of the Infinite Realms." He brought the silver hammer down on the glass table, shattering it. It reformed a moment later. Destruction was so often impermanent in the lands of the Dead, Deathless, and Neverborn. He sighed. The action was quite cathartic, even though he had no need to breathe. "Now remains the task of breaking the news to him."

Nephthys patted Clockwork consolingly on the shoulder. "You know he won't be angry at you for long."

"Somehow, that makes it worse." Sometimes, it felt to Clockwork like he was just manipulating Daniel. It made him feel awful. Guilty. Dirty. But these were things that had to be, for the good of both worlds, and Clockwork had to put that first. Finding the best possible time line, walking the narrow path, the one with the greatest good, with the least suffering, was, after all, his primary Obsession. His only consolation was that Daniel would likely have made the same choice, if he had been in the same position. That, and that Daniel would forgive him before too long.

Still. It made his skin crawl, what he so often did. Omniscience was not a blank check, when it came to morality, when it came to these choices. (Sometimes he was almost glad for the excuse the Observants gave him to not act. But these moments were fleeting. At all other times he despised them, and he doubted that any such moment would come again. Not with what they would have let happen.)

"Now. To our next topic. The Regency Council."

"The composition of a Regency Council is written into the law, is it not?" asked Fright Knight. "What is there to discuss?"

"Yes," said Clockwork. "There are to be seven Ancients, three Judges, five Magicians, two Ravens, a Grand Vizier, if the king has appointed one, a Tiger, if they exercise their right before the first month of rule, the First of Generals, the Treasurer, the king's legal guardians, if applicable, and then after that the existing Regents nominate people to be chosen by the king until the total number of Regents is twenty-three. You do see the space for us to move in that, yes? I am certain that the Tigers will exercise their right, but Daniel's legal guardians are already on the council, and if none of the current Generals arrive, then we must find new ones. Then, after that, I cannot imagine that Daniel will wish to keep Undergrowth and Vortex on the council, and it is his right to depose the Ancients, presuming that at least one Judge agrees. Regardless of whether or not he has been crowned, or has undergone the Rite of Ascension. It is our duty to advise him as to his choices. Not immediately. He will have enough on his mind, but eventually."
"I would actually like to table that discussion for a moment," said Nephthys, tapping the table to punctuate her words. "I think that it may be better to determine how to handle the other revelation delivered to us by young Megaera. That is, the second mandate given us by Ereshkigal."

Nocturne tsked. "I do have to say that Sumer is outdated, even if agreeing with the Court Magicians is... bleh." The masked ghost held his pillow tighter.

"It is not for us to question the choices of Ereshkigal," said Fright Knight.

Pandora groaned. "Sanctimonious is not a good color on you, Fright Knight. Can we get on with this?"

"Very well," said Clockwork. "The issue of the blessing."

"They have not given their blessing in a long, long, time," observed Nocturne. "It was many sleeps ago..."

"Yes," said Pandora, "and for a reason. I often speak of containment. The Pilgrimage is one of those things that must be contained."

"I agree," said Nephthys. "Not all those who die should join us. Humans and whispers of immortality... We all know how that goes, and we know that. Still. This is a mandate. And Jazz, Sam, and Tucker aren't so bad."

"They will likely be fine without the Pilgrimage," said Pandora. "Although I suppose that isn't the point."

"No," said Clockwork. "It is not. I propose that we explain the situation, and start them on the Pilgrimage as quickly as possible, and ensure that it is completed as quietly as possible."

"I agree," said Pandora.

"Go for it," said Nocturne, smothering a yawn.

"Fine," said Fright Knight.

"Yes, that's fine," finished Nephthys. "Now, who shall we send to tell them?"

The other four Ancients stared at the Master of Death. Clockwork broke into a smile. "Thank you for volunteering, sister!"

"What? No, I- Aw, argh. Fine."

"So mote it be," said Clockwork, bringing his hammer down on the table, shattering it.

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It was not, however, yet time to tell Daniel. That was another thing that all five of the Ancients had agreed on. They had to give the child time to heal before giving him yet another shock. The same was not true for telling the other three about the Pilgrimage. However, telling Jazz, Sam, and Tucker would necessitate telling Daniel... Clockwork doubted that they would leave before he was safely through the trial. In truth, they could not leave until the trial was over.
It was like a Grecian tragedy. The inclusion of gods or their equivalents always made things more complicated.

"Jazz!" squealed Phantom in excitement, throwing himself at the red-haired girl. Jazz stared at the small version of her brother, holding him out at arm's length before glancing between him, and the older one in the wheelchair. Then she shrugged. She had seen weirder.

"Oh my gosh!" said Jazz. "You're so, so cute!" She cuddled the small ghost. The how and why of this situation could be addressed later.

Phantom giggled, and hugged Jazz back, putting his arms around her neck.

"Hi, Jazz," said Fenton, his tone much more subdued, his voice faint.

"Hey, Danny," said Jazz. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Just tired." He smiled weakly up at Jazz.

"We've been trying to get ready for the, you know, trials. Hemlock was here."

"Yeah. I was tracked down by a pair of advocates myself. Not quite ambulance chasers, but, well..."

"Yeah, well, no matter what world you're in, lawyers are lawyers," said Sam.

"Aren't they technically advocates, though?"

"Shut up, Tucker."

"Hey!" complained Tucker.

"How is Mom?"

"She's... Having trouble adjusting, I think. I wasn't exactly helpful, either. I-" she faltered. Sighed. "She said she's sorry."

"Oh. Okay," said Fenton. He fiddled with the tie of his tunic. "Okay. Does she have representation yet?"

"Not when I left," admitted Jazz.

"We got Hemlock to agree to ask around, see if anyone will take them up."

"And did you two get anyone?" asked Jazz, directing the question to Sam and Tucker.

"Not yet," said Sam. "But we're working on it. You know that things work differently here. We can't just call someone up."

"Yes, I know. So."

"So," said Sam.

"Jazzy, you need to clean the insides of your ears," said Phantom.
"I'm aware," she said flatly. Fenton blushed deeply. "Hey. Is being separated like this okay for you?" asked Jazz, walking towards Fenton. She scanned him, noting the bruises and the dark circles under his eyes. "Usually you're more healed after a day."

"I'm not normally this beaten up," said Fenton, shrugging, then wincing.

"Jazz has a point, Danny," Sam said slowly. "I mean, you've still got these bruises, even after all that healing Clockwork did for you." She brushed the side of Fenton's face with one hand. He didn't flinch.

"Well, I've got less ghost weirdness in me right now," said Fenton.

"I'm the ghost weirdness!" said Phantom, happily.

Jazz winced. "My ear is right there, Danny."

"Oops," said the little ghost, wilting. "Sorry," he whispered. "Sorry Jazz's ear." He petted the appendage, which was a sensation not entirely unlike having an ice cube rubbed up and down the side of her head. Then he kissed it, and went back to hugging Jazz.

Jazz sighed, and patted the little ghost awkwardly on the back. This would take some getting used to. Fenton was red again, and Sam and Tucker were looking on with barely suppressed amusement.

"So," said Jazz, looking for a change in topic. "It looks like they've given you three the usual room."

"Us two, actually," said Tucker. "They've still got Danny in the infirmary. You did notice the doctors on standby by the door, right?"

"Well, yes," said Jazz, noting the way both Fenton and Phantom looked down guiltily. "You didn't try to argue with them, did you, Danny?" she asked, amused.

"Maybe a little," said Phantom.

"I mean, I'm fine, really. What if they're needed?" said Fenton, without much conviction.

"Told you that they knew their own jobs, huh?"

"Maybe," Phantom mumbled into Jazz's neck. His hair was soft, ticklish, and did not seem to follow the standard laws of physics, and Jazz brushed it aside.

"Glad to know that your personality is intact," said Jazz, settling onto a bed. Normally she would stay standing, Far Frozen furniture was, like their architecture, frigid, but she was tired, and Phantom, while much, much lighter than a human of similar size, was added weight.

"Ah," said a familiar voice from the door. "You are all together. Good."

"Aunt Nephthys!" exclaimed Phantom, disentangling himself from Jazz and throwing himself on the dark-skinned ghost.

"I did say they would be," said Clockwork. He ruffled Phantom's hair, and looked over at Fenton. "Hello, Daniel."

"'Aunt' Nephthys? Since when am I 'Aunt' Nephthys?" asked Nephthys, raising an eyebrow. Fenton doubled over and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Ancients..."
"We are Ancients, yes," said Clockwork.


"Bit late for that, isn't it? Oh my goodness, who's the cutest little fear-eating supernatural monster? You are! Yes, you are!" said Nephthys, playing with Phantom, who was giggling madly.

"Eungh," said Fenton.

Clockwork drifted over to Fenton, and patted him on the back. "It's alright, Daniel."

"Know I'm overreacting. Overreacting to everything last couple of hours... Hnnn. Why?"

"You are simply trying to find a sense of equilibrium," said Clockwork.

Fenton pulled himself up into a sitting position. "I guess." He eyed Nephthys and Phantom. Nephthys was tickling Phantom, and Phantom had taken Nephthys's veil hostage. "Is it weird that I can feel that? It feels like it should be weird, but then I'm weird, so... Do two weirds make a normal?"

"Dude, if two weirds made a normal you wouldn't have an inter-dimensional portal in your basement."

There was a beat of silence as everyone stared at Tucker.

"Was that supposed to be a joke about our parents?"

"Maybe."


"And no comments about how we were making ghost jokes within hours of my death!" said Phantom, hanging upside-down from Nephthys's grip.

"Aw, man," said Tucker. "But those were good ones."

"No point in beating a dead horse, Tucker," said Sam.

"That's a stretch."

"I don't know about that," said Fenton. "I mean, it is a stretch, but we've beaten up lots of dead horses."

"Weren't they unicorns, though?" mused Sam, her brow furrowed.

"Well, the ones from Pandora's Box were, but then there's Nightmare, and... Huh. Yeah. I guess that Nightmare is more of a Pegasus than a horse. Um. Lady Nephthys, you have a horse, don't you?"

"Yes, but if I find that you've been beating up Pale, you would be wise to learn to sleep with your eyes open."

"Oh, no, of course not," said Fenton. "Just trying to, um, place things. I knew I'd seen actual horses in here before... Oh, yeah! The ambulance horses! That's it. Okay. Yep. But then... How many weirds do you need for it to be a normal? I mean, three lefts make a right-"

"You aren't going to base your social philosophy on a pun, are you?" asked Sam.
"No, but I might base it on a dumb joke. But, seriously. There was a point where cars were weird, right? But now they're normal. So how many weirds did it take, before that happened?"

"Huh," said Jazz. "I think that might actually be a variation on the heap paradox-"

"Nope!" said Tucker. "Nope! Not falling down the psychology rabbit hole today!"

"I'm the white rabbit!" said Phantom, hanging off of Nephthys's arm.

"Considering where we are, Alice, you're way too late," said Sam.

"You see me wearing a dress?"

"Not right now," said Sam, her grin gaining a wicked edge.

"Hey!" complained Tucker. "I thought we agreed never to speak of that again."

"Dude," said Fenton, "you took money to cross dress as Sam. There's no way that'd never be brought up. I mean, you have to have realized that you couldn't pass. You don't look anything alike."

"Hey, Sam wouldn't have done something that wouldn't work! Right, Sam?"

"Um," said Sam.

"Sam?" prompted Tucker.

"I maybe might have had an ulterior motive."

"Sam."

"Yeah. I might have known that you wouldn't have come with me, and I wanted company in detention."

"Then why didn't you bribe Danny?"

"Hey, I have some common sense."

"Dude, you cave to peer pressure like an eighteenth-century coal mine. You walked into a potentially deadly untested invention because we said please."

"Okay. Maybe I don't have common sense. I still have pride. Anyway, I probably could have passed as Sam back then, so I wasn't a good choice. Right?"

"... Sure, let's go with that."

"I don't even want to know what that pause was about."

"I do," said Tucker.

Nephthys coughed politely into her fist. "Personally, I'd also like to hear your reasoning. Unfortunately, I am not here only for your company. Although I would have certainly come anyway for this cute little bean!" she cooed, nibbling on Phantom's stomach.

"Um," said Fenton, pink again. "Lady Nephthys? You know that's still me, right?"

"Yes, dear. Unfortunately, you are in a wheelchair."
Nephthys swept down to settle next to Jazz. Clockwork continued to float next to Fenton, but adopted a sitting position. Phantom squished himself into the tiny space in-between Jazz and Nephthys.

"Alright," said Nephthys. "So. When you met with Ereshkigal, they gave you their blessing."

"Yeah," said Tucker.

"He also said that he was giving us his permission," added Jazz.

"And then he kissed us," finished Sam.

Nephthys brushed her hair away from her face. She still hadn't recovered her veil from Phantom. "Rule of three, hm?" she said, thoughtfully. "Well. None of those were empty words or simple platitudes. Have you ever heard of the Trials of Psyche? Or, perhaps, the Grail Quest?"

"Psyche as in Cupid and Psyche, and the Grail Quest as in Arthurian legend?" asked Sam, with Fenton, Phantom, Jazz, and Tucker murmuring assent as well. "Yeah. Why?"

"Have you ever heard of the Pilgrimage?"

"I've heard of pilgrimages," said Sam. "But not the Pilgrimage."

"I have," said Fenton, slowly. "Well, I read about it, anyway. But I thought that it was a myth? The books I read thought it was a myth. Or the authors thought it was a myth. I don't think that the books actually had thoughts. I've met a couple of those, though..." He blinked. "Nevermind."

Nephthys was doing some blinking of her own. "Where in two worlds did you find books that talk about the Pilgrimage?"

"Uhhh. Ghostwriter and Vlad."

Nephthys rubbed her temple with one hand. "Of course. Of course it's those two. Why wouldn't it be those two? In any case, it is not a myth. It is, however, something that the High Council, that is the High Council, not the Council of Ancients, agreed to keep secret, baring Ereshkigal's permission."

"Why?" asked Sam.

"Because it is the only way to ensure that a human becomes a ghost upon death."
Chapter 87

Chapter 87: Honey

"So," said Maddie, flatly. "You're my lawyer?"

"Y-Yes," stuttered the young-looking ghost, brushing her flower-bedecked, honey-gold hair back out of her face. "W-Well, technically, I'm not a lawyer. I'm an advocate. My name is Azalea. I'm a junior associate of Hemlock and Wolfsbane." She held out her hand, as if expecting Maddie to shake it.

Maddie stared at it as if it was made of poison. Then she sighed. *Open mind.* She reminded herself. She had to work with these... people, if she was to survive this. Jazz had made that much clear. She shook the ghost's hand.

Azalea beamed. A bee flew out of her delicately pointed left ear, and settled on one of the flowers in her hair. Maddie suppressed a grimace.

"Mr Wolfsbane will be here soon," said the ghost. "He's taking care of the tail-end of another case. Can I offer you some tea?" she asked, pulling a tiny teacup out of thin air. "It has honey in it and-! Oh. Wait. No. You're human. Best not. Have you been fed, though? Libra keeps a specialist on human nutrition on call."

"I'm fine," said Maddie, stiffly.

The ghost tilted her head, and froze for a moment, an eerie, wide-eyed, close-lipped smile on her paper-pale face. "Alright," she said, abruptly, becoming animated again. "Now, your co-defendant is on his way here, as are a number of witnesses. You know, your trial is causing the biggest stir the greater legal community has seen in centuries. There are people coming out of hibernation."

"Glad that someone is enjoying this," grumbled Maddie under her breath.

"Oh, sorry," said the ghost. "Just, it's very exciting, that's all."

Darn ghosts and their oversensitive ears.

"Who do you mean by co-defendant?" said Maddie, at a higher volume.

"Your husband!" said the ghost cheerfully. "Or, um," she pulled another item out of thin air, this time a green manila folder. She peered into it. "I'm assuming that Mr Jack Fenton is your husband, right? Not your brother or something? I mean," she took what looked like a Polaroid from the file, and compared whatever was on it to Maddie's face, "you don't look like you're related, but then, when I was alive, I had a brother who was five and a half cubits tall and looked downright Egyptian."

"He's my husband."

"Okay. So. First thing I need to ask is, do you want him as a co-defendant? It wouldn't be too difficult to separate your cases at this point. You could try to pin everything on him, or take the fall yourself. One of you would have to get a different advocate, though. There are rules, you know."

"I'm not abandoning my husband," snapped Maddie.
"Th-That's not what I was suggesting," said the ghost, raising her hands defensively. "It's just a strategy."

Maddie glared.

"Right. W-Well.-speaking of strategy, I just want to establish your goals in all of this."

"My what?"

"Your goals. How you want to trial to ultimately conclude. Like, if you're going to aim for being left alive no matter what, or if you'd be okay with a painless death, or if you'll push a claim of innocence." She smiled. "I wouldn't try that last one, though. It looks like there are a lot of witnesses here, and arguing for your innocence in the face of all that evidence might make you seem unrepentant if we wind up with a jury trial. Then there's always the risk that the preliminary committee will decide that the trial will be- Ah. You won't know the Latin term. Essentially, to require you to both testify, and to take a Stygian Oath to tell the truth during said testimony. I'm assuming that you don't want that?"

Maddie recalled what Danny had said about how things would be worse if these ghosts found out about some of her other inventions. "No. I don't want that."

"Alright, we will definitely argue against that," said the ghost, making a note on a pad she had, again, pulled out of thin air. Her half of the table was covered in papers, teacups, and other random objects. Including, distressingly enough, bees. Not normal bees, either. They glowed, and about half of them were striped with a lurid green instead of gold.

Maddie didn't understand the bees. Or the floral name. Or the scent of honey and herbal tea that had, at this point, permeated the room. The three of them went together, but not with the ghost's declared profession. They didn't seem to fit a law-Obsessed ghost. Perhaps one Obsessed with apiculture, but not law. Or whatever chaos the ghosts practiced.

"What is the preliminary council?" asked Maddie instead.

"Oh! It's the, um. This will likely sound strange to you, but back when the inter-Realm legal system was being set up, no one could agree on exactly what the rules for trials should be, too many different value systems, so they decided that the rules should be decided on a case-by-case basis by advocates of all persons with legal standing in the case prior to the actual trial. That includes you, the alleged victim, the witnesses, the sponsoring Judge, fraidmates, immediate family, and vassals of the alleged victim and the accused, among others... I had a definition here somewhere," she said, sorting through her numerous papers.

"Fraidmates?"

"Ah, right, right. I keep forgetting that you're human. It means something a little like family. Only, ah, in the figurative sense. Not blood, but bonds of trust. The blood of the covenant is thicker than the waters of the womb. That kind of thing. So it would be, like, hm, spouses, I suppose, an adopted family, or close friends."

"Like Sam and Tucker?"

"If you mean Miss Manson and Mr Foley for, um, Mr Phantom, they are listed as his fraidmates, among others."

"Among others? What others?"
"Um. Well, there's Miss Manson and Mr Foley, then a Miss Jasmine Fenton, a Miss Phantom, Lord Clockwork, Lady Pandora, Queen of Elysium, Queen Dorothea of Mattingly, Chief Frostbite of the Far Frozen, a Mr Wulf, a Mr Cujo... Wow, this is a long list. Even if you don't count the dogs and the cats... Just, wow... Big names. Then the list of vassals... How big is his haunt? Gosh. How big is his lair? No wonder he's on the short list for." She cut herself off. "Never mind. Anyway. What else do I need to tell you? Oh, yes! Our senior associate, Mr Hemlock is representing Mr Phantom in this case."

Maddie rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"Mr Phantom has indicated that he wants to work with you to ensure that you receive the most lenient sentence possible, and, besides, no matter the quirks we ghosts have, we don't have to worry about that kind of dishonesty. Stygian oaths," she clarified. "We are dedicated to our profession. Also," she said, conspiratorially, "if we did engage in that kind of foolery, we'd be thrown into the Vortex of Infinite Pain. And it isn't as if we get anything from winning except for bragging rights. I mean, you aren't paying us. Mr Phantom isn't paying us." She shrugged.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Bragging rights, I've always loved to argue, and you've never seen insanity until you've seen what goes on inside a courtroom," she said dreamily, propping her chin up on her hand, her eyes loosing focus. "It's better than an asylum."

"That's... wonderful," said Maddie, struggling with a renewed desire to fight the ghost. Before she could come to a resolution about that, however, there was a knock on the room's door. Her eyes flicked over to it. It was a big, sturdy, iron-bound thing with no handle on the inside and a peephole that only looked in, not out. It was a reminder that this wasn't a hotel room, but a prison.

"That will be Mr Wolfsbane! Come in, please!"

'Mr Wolfsbane' was a thin man with lavender skin. He was clean-shaven, and had slate gray hair. His eyes were indigo. He wore a dark blue suit with pale purple pinstripes, and a cape of wolf's fur. The wolf's head was still attached.

"Mrs Fenton?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

"Mr Wolfsbane," said Maddie.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Fenton. Please, just call me Wolfsbane."

"Mr Wolfsbane,"

"A pleasure to meet you, Mrs Fenton. Please, just call me Wolfsbane."

After the whole 'immortality' revelation, Fenton had been on edge. He was beyond happy, even ecstatic, to hear that there was a chance that he wouldn't be, well, left alone, when time, inevitably, marched on. Not that he would have been left alone, really. He had other friends, other family, who were already here on this side. But Jazz, Sam, and Tucker... They were special. He was glad that the Core had also decided that they were special.

On the other hand, the Pilgrimage sounded fabulously dangerous, and they would have to do it alone. Well, without Danny, in any case. It made him nervous. Anxious. Fenton was trying not to go into crazy overprotective mode. Phantom was... having a harder time coping. He was currently lying
across all three of their laps. It was impressive, considering how small he was, and how each of the three of them had a comfortable distance between them.

But that wasn't what was bothering him right now.

"Libra's bringing them here? All of them? Why?"

The messenger, a woman with a long braid and rainbows tattooed on her skin, answered, "Because in many legal systems practiced here in the Realms, they belong to you."

"What."

"They belong to you. It is somewhat unfortunate, but the legal framework for dealing with large numbers of persons without some measure of standing in a community is... lacking. As is our capability to house and feed large numbers of humans."

"Okay," said Fenton, pinching the bridge of his nose as Phantom mumbled angrily into Jazz's lap. "How many of them are there again?"

"Ah, think that you have misunderstood. The ones living in your lair? They are part of a community. There are ghosts among them, to chaperon them and guide them. The ones being brought here are only the ones from Amity. Except, of course, for your parents." The ghost inclined herself slightly. It wasn't quite a bow. "Of course, it will be a temporary matter. We will have facilities constructed before the initial committee is finished."

"Great," ground out Fenton. "When do they get here?"

"They will arrive tomorrow evening."

"Wonderful."

"Ugh," said Sam. "We're going to have to deal with all of them again? Again? Really?"

"I thought that these were people that you were close to?" asked the messenger, confused.

"Not really," said Fenton.

"Then why were they with you in your lair?"

"That is a really, really, long story. Can we just, I don't know, skip it for now?"
Chapter 88

Clockwork came back into the room after the messenger left. He had left to confer with Nephthys about something. Phantom didn't know what Clockwork was discussing, but he was upset and he wanted to be near Clockwork because Clockwork always made him less upset.

He flew to the older ghost and hid in his robe. This was a good place to hide. The cloak was big and thick, and close to Clockwork.

He didn't want to be exposed like this when all of those people came back. He liked them, and they were his, but they were not gentle people. It hurt to be around them, sometimes.

Then, there was Clockwork, carefully holding him, and Phantom could relax again, secure. "Daniel," said Clockwork, speaking to both Phantom and his literal other half. "Frostbite and I are going to have to examine you again."

"Okay," said Fenton, and Phantom could hear the wheels on his chair moving.

"Does that mean that I'm going to melt?" asked Phantom, hesitantly. He felt, rather than heard or saw, Fenton freeze. He hadn't considered that, apparently. Neither had Phantom until this moment.

Clockwork petted Phantom's hair through his robe before settling an arm around his shoulders. "Not the part that matters," said Clockwork. "Just this shell."

"Will it hurt?" whispered Phantom.

"It shouldn't. It might be scary, but I know you are brave."

"If you say so."

Fenton sat on the edge of the table, and knocked back the thimble of medicine, trying to keep it from touching his tongue. "That tastes gross," he said, as he laid down, Phantom laying his head on his shoulder and curling into his side. Fenton hugged him with his one arm.

"Many medicines do," said Frostbite, apologetically.

"I know," said Fenton, shifting his weight. He had tried to hide it, but many of his wounds, especially the bullet wounds and his unhealed ankle, had begun to ache as the day wore on.

His eyes began to drift closed. He gave Phantom one last comforting squeeze. Everything would be alright.
Phantom waited until Fenton's breathing evened out to sit up. "I thought that I was going to fall asleep, too?"

Clockwork smiled, tightly, sadly. "I'm afraid not quite yet, Daniel."

"Oh," said Phantom. He pulled himself inward. "What do I need to do?"

"Here," he said, offering his arms to Phantom.

Phantom climbed into them, wrapping his arms around Clockwork's neck and inserting his head beneath the older ghost's chin. Clockwork turned, and brought Phantom to the tank, which Frostbite had pushed out into the center of the room again.

"Oh," said Phantom again. "When can I go to sleep?"

"I just want you to know what's going on," said Clockwork. "It's only fair."

"Okay," said Phantom. "I know now. I want to go to sleep."

"I'm sorry, Daniel," said Clockwork. "You can go to sleep."

Clockwork and Frostbite examined the small delicate sphere floating in front of them.

"He is much improved," observed Frostbite.

"He is," agreed Clockwork. It was true. The bruising was almost gone, as were the cracks. He glanced at Daniel's human half. He, on the other hand, looked much more fragile. He had bruises that had not been present yesterday, and his skin was thin, pale, faded. His wounds were not healing as they should be, and Clockwork had noticed that he had been picking over his lunch, feeding most of it to Phantom. "But he is not."

"No," rumbled Frostbite. "He deteriorated quickly. I believe that the stress got to him." He sent Clockwork a rather dirty glare.

Clockwork had the grace to look ashamed. "I did not plan for all of this to come down on Daniel at once." (Again, he could murder the Observants.)

"Hm," said Frostbite. "No. But I do not think that it would be wise to keep him split for much longer."

"No."

"Then, here we go."
Danny woke with a start. He felt chilled, but whole. He sighed, a white curl of mist issuing from between his lips and winding up to the ceiling. His ghost sense. He smiled, stretching, catlike, and rolling over.

"Hello, Daniel," said Clockwork.

"Clockwork," said Danny, happily, enthusiastically, still sleepy. He sat up and looked around for his grandfather. Then he hummed as a familiar, friendly presence settled next to him on the table. Another, larger, fuzzier one sat on his other side. "Frostbite," he said, happy to have someone on his other side.

"Are you feeling better."

"Yes," said Danny, leaning into Clockwork. "I think so. Do you have any water?"

"Here," said Clockwork, cupping Danny's hands around a small glass.

Danny drained it quickly. "Being drugged always makes me thirsty," he observed.

"That is a side effect," said Clockwork.

Danny rubbed his chest. "I'm together again," said Danny.

"Yes," said Clockwork.

"However, Great One, I would recommend that you refrain from using your active, or more advanced powers for the time being. Your core is still fragile. It will be prone to fracturing again for some time."

"Your passive powers, on the other hand, should be fine," said Clockwork. "As should your basic abilities."

Danny sighed. "Why can't I ever just be better?" he asked frustrated. He adjusted his position slightly. "What am I supposed to do about my class?" he asked. "They can't stay here. There's only the one room that's heated, and we're in it."

"If I might have a suggestion?" said Clockwork. Danny looked up at him, hopefully. "They are schoolchildren, are they not? Then perhaps a field trip would do them some good."

Danny's eyes narrowed. "I can't tell if that's a brilliant idea or a terrible one," he said, finally. "What would I transport them in? I don't exactly have a car. Or a bus."

"I'm sure that we can borrow whatever transportation they come in on."

"Really? You're sure?"

"If not," said Frostbite, "we have transportation that you can borrow."

"Thank you, Frostbite," said Danny. He licked his lips. They were chapped, and the little splits stung, although they didn't hurt nearly as much as his still not entirely healed bullet wounds. He sniffed, then sighed. "I'm hungry."
"We can set you up with a fine diner, Great One," said Frostbite.

"Hm. Will the wisps be there?" asked Danny.

"We will allow some of them to join you, if you would like."

"Thank you. And Jazz and Sam and Tucker?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you."

They left early the next morning. Danny, and Clockwork, too, so Danny thought that it was probably a good idea, thought that it would be best to meet up with Danny's classmates and their Libra escort early in the day, so that they would have time to travel to their real destination, Elysium.

Elysium was a much better place to bring the class than the Far Frozen. It was a reasonable temperature, to begin with. The Labyrinth was a bit tricky, but the thing was, that going through the Labyrinth wasn't strictly necessary. Yes, Danny had to go through it because Pandora had locked down her Realm upon the theft of her box, and flight above about six feet on her island hadn't been possible, but that wasn't something that was always, or even usually true. Most of the time it was perfectly possible to simply fly across the Labyrinth to the center of the island. This is what Danny intended to do. They had sent a letter ahead to Pandora, who had replied with an enthusiastic yes. She was the Master of Hope for a reason.

They were riding on a flying barque. A great, three-masted, antique ship. It hadn't seemed like something that the Far Frozen would normally have. They were generally on the more hi-tech end of the spectrum. But Frostbite had explained that they had won it from a group of pirates who had been attacking them fairly often... three hundred or so years ago. But they said that it was seaworthy. Or Zone-worthy. So. Up they went.

Danny was having a fine time watching the ship pilot itself, the helm spinning to and fro, the sails and ropes snapping in a nonexistent breeze. There were hammocks strung up one deck down. Enough for the entire class and then some.

He rolled his cane over the top of his thighs, contemplatively. Danny hadn't wanted to bring a cane, but he had wanted to be in the chair even less, and, though it was better, his ankle still wasn't right. If he was going to be doing a tour for his class, if he was going to be leading a tour for his class, he would be doing a lot of walking. He could keep weight off of his ankle with flight and levitation, but he couldn't do that in front of his classmate. Well. He could, but faking walking while levitating wasn't something he did every day, and would probably take more concentration that he could spare. The cane would help, although he'd have to be careful not to overwork his arms to spare his ankle. He had been shot in the shoulder, after all.

This was a peaceful interlude, here on the ship. No one would track him down to ask him something else, here. Very few people knew where he was. Those that did, he had either just left, or were on the boat with him.

Sam seemed to be sharing similar sentiments, if her body position on the bench next to him was any
clue. "This is nice," she said.

"Yeah," said Danny, now looking up at the swirling purple and green clouds and floating doors and islands that filled the Ghost Zone sky. The Ghost Zone could be beautiful. It could be ugly, too, but then so could the Earth. He breathed in deeply, tasting the ambient ectoplasm.

But the moment was too sweet to last.

"I see them!" shouted Tucker from the prow of the boat, where he had been perched like a second figurehead. "They're on a magic carpet kind of thing."

Danny sighed. Time to give the ship its instructions.


Mr Lancer had enough of all this nonsense. He was a teacher. A teacher! Yes, he accepted responsibility for his students when they were in his care, but he wasn't a- a- Arabian Nights, he didn't even know what kind of person would have the training and mindset for this. Some kind of lunatic combat philosopher. A hero in the old style. Someone mythic. A saint, perhaps. Someone not named William Lancer.

He hadn't signed up for this. He hadn't even signed up for being in charge of these students for more than a few hours at a time, strictly speaking.

So he thought that he could be forgiven for being in a state of shock, and not doing very much... Well, he couldn't even call it classroom management at this point. There was no classroom.

They weren't even in an enclosed space. They were on a flying carpet! A large flying carpet, yes, but a carpet. Entirely exposed to any random ghost that they might cross paths with. Well... To be truthful, none of the ghosts they had met in Phantom's lair, and since leaving it, had been particularly aggressive. In fact, they had been nothing if not polite. Still, there was the example of all the ghosts who attacked Amity to consider, and Mr Lancer didn't entirely trust their ghostly escort to protect them.

In other words, Mr Lancer was scared. With good reason.

When a ghostly pirate ship appeared out of nowhere to hang above the , Mr Lancer was downright terrified. What did they want?

But then his students, his students, poked their heads over the railing and waved down. Daniel, Jasmine, Mr Foley, Miss Manson were on that ship. It wasn't a pirate ship, then, Mr Lancer realized once he got his heartbeat under control. That didn't answer the question of what they were doing here. Mr Lancer had understood that they were going to meet the four of them in a place called the Far Frozen, not here, in the middle of, well, nowhere in particular. A green and swirling void.

Where had they even come from? Was one of these green clouds much closer to them than it appeared?

He supposed that it didn't matter. The 'driver' of the carpet signaled up to the children on the ship with a series of complicated hand gestures. Daniel signed back. Then the 'driver' angled the carpet up, to the deck of the ship, sneaking it over the railing to land.
"Fenton?!!" exclaimed Dash, loudly, before Mr Lancer had a chance to react. Mr Lancer wasn't sure why he sounded so surprised. It wasn't as if he hadn't had several minutes to process Daniel's presence, and he had known that they were going to meet Daniel, his sister, and their two friends. It wasn't that shocking to find them here... Or maybe Mr Lancer had run out of shock when the ship appeared overhead, and Dash was reacting normally.

"Hi, Dash," said Daniel.
Chapter 89: Glass

"Danny," said Valerie, sounding horrified, "what happened to you?"

That was a good question. Another good question would be how to answer it. Luckily, Danny had thought about that on the way here.

He raised an eyebrow. "You were around for most of what happened to me, Val, but I sprained my ankle and got shot since you saw me last."

"You were shot?" asked Mr Lancer, sounding more resigned than shocked. He also sounded concerned, however, and he stood up, legs a little wobbly, and took a step towards Danny.

"Yep."

"Is Phantom here?" asked Paulina, elbowing the teacher out of the way. "Where is he?" she whined, noticing that he wasn't visible.

Danny braced himself. "The only ones here are me, Jazz, Sam, Tucker, Dr Iceclaw, and Clockwork." He frowned. "Actually, I don't know if Clockwork is still aboard. I haven't seen him for a bit. He probably had to go take care of something."

Mr Lancer blinked. "Clockwork? As in, Phantom's mentor?"

"Yes," said Danny. "He's our chaperon on our field trip today."

"Then where's Phantom?" asked Paulina, in an aggravated tone. "He's not still stuck in you, is he?" she said, curling her lips.

"No," said Danny, suppressing a twitch of his own lips.

"Danny," said Valerie, getting Danny's attention again. "What do you mean, 'field trip'?"

"The Far Frozen isn't the best place for people with body temperature," answered Sam. "It's cold. Really cold. They don't have enough insulated rooms for all of us."

"We're going to Elysium instead," said Tucker, who hadn't looked up at the other teens since they got on board, instead choosing to pour over his PDA. "Don't worry, it's cool there."

"Not as cool as the Far Frozen," said Danny, with a grin.

"Hard to be cooler than cold."

"Absolute zero."

"You two are such nerds," said Sam.

"Says the nerd," shot back Tucker.

"Anyway," said Danny. "We're going to be moving around a lot, until Libra can set up a place for all
of us to stay. They don't deal with large numbers of humans very often. There are logistical problems. It'll be easier for everyone to spread us out. Does that make sense?"

"So we'll be staying with ghosts," said Valerie, distaste evident.

"Yep," said Danny, now turning his attention to the ghostly 'driver' of the carpet. "Thank you for bringing them," said Danny, bowing politely.

"Thank you for taking them off our hands," said the ghost, equally politely. "I hope that things go well for you at trial. Now, if you'll all step off, please? This may be a carpet, but I don't want to take off with you."

The class shuffled off the carpet, and then the carpet took off. Danny waved as it left.

"So," said Mia, "Elysium? Is that, like, Greek mythology Elysium?" She seemed uncomfortable, and she kept looking at Danny with worry. Then again, everyone looked somewhat uncomfortable. Mikey looked downright nauseous. This was an odd situation.

"Sort of," said Danny. "I'll explain in a bit. First, I want to show you all where you'll be sleeping."

He took a couple of steps back, and then turned, leading them to the doors that lead to below-decks. He showed them the hammocks, and the head, not expecting them to be happy about the situation. He wasn't exactly disappointed. Most of them were not. A few of them, Ricky, Hannah, and Mr Lancer, however, were only too happy to crawl into the hanging beds.

Danny smiled nervously at the others. Mikey suddenly slapped a hand over his mouth and ran up the stairs. With his sharp ears, Danny could hear him retching. He winced. He didn't consider that some people would get seasick. Zone sick? The ship didn't rock that much. Really, it hardly rocked at all. It wasn't as if they were on an actual ocean, after all. Poor Mikey. He must have a really sensitive stomach. Danny wondered how he had fared on the flying carpet.

"So, shall we go back above-decks? Or, um, I know that you had questions. I mean, we can do both, or if you're hungry, we have food. Or we can do all three. Oh, and I have to introduce you to Dr Iceclaw-"

"Answers," said Valerie, firmly. "I want answers. What is going on? Why are we here?"

"Um, well," Danny took a deep breath. "My parents are on trial. For what they did to Phantom. It's like I said the other day. They made something that violated a Taboo, and Libra found out." He lowered his voice, and glanced at the people sitting in the hammocks. "They only know about the first thing, though. The Mortifier. They don't know about the other thing. The circle thing. Please, please, don't talk about that. Please don't tell anyone about it. Please, please tell me that you didn't say anything to them already."

"Or what, Fenton?" sneered Dash. Danny sighed internally. Apparently, the time away from Danny and the lair returned his sense of bravado. Or perhaps it was just that Phantom was no longer 'nearby,' to keep him on his best behavior.

"If you tell anyone about that, my parents will almost certainly be executed. So please, please do not do that."

"How do you know that Phantom hasn't told anyone?" asked Valerie. "Or those little ghosts? The will-o-the-wisps."

"He wouldn't," said Danny. "And we asked the wisps not to say anything. They'll listen to me. Or to
Phantom." He shrugged. "Whichever."

"Why?" asked Valerie, bluntly. "Why would Phantom do that for you? Apparently, this is a 'serious' thing for ghosts."

Danny shrugged, helplessly. "You didn't say anything, did you?" he asked again.

"No," said Mia, shooting a near-sighted glare at Valerie. "We didn't. At least, I didn't. Honestly, I had forgotten about that part of this whole, this whole thing." She ran her hands through her hair. "I just want to get this whole thing over with and go home, Danny."

"Me, too," said Danny, giving her a small smile.

"Hey, why can't we do that right now?" asked Lester, abruptly. "You're in charge of this boat, right? And you know where the portal is, don't you?"

"Two reasons," said Danny, raising a pair of fingers. "One, how do you think that all those agents got in to the Ghost Zone? You remember the agents, right? I know not all of you were there, but they tried to kill mom, Jazz, Sam, Tucker, Valerie, Lester, Nathan, Paulina, Dash, and I. I kind of don't want to go out that way. Thing is, all the other ways are... tricky." Both Vlad's portal and the Infini-Map crossed his mind. He shook his head. "None of them are ways that we can take right now. The other reason is that Libra would track us down. There is a reason that Adrestia is called Adrestia the Inescapable, and I doubt that their other enforcers are slouches." He sighed. "I'm not as familiar with Libra as I am with the Feathers. I don't know what their policies are. But I'm not going to try to go against them."

"Of course you aren't," said Dash. "You're a wimp, Fentini."

"Dash," said Kwan, slowly, reluctantly, "I don't think that this is a good idea."

"You were acting all tough when Phantom was with you, but you, you're nothing without him, and you're holding him back, with your wimpy-wimpy do-dah sissy act."

"Oh?" said Danny, delicately, ice in his tone. Dash's accusation had managed to set off a dark and aggressive part of his personality. He still wasn't entirely well. He was still on the defensive, still touchy, and he was reacting to the threat as a serious one. Which it was. Dash was an idiot who couldn't be trusted with his own safety, let alone anyone else's, and if he gained control of the situation, then everyone here would be in danger.

"Yeah! If you weren't a wimp, then we'd be home already! But you're just being, like, a wimp to all these ghosts. I bet that you're just running away, like usual."

Danny's eyes went narrow. "And you're a role model for, what, fortitude? Toughness? If I recall correctly, when we were in the woods, you ran at the first sight of the wisps. Are you really denigrating me for not wanting to draw the ire of people who are millions of times more powerful?"

Dash seized the front of Danny's shirt, and pulled him up to his eye-level. "Are you making fun of me, Fentonia?"

"Mr Baxter!" exclaimed Mr Lancer, attempting to struggle out of his hammock, finally recognizing the brewing fight.

At that moment, an expertly aimed, steel-toed boot flew over the heads of the assembled students, and hit Dash in the head. He dropped Danny, who landed lightly on his good foot. Dash whirled, and the other students parted like the Red Sea to reveal Sam in stocking feet, her other boot in her
hand, Tucker standing next to her, clutching his PDA as if he expected Sam to throw it next.

"What the hell, Manson?" asked Dash, angrily, rubbing the back of his head.

"Well," said Sam, "far be it from me to interrupt Danny finally introducing his fist to your face, but this is getting ridiculous. You did hear him when he said that there were ghosts on board, right? Dr Iceclaw could probably rip your head off, and Clockwork could arrange it so that you were never born. I think that renders all of this moot."

"I don't think that Dr Iceclaw would rip anyone's head off," said Jazz, coming down the stairs.

"Nah," said Danny. "He's a big softy. Is Mikey okay?"

"He said that he gets motion sickness easily," said Jazz, shrugging. "I guess that it's a good thing that we'll be in Elysium before too long."

"How long is that?" asked Mia.

"Three days, about," said Danny. He bent, gingerly, favoring his leg, and picked up Sam's boot from where it had fallen. "Here, Sam," he said, tossing it back to her.

"What is Elysium like?" asked Mia.

"Well, the part we're going to is a city," said Danny, brightly, glad for the change in subject.

But before Danny could finish, Dash re-inserted himself between Danny and the rest of the class. Danny sighed.

"We're not done," growled Dash.

"Look, Dash," said Danny, "you have good qualities, you really do, but you're being an idiot. You don't know what's going on here. You don't know how to deal with ghosts."

"I've done fine before," said Dash, tilting his chin up, and folding his arms. "I took on that ghost pirate that stole all the adults."

There was a murmur of assent from the other students, and a yelp of surprise from Mr Lancer.

Dash smirked. "You, on the other hand, ran away like the loser you are."

"I got tossed over the side of the ship," said Danny, flatly. If Phantom hadn't shown up, I would have face-planted onto the pavement, and he wasn't keen on bringing me back up." He rubbed the side of his face. "Do I really need to fight you, or whatever?"

"You think you can take me, Wimp-ton?"

"Dash, I help Phantom fight ghosts."

"I would advise that you do not fight," said a deep rumbling voice.

Danny smiled. "Everyone, this is Dr Iceclaw. Dr Iceclaw, this is my class, and my teacher, Mr Lancer. Except for Mikey. Mikey is having a bit of seasickness upstairs."

"I see," said the doctor, looking at Dash with narrowed, yellow eyes, clawed hands clasped behind his back. Dash quailed, taking a step back. Dr Iceclaw stepped forward, looming over the quarterback. "Daniel is my patient. He is recovering from injuries sustained in defense of the Infinite
Realms. You will not harass him."

"Uh, sure," said Dash.

Danny wasn't sure how to feel about this. On one hand, he was glad to not have to fight Dash, and he was feeling a lot calmer, more level-headed and less reactionary, now that Dash wasn't pushing his buttons. On the other hand, he suspected that he was just pushing the confrontation with Dash back, not avoiding it altogether.

Then, too, he was a little worried about how quickly he got angry. Maybe it was just a reaction to everything that had happened, a reaction to the stress, his patience running out.

Dr Iceclaw smiled down at Danny. "I don't suppose that the young man upstairs- Mikey, was it?- would mind me taking a look? I may have something that could help him."

"Probably not," said Danny. "I'll introduce you."

"Enough!" shouted Themis, bringing her gavel down hard on the table, frowning deeply. Had she eyes to see, she would have been glaring at the assembled advocates. There were hundreds of them, squeezed into the circular room. Many of them were hovering a dozen feet up, eschewing table space for elbow room. "Phantom's status as a ghost is not only unimpeachable, it is immaterial to these proceedings! The only voice in that matter is Libra's, and we have chosen to prosecute this case. All that should concern you, is how the trial unfolds, and which of you belong here."

The last part was hissed. Even that portion of the initial committee, which was a minor, almost cursory, formality in most trials, had not been finished.

The room went quiet, but not silent, at the threat. Good enough.

"Lord Issitoq," said Themis. "I suggest that you remove yourself and your associates. This trial is being arbitrated by Libra, not by the Observants."

A titter moved through the crowd.

"Lady Themis," replied Issitoq, his tone barely civil. "Considering the social standing of the persons involved in this trial, I believe that all citizens of the Infinite Realms deserve a say in it."

"No. They do not," said Themis. "I will not change my standards and go against everything I believe in for anything, especially not for something so petty as the social status of the victim." Unspoken: You are treading dangerously close to asking me to go against my Obsessions.

"Lady Themis?" called an advocate, hesitant, but not hesitant enough to refrain from taking advantage of the lull in conversation.

"Ivy, is it?" asked Themis.

"Yes, ma'am. Ma'am, most of the human witnesses do not yet have advocates."

"I am aware of this."

"I propose that we delay the initial committee until they do have advocates, or to select a temporary
Themis nodded. She had expected such a motion. "I will take your suggestion under advisement. Issitoq," she said, returning her attention and her ire to her fellow Judge, "I notice that you are still here. Despite my lack of your most prominent feature, I can detect your presence. Remove yourself or I will have you removed."

"Very well," said Issitoq, standing with a rustle of cloth. "I do hope that you do not regret this, Themis."

Issitoq flew through the treasury of the Panopticon, ignoring fabulous riches and priceless artifacts, lost masterpieces and objects of arcane power. He did not show it, but he was furious.

First, treating that abomination as a proper ghost... Treating it as a human would have been too good for it. Then, Themis practically throwing him out of the initial committee...

And Clockwork.

Issitoq swallowed a snarl.

But this whole situation could be remedied. Issitoq would not allow that abomination, that simpering pet of Clockwork's, to become King. He would stop it. He would preserve order. He would preserve balance.

He, unlike those power-hungry Ancients, and his supposed 'equals,' those fools who thought that they had a right to call themselves Judges, was going to do his job.

Issitoq came to a stop as he reached the back of the vault. He glared at the wall, and the great, green-black stones that made it up as if they were responsible for all the inconveniences in his life. Then, he raised one clawed hand to the ornate, eye-shaped brooch that clasped his robe, and, with the other, touched the wall. It dissolved into mist, which Issitoq easily stepped through, and then reformed behind him. This was the inner vault, the secret vault, the place where the greatest, most powerful, and most dangerous treasures of the Observants were stored.

This place was not like the outer vault. There were no artifacts simply lying out on display, no extravagant show of wealth and power. Instead, this room looked like nothing so much as a bank vault filled with lock boxes in the human world. The only thing lying out, on the rectangular wooden table in the center of the room, was a book. It was a catalog of all the items within.

Once, the Ring of Rage and the Crown of Fire had resided in this room. No longer. Both had been claimed by Smith. Another slight against the Observants.

But that was not what Issitoq was here for. No. He was looking for a much older object. One of the oldest. One of the most powerful. He opened the book, and trailed his fingers down the first page, until he came to the entry he wanted.

He floated to the appropriate drawer, and, again using his authority as the foremost of the Observants, opened it. Carefully, he removed the object that laid within, a delicate, twisted sculpture of eggshell-thin glass, tied to a slender golden chain. It was full of luminous green sand. The corners
of his eye crinkled in pleasure. This. This would let him right all that was wrong with the Realms.

All of it.
Chapter 90

Chapter 90: Long Sea Voyage

Danny sat on the most forward bench, waiting for Elysium to come into view. Jazz was sitting next to him, reading a book. Danny was enjoying the warmth she was giving off, or, more accurately, what that warmth meant. She was close. She was with him.

Danny didn't know if she knew what that meant to him. She probably did. She was practically his therapist, for all that she said that it was risky for people who were close in other ways to have a patient/therapist relationship. Danny didn't really get that. He knew some psychology from Jazz, but things like that, well. It went over his head. It seemed to him that a personal relationship would be better than talking about private things with a complete stranger.

Whatever. Jazz knew more than him about that kind of stuff. Still. She was the one he talked to. Not a stranger. Not even a ghost stranger.

He was rambling.

"You think that they're ready?" asked Danny.

"Hm? You mean, do I think that your classmates are ready to immerse themselves in ghost culture and behave civilly while doing it?"

"You say that as thought there's only one ghost culture," teased Danny.

"My answer would be 'no.'"

"Yeah," said Danny. "Me too." He sighed, and leaned on Jazz, doing his best to bother her. What could he say? He was her little brother. It was his job to bother her, and she didn't seem to mind. Much. "What are you reading anyway?"

"Oh, it's fascinating," said Jazz. "Clockwork gave it to me. It's about liminality. Those kids we met, back in you lair, did you notice their eyes?"

"Yes," said Danny. "They're liminal. I guess we never had a chance to talk about it."

"There was a lot going on, wasn't there?" she mused. "Danny," she said, after a pause, "I'm liminal, too, aren't I?"

"Mhm," hummed Danny. She knew this already. "Everyone in Amity, probably."

"How liminal?"

"Hard to quantify," said Danny.

"With respect to those kids?"

"Well," said Danny, straightening, glancing back at the knot of students hanging over the port side, "you're more liminal, I think. You've lived on a thin spot your whole life. They've only been exposed the last couple of years. They've just had more access to ectoplasm."
"Right now," said Jazz, trailing her fingers through a wisp of ectoplasmic fog, "I think that we have the same access to ectoplasm."

"What are you getting at?"

"Do my eyes ever change color, Danny?"

He thought about that for a minute. "They might," said Danny, finally. "I- I've never been sure that it wasn't a trick of the light, and didn't want to bother you with something that might not be real, and you already knew about liminality. Valerie's eyes change color," he added. "When she's angry enough, they flash red, like her suit."

"Really? What color do my eyes turn?"

"Gold," said Danny. "That's why I thought it might be the light, you know? I still think that it might be the light," he continued, stubbornly.

"I don't think so," said Jazz, ruffling Danny's hair. He stuck his tongue out at her, but she ignored it. "There are some things in this book that I would like to try."

"What, so it has, like, instructions? For what?" asked Danny, now interested.

"Sort of." She rubbed her lower lip. "This book is old. And weird. It uses the term 'magi' for human liminals in the Ghost Zone. Which is cool, but also, I don't know, kind of lame, too. There's a lot of stuff that I can already do. Things you've shown me how to do. The whole, 'humans are the ghosts in the Ghost Zone' thing. But there's other stuff, too. I'm not sure how to describe most of this. They almost seem like spells. The others are meditations. 'Touch your inner-self' kinds of things. But I guess that anything involving humans and ghost powers is going to be weird."

Danny peered into the book. "I bet that you could do this one," he said tapping an illustration. "You should try it."

"Now?"

"No time like the present," he said, grinning at her impishly as he parroted what she always said about his homework.

She smacked him lightly. "What about our traveling companions over there? We aren't exactly hidden."

"You could blame anything that happens on a passing ghost." He leaned on her again. "You know, when we're like this, I can feel you."

Jazz laughed. "I assume that you're not talking about your sense of touch."

"That too," said Danny, "and you're warm, but, yeah, that's not what I'm talking about." He paused, and blinked lazily, curling closer to his sister. "I can feel you. Your ectosignature."

Jazz frowned. "I thought you couldn't do that in the Ghost Zone. Too much ambient ectoplasm."

"Not usually," said Danny. "But I can when we're this close, and I think that it's gotten stronger the last few days. I could feel you in the hospital, when I was unconscious."

"Do you think that it has anything to do with, um, being blessed?"

"I don't know. It could just be being here, in the Ghost Zone. I don't think that you've ever spent
more than a night, have you?"

"No," said Jazz. She suddenly sat straight up, dislodging Danny in the process. "Sorry," she said sheepishly, as he re-balanced himself. "What about Sam and Tucker? Can you feel them now, too?"

"I- Maybe? I don't know."

"You should check. Where are they, anyway?"

"Napping. I got my sleep schedule reset courtesy of drugs, but theirs is still kinda screwy. How are you managing, anyway?"

Jazz shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Okay," said Danny, trying to find a comfortable position that didn't involve leaning on Jazz. "I still think that you should try that thing in the book. It isn't that far off of intangibility."

Jazz eyed him skeptically. "Danny, this is straight up telekinesis. I'd say that it is miles away from intangibility."

"Not really. Look, human intangibility here is basically just telling ectoplasm to back off and leave you alone. It's you telling the ectoplasm to be intangible to you. This is telling the ectoplasm to do stuff for you." He stared at the book contemplatively. "You could probably try visualizing it as hands or something. Visualization is important. Ooh. Now I have a vision," he gasped dramatically, "a vision of you, surrounded by dozens of disembodied hands! Think of how much more quickly you could shelve books at the library!"

"Oh, stop it," said Jazz, with good humor. "Maybe I'll give it a try once we get to Elysium. You should talk to Sam and Tucker, though, see if you can feel them, too."

"Yeah, I know." He started looking forward again. "You aren't mad, are you?"

"Why would I be mad? Like you said, we haven't had much time to talk about this, even since we got aboard... this... Did we ever get the name of this ship?"

"Yeah, it's the Glaciinsulo."

"The iceberg?"

"Yeah."

"That's kind of hilarious."

"I know, right? Hey! Is that Elysium?"

Jazz stood and went to the rail. "It could be," she said.

"I'm going to go get Sam and Tucker," said Danny, standing and rubbing a kink out of his knee.

"We probably won't get there for another couple of hours," said Jazz. "Even if that is it, it doesn't look any bigger than a thumbnail at this point. You can let them sleep."

Danny blinked. "Yeah... I would, but Sam made me promise to wake them up when Elysium came into view. She thinks that we'll need crowd control."

"She got a promise out of you?"
"Uh-huh." He sighed, and scowled. "I don't get it. She always knows what to say."

"I guess she just knows you, Danny."

"Yeah," he said. He smiled, all of his features softening. "That's a good thing, though. I have to go."

"Would you like me to-?"

"No, I've got this," said Danny, waving over his shoulder. He patted to the door below, pleased to note that he had acquired the knack of putting the tip of the cane down silently, and waved briefly at Dr Iceclaw, who was monitoring the other students, before descending.

The lights below were dimmed. It probably would have seemed quite dark to a human, but Danny had no issues. He easily navigated to the hammocks Sam and Tucker had claimed. Then he sighed again. Sam was not an easy person to wake up. So. Tucker first.

He went to prod the other boy, but paused, instead simply laying his hand on Tucker's shoulder. Like Jazz had said before, he shouldn't be able to detect the teeny, tiny ectosignature that Tucker had while surrounded by the continuous 'noise' of the Ghost Zone. He could feel back home, in Amity, but Amity had a lot less ambient ectoplasm. The only way that he would be able to sense it, would be if Tucker's ectosignature had grown, or if Danny had gotten more sensitive to ectosignatures. He was pretty sure the second wasn't true. If anything, based on the beating his core had received, he should be less sensitive.

But Danny could feel it, a persistent static hum beneath his fingertips. A smile worked it's way onto his face. It wasn't wrong for him to be happy, was it? He would have waited longer, listened longer, but, well, he had promised.

He gently shook Tucker's shoulder, then, when the boy began to grumble himself away, he gingerly jostled Sam. She threw her boot at him, which he caught.

"Sorry, Danny," she mumbled.

"Nah, it's cool. Um. So, we can see Elysium from the front of the ship, now."

"Okay, great," she said, rubbing her eyes. "So, now, what did we decide we had to do, Tuck?"

Tucker, groaned loudly, and pulled out his PDA. Then, in a monotone voice, he read, "Remind morons to bow to Pandora, remind morons to add water to their wine, remind morons not to insult the advocates, remind morons not to ask about deaths, remind morons not to ask about lives, remind morons not to ask about Obsessions-"

"Dude," interrupted Danny, rubbing the bridge of his nose, and sitting himself down on his own hammock. "Did you have to call them morons every time?"

"Sam made me."

"Sam. Why."

"They are morons," complained Sam.

"Not all of them," said Danny.

"Yeah, I know. I'm only reminding the morons. Not the ones that actually get it."

"Ah, okay then. Fair enough. Hey, um, guys. I think I should tell you something..."
"Does this mean that we're going to get ghost powers?" asked Tucker after Danny finished his explanation. He had mixed feelings about this. He was excited, sure, but he hadn't exactly been great at handling personal power in the past. Actually, he had proven to be downright terrible at dealing with power.

More than once.

Yes, as Danny would say, both times he had been dealing with mind control. The first time he had been practically overshadowed, towards the end.

That didn't make Tucker feel much better. Both times, the mind control had started of gentle, subtle, feeding on dark feelings of jealousy, envy, and resentment. Feelings that he did have. He didn't have them anymore. He had seen how much Danny's powers ate at him, how much they weighed him down. Not to mention his Obsessions. Tucker could take a day off from ghost hunting, Danny couldn't.

Sam looked a bit happier about it, but still dubious. That was the expression she had worn when Nephthys had told them about the Pilgrimage. Sam hadn't quite the same experiences with mind control, power, and corruption as Tucker, her experience with Undergrowth notwithstanding, but she had her own issues with going too far.

(They all did.)

Danny looked eager, but apprehensive. Like he was half afraid that Tucker and Sam would be angry with him. That was ridiculous, of course, this wasn't something Danny had any control over, and even if it was, it wasn't like Tucker and Sam would have blamed him. It was like he wanted to be excited, wanted to be happy, but he was waiting to see how Sam and Tucker reacted.

"Probably?" said Danny, shrugging. "I don't really know. I think-" his eyes unfocused, and Tucker had the suspicion that there were some ghost weirdness going on, "I think that those kids, the ones from Harmony, they aren't as liminal as you are, not quite, but they can do things." He drummed his fingers on his knee. "Yeah, so, probably."

"Yeah, okay," said Tucker. That's what he had thought.

"What about an Obsession?" asked Sam. Tucker blinked. He hadn't thought about that. "I mean," continued Sam, "I know that with the Pilgrimage, to become a ghost, that's, I don't know, a far future, it's definitely going to happen eventually kind of thing, but this is a lot more immediate," she glanced at Tucker, "and I do know that liminality makes us sort of obsessive to begin with, but this is different."

"I... I don't think so," said Danny, slowly. "That- To have an Obsession, you'd have to have a core. If you had a core, even a little one, I think that you would be guaranteed, or at least really likely, to become a ghost, and then the Pilgrimage wouldn't be necessary. But then, the Pilgrimage might give you a core. That might be how it works." He sighed, heavily. "I wi-' he stopped dead. "I should have asked for more technical details."
"Yeah, no w-word stuff, dude."

"Wouldn't that be just the thing to happen, though?" asked Sam.

"That is what our luck is like. Hey, that might not be the worst way to get everyone home. Desiree, I mean. It isn't like she can't be negotiated with."

"Let's put her on the bottom of the list of options," said Sam, sliding out of her hammock.

"You want to put her under the Box Ghost?" asked Danny, sounding surprised.

Tucker stared. "Dude, what's even going on with your list?"

Danny blushed. "Well, he can find portals. That's why he always shows up."

"But... You can find portals to Amity. With your ghost homing instinct. Is that still not working?" Tucker asked with concern. He had thought that Danny was getting better.

"It's working, it's working. I'm fine. I'm just not sure that we want to come out in Amity, because of the agents, and I want to keep our options open."

"Good point," said Sam. She rubbed the side of her nose, dislodging sand from the corner of her eye. "But let's shelve this. I think this falls into the 'worry about it later' category and I had you wake us up so that we could make sure our beloved classmates don't work themselves into a frenzy." There was a thump from above, a shriek, and then shouts from Mr Lancer and Dr Iceclaw. Sam deflated, "Too late."

Danny was already halfway up the stairs.

"Back up?" asked Tucker.

"Back up," said Sam, resigned.

It turned out that there was a ghost.

That went without saying, of course. Dr Iceclaw was there. He was a ghost. But there was another ghost, an animal ghost, not one that possessed sapience, if Danny was any judge. It was a giant whale. Dr Iceclaw and Valerie had held it off with ice so far, but it was clear that the yeti was tiring. He was a doctor, not a whaler!

… Danny really needed to watch that series again. First, though, he had to do something about the whale.

Valerie wasn't doing much better. She wasn't used to fighting such large ghosts.

He mentally ran through his list of options. There weren't a lot of them. He had been told not to use his powers, he certainly couldn't transform, and he didn't have any weapons. Why hadn't he planned for this? This was foreseeable! Predictable, even!

"Danny," said Jazz, coming up alongside him, "breathe." She was wearing the Fenton Peeler in all
it's white and silver glory. She handed Danny a blaster. "Here," she said, "and this, too."

"Is this Mom's staff?"

"Yeah," said Jazz. "Remeber, the-"

"The spear extension, yeah."

"Great," said Jazz. "I've got the bow, you take the stern." She grabbed Tucker, who had just arrived from downstairs, and ran off.

Danny exchanged a glance with Sam, who had both wrist rays at the ready. They were running to the stern a moment later, Danny ignoring the pain in his ankle, yelling at the class to get below-decks, where things were at least nominally safer, and they wouldn't be underfoot.

Jazz's plan was mostly solid, for something that she had most likely come up with on the fly. With fighters on both the bow and stern, Valerie doing aerial work, and Dr Iceclaw in the center, they could cover most of the ship.

The top half of it, anyway.

It quickly evolved that the whale, while not possessing a human intellect, wasn't particularly keen on being shot at. It reverted to the 'natural' method for a whale to attack a ship. It came at it from below.

This was harder for the defenders to deal with. The ship was in the way, keeping them from shooting at the whale, and the way that the whale kept ramming the ship wasn't helping. Nor was all the screaming from Danny's less-experienced classmates. Valerie, with her board (and, goodness, her suit had repaired that quickly), could circle the ship, and attack the whale more directly, but having her face the huge ghost alone (even only relatively alone), made Danny's core throb.

Danny put his foot on the port railing.

Sam half-turned towards him from where she was standing on starboard. "Danny, what-?"

Danny stepped forward, his foot leaving the railing. Sam gasped.

The thing was, in the Ghost Zone, gravity wasn't so much a law as a suggestion. His other foot landed on the wooden planking that made up the ship's side.

"Danny, what the heck-! Oh. Okay then."

Danny looked down to see Sam looking at him from the railing, her perception of gravity at right angles to his. He shrugged. The boat shook again. They both went back to work, Danny running down the side of the ship, Sam back across the deck.

This was better. Much better. He had a clear shot, now. He raised his blaster and fired. The shots weren't much more than a distraction, honestly. The whale's hide was thick, and from this vantage, he could see the majority of the shot glance off, leaving little damage. To do damage to the ghost, Danny would either need something very sharp, or would have to hit something vulnerable, something soft, something tender. Valerie had apparently realized that, too. She was aiming for its eyes.

She wasn't, quite, good enough to hit them, though.

All of the attacks were aggravating the whale, however, and it responded by opening its huge, toothy
maw, and gathering a ball of fuchsia energy on the tip of its thick gray tongue. Heck, there wasn’t really anything Danny could do about that. He flinched as the blast was fired, and the ship jumped, its programmed defenses kicking in and letting it dodge the blast, which shot into the ether.

Danny steadied himself, his ankle screaming, his newly-healed muscles aching. He must have made a sound, because Valerie zoomed down next to him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "And how are you doing that?"

"I'll explain later," he said. Then he smiled, masking his pain. "Maybe I'll teach you in Elysium. Here, take this." He gave her the staff, activating it. The ecto-spear sprang out. "You won't get through that hide with your normal stuff."

Valerie sent him an odd look, just barely visible through her face plate. "Thanks," she said.

"No problem," said Danny, sighting down his blaster again. Despite his less than ideal position, he was getting much closer to the ghost's eyes than Valerie could.

This was incredibly frustrating. If he could access his powers, this fight would have already been over. Yes, this was a relatively powerful animal ghost, one with a clear grudge against boats, but Danny had fought stronger. His ice could get through the ghost's skin with no problem, not to mention his shields, his speed, his... There was no point to this. He had to work with what he had.

Which was a blaster and his mastery of the mind-tricks that made the Ghost Zone so much fun.

Wow. It was like the exact opposite of an arsenal. A quiver with one arrow. One string to his bow. Why did he know so many metaphors for this?

Maybe he should include his razor sharp wits on his list. Yeah. That sounded better.

In any case, Valerie had point with this. Danny's job was being a distraction, so that Valerie could hit the whale with the spear.

Danny's heart rate spiked as he considered all the ways that could go wrong. Oh, ancients, he hoped that Valerie didn't go overboard. The whale was dangerous, yes, it was attacking them, yes, but that didn't mean it deserved to be destroyed or crippled.

(And he was so used to seeing Valerie as an almost enemy, an an antagonist... He was so used to not trusting her... To seeing her go after innocent ghosts... To seeing her going after him.)

His aim wavered, but he steadied himself. He was protecting Valerie. He was protecting the silly humans on the ship. His silly humans. He was not protecting the whale.

(His Obsession's attempt to latch onto himself no longer seemed so strange.)

He fired, and the whale flinched away from the well-aimed blast, which hit just to the right of its eye, momentarily distracted from Valerie. Valerie, always ready and rash, swooped in, trying to take advantage, only to narrowly miss being hit with one of the whale's flippers. However, the whale's movement brought it back into the range of the marksmen on the deck. Additionally, Dr Iceclaw had decided to join Danny and Valerie down below, and he was throwing ice at the creature, which was much more effective. The only problem was that with the two heavy-hitters (Dr Iceclaw and Valerie) down here, the whale might decide to- Oh, and there it was, it was switching back to the top. Wonderful.
Valerie and Dr Iceclaw, being blessed with flight, easily zoomed back to the top (although Dr Iceclaw shot Danny a very dirty look before going). Danny, being, if not earthbound, then shipbound, could not move so quickly. Not to mention his ankle, which was Not Happy with capital letters. Then, too, staying here could be tactically advantageous. They couldn't play the 'chase the whale back and forth' game forever.

Danny glanced towards Elysium. They were still miles and miles away. Only the most eagle-eyed of ghosts would be able to spot something as small as the ship from this distance. That meant that they had almost certainly been spotted. There were plenty of sharp-eyed ghosts in Elysium. However, considering how far away Elysium was, it would be some time before any help got here. Danny's top speed of one hundred and sixty miles an hour was something of an outlier, and it took him some time to build up to it. He couldn't expect help from there, couldn't rely on it.

He flinched as the ship shook, and lost balance, falling. He heard the horrible, shrieking, groan of a mast breaking. The ship shuddered again, and began to list, Danny's perception of gravity shifting despite his best efforts. There was a logic to this somewhere, Danny was sure. Even in the Ghost Zone, even in the very grip of madness, there was some logic, some reasoning. He just had no idea what the logic was, when it came to flying boats, because there wasn't any reason for the ship to be acting like this as far as he could see. Perhaps it was simply trying to mimic what would be happening to a real ship in these circumstances. Maybe it was more 'alive' than Danny had first thought, and it was hurt. That wasn't uncommon with ghostly things. (Now Danny was struggling to avoid imprinting on a questionably-sentient mostly-inanimate object. Great. What was he doing?)

The whale was heading down below again. Danny scrambled to his feet. Or tried to. Danny hissed as he tried to put weight on his ankle. He had aggravated it in his fall. Fine. He could fire prone, and he did, rolling over to shoot at the whale.

Oddly, he was getting closer to the whale's eyes while shooting like this. He supposed that there was a reason that snipers fired from this position.

Valerie and Dr Iceclaw flew back over, harrying the whale. It was now sporting several chunks of ice on its tail and fins.

Danny hit the whale's eye. It came as just as much of a surprise to him as to the whale.

It bellowed, loud and deep. Valerie plunged her spear into the whale's side. Then, at last, it turned and ran, leaving a trail of pink ectoplasm behind it.

Danny relaxed, and then tensed again as he saw Dr Iceclaw coming towards him. The doctor did not look happy.
Chapter 92

Chapter 92: Obsessive Behaviors

Danny made a distressed noise in the back of his throat as Dr Iceclaw phased off first his shoe and then his sock. The flesh of his ankle was a swollen, tender pink. That didn't look right.

He couldn't wait until his accelerated healing started to work again. He really couldn't. It looked like Dr Iceclaw couldn't wait either.

"Great One," said the larger ghost in a highly aggrieved tone, "we told you that you weren't entirely healed. You have to *rest.*"

"I couldn't let you guys fight alone," argued Danny.

The doctor gave him a very sad look, then pulled the collar of his shirt down around his shoulder. "Look what you've done to these."

Danny looked down at the bruise forming around the healed bullet wound in his shoulder, and winced. "How does that even work?" he asked. "It shouldn't do that, right?"

"These wounds weren't healed in the normal way," said Dr Iceclaw.

Then Danny spotted Valerie coming up behind Dr Iceclaw, and he hurriedly pulled his shirt back up. His classmates hadn't been filled in on how hurt he had been, how hurt he *still* was, and he wanted to keep it that way. Dr Iceclaw glared.

Valerie was glaring, too. She retracted her helmet, and stared up at Danny. But then her expression softened as she spotted his ankle. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I just twisted my ankle."

"Again," rumbled Dr Iceclaw.

"Thank goodness," she said. Then her face hardened again. "So, spill. How are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" asked Danny, blankly, looking up at Valerie.

"That!" exclaimed Valerie. "Sitting on that like- like *nothing.*"

"Sitting on-? Oh. Um." He looked down at the side of the ship. "Well-"

"That explanation will have to wait, Miss Gray," said Dr Iceclaw, coolly. He picked up Danny.

Danny tensed. Being picked up by Frostbite, or Clockwork was one thing, but he didn't know Dr Iceclaw as well. He squeaked, and curled inward slightly. Then, when Dr Iceclaw realigned them with the gravity on the deck, he squeaked again.

"Apologies," said Dr Iceclaw, and he did look apologetic.

"It's okay," said Danny, looking down at Valerie. "She looks angry."
"Perhaps."

"I think she's angry. She's not going to let this drop, and then she'll remember all the other stuff, and it'll come back up, and oh my gosh, this is going to be terrible. This is going to be awful."

"Great One," said Dr Iceclaw, clearly uncertain about how to deal with this.

"I'm fine," said Danny.

They reached the top deck. Dr Iceclaw set down lightly, more lightly than his bulk suggested he could. Jazz, Sam, and Tucker were there in a moment, asking if he was alright. Danny was more concerned that they were alright. The whale had knocked down a mast, after all.

Dr Iceclaw set Danny on a bench, and started tending to Danny's ankle. He started by making the flesh, the skin and muscle, of his ankle invisible, layer by layer until only the bone was left. Tucker blanched and retreated. Valerie went pale.

"You've torn the ligament," said Dr Iceclaw. "But you haven't broken any bones."

"That's good, right?"

"Sprains are worse than breaks."

"Oh. Okay."

Then the door to below-decks flew open, and Dash came marching out, a very strange expression on his face, Mr Lancer and the rest of the class behind him. Clearly, he was angry, but there was something else there that Danny couldn't read. He marched right up to the small group, fists balled and back straight. If Danny wasn't mistaken, he had puffed himself up. He very much had the air of someone trying to make himself look larger, more intimidating.

Danny stared. While Dash often made an effort to look intimidating, especially to his victims, he hadn't ever acted quite like this. This, this was weird.

He walked right up to where Danny was, or tried to. Sam got in the way. He looked down his nose at her. "Get out of the way, Manson."

"If you have something to say to Danny, you can say it from here," she said, crossing her arms.

"What are you, his body guard?" Dash asked, sneering. Wow. That still was not a good look on him. Actually, it was even worse than usual, because of whatever else was underneath it. "What, Fentoenail, too wimpy to fight your own battles?"

"Shut up, Baxter," said Valerie. "He did better than you. He actually helped, rather than screaming like a little girl."

If possible, Dash got angrier. "Yeah? And whose fault is that? Huh? His! You people," he pointed an accusatory finger at Valerie, then Sam, Tucker, and Jazz, "have all the weapons, all the stuff! You should share! I'd do way better than Fentina, who can't go five minutes without breaking his leg."

Some parts of that argument, Danny had to admit, made sense. Dash and the others really couldn't be expected to fight ghosts without weapons. For one thing, they weren't being expected to fight ghosts. For another, unless Danny counted the time all of their parents had been kidnapped by Ember and Youngblood, which was over a year ago, Dash and the others had never been trained to use ghost weapons. That's what the ghost safety assembly had been for. Even counting that one time, they had
only been trained with blasters, which they didn't have enough of for everyone. In fact, they didn't have enough weapons for everyone, period. Especially not now that the whale had flown off with the spear. Or should he still be thinking of it as the ecto-staff, even with the spear extension? Whatever. It didn't matter.

Unless Jazz had a whole lot more weapons from the lair than she had mentioned earlier. That wasn't impossible, but it was unlikely. That wasn't something Jazz would lie about, although she might forget about it. He was pretty sure she hadn't mentioned the ecto-staff before. Wait. That was included in the Peeler's built-in weapon set now. Yep. He had forgotten about that. (Really, the Peeler was hardly a Peeler anymore. It certainly couldn't be called just a Peeler. Yes, it could still do that, but at this point it was almost a low-level, nonlethal version of the Fenton Ecto-Skeleton.)

So, arming Dash, or any of the others, wasn't possible. The few ectoweapons that they had were best off in the hands of people who were actually familiar with them. That was Jazz, Sam, Tucker, and Valerie. And Danny himself, he supposed, although he had handed his blaster back to Jazz. Push come to shove, he was his own blaster, doctor's orders aside.

They had explained this, hadn't they? On the first day?

Then Jazz stepped up, shoulders squared and hands spread to invite reasonableness. "Dash, we talked about this just the other day. Even if we had enough weapons, you don't have the training, we do."

"You have tons of weapons," argued Dale, coming up next to Dash. Oddly, Kwan was staying out of this, not supporting Dash even by standing next to him, like he usually did when Dash was beating Danny up, or shoving him in a locker.

"We have, like, ten, total. You can't count most of Valerie's, or mine, they're built into the suits."

"Look, Jazz," said Dale, dismissively (Danny felt his eye twitch), "you're pretty and all, and you get good grades, but this is, like, real life. You don't know fighting. You should let us guys handle this."

This statement caused an uproar, starting with Mr Lancer exclaiming, "Little Women, Mr Gordon!" and ending with Sam saying, darkly, dangerously, "You want to find out how well I 'know fighting,' huh, Dale?"

"Whatcha gonna do to him, witch?" said Dash. "Curse him with your voodoo?"

This conflict was very strange, decided Danny. Not because it was happening at all, he had expected a clash with these two, he had been dreading it, to be honest, but because of the timing. Because of what had just happened, where they were, and because there was a very large, very confused ghost in their midst, who happened to like Danny. One of, if not all of, those things should have given Dash and Dale pause. (It was certainly giving Kwan pause, although it was perfectly possible that Kwan had finally had that crisis of conscious that Sam, Tucker, and Danny had been betting on for years. In which case, Danny won. He had thought that it would come before senior year, Tucker thought that it would happen before senior prom, Sam didn't think that he would grow up until graduation.)

Really, the two of them, and Dash especially, were acting like they had a need, a pathological need, to be at the top, to be in charge of the people around them. That was something that would get them killed if they kept it up. This near-suicidal behavior was something that he'd expect to see from a ghost who had their Obsession threatened, not a... Wait.

Alright, thought Danny, mind and face clearing. This behavior actually made sense, if looked at from
that perspective. Yes, now he knew what was going on, not that it made this much easier to deal with. He had been hoping that this particular discussion would at least wait until they got to Elysium, when they'd have access to all the Elysian scholars and philosophers.

But, again, if Dash and Dale kept this behavior up, they would get themselves killed, if not by Sam, then by ghosts. So.

"Sam, wait," said Danny, before Sam could turn the verbal fight into a physical one.

"What?" snapped Sam, turning.

Everyone else stopped. Danny hadn't said anything yet, and, Dash's feelings and actions aside, they had apparently come to see him as something of an authority.

"What, finally accepting the truth, Fentertainment?"

"Yes, actually," said Danny, calmly. "I know why you're feeling and acting this way, and I'm sorry."

"Danny, what?" started Sam, but she was cut off, by Dash's victorious laugh.

"Hah! You heard him Manson, hand 'em over," he demanded, shoving his hand in her face.

"That's not what I meant, Dash, and I'm pretty sure that if you don't move your hand, Sam will break it?"

"Yeah ri-"

"You know that she's placed in martial arts competitions before, right?" This wasn't a lie, it was just that the competition had been in the Ghost Zone. Actually, if he thought about it, that made it more impressive. "What I mean, is that there's a physiological reason for why you are acting like, well," Danny searched for a diplomatic term.

"Like a meat-head," supplied Sam, spitting the word meat as if it was the worst insult ever.

"Like an aggressive idiot," tried Tucker.

"Oh!" said Jazz, pounding a fist into an open hand. "Of course! I should have seen that! The abnormal aggression, the disregard of logic and self preservation, it makes sense now!"

"Sure," said Danny. "Let's go with that. You need to redirect, or you'll wind up picking a fight with someone you can't beat." He had, admittedly, already done that. "Or, worse, someone who won't see anything wrong with killing you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this earlier, and I really should have told all of you. I just didn't know if I was right, I didn't want you to be scared, and I was worried about how you'd react." He looked at Dr Iceclaw. "Dr Iceclaw, you've studied liminality, right?"

"Of course," said the ghost. The undertone said, he wouldn't be here, with Danny, treating Danny, arguably the most liminal person in existence, otherwise.

"You'll tell me if I get something wrong?" The ghost nodded in reply, and Danny took a deep breath, ignoring a twinge in his chest that told him that he had likely pulled something else during the fight with the whale. "Okay. So. Do you guys remember the time everyone in school got ghost powers?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Hannah as most of the others murmured. "That was so weird and sketchy. You know, Wes and I looked up those doctors afterwards, when the bugs flew out and we were released, and there wasn't any record of them? Like, at all? And there's no record of North Mercy Hospital
being refurbished. It's got to be some Guys in White cover-up, right? So that no one figures out that there are ghosts in Amity Park?” Hannah sounded less certain than she usually did.

"Um. No. Not exactly. The doctors were actually ghosts in disguise who wanted to steal our genes. Genetic information, not pants," he added for the benefit of the football players. "Long story, and sort of off-topic. Anyway, um. Over time, you have all been exposed to a lot of ghostly things. The attacks, the invasions, the overshadowings, the whole town getting sucked into the Ghost Zone... The list goes on, and that's on top of Amity Park being a natural thin spot. There's a huge amount of ectoplasm in Amity Park compared to the rest of the state, and there's way more here. There are side effects."

"Oh my god," said Mikey, suddenly. "Are we mutating? Is that what this is? Are we turning into mutants?"

"Um," said Danny. "Sort of?"

"That is so cool!" There was a pause. "I'm not going to get cancer from this, am I? Or grow a third arm?"

"Um. Definite no on the cancer, probably not on the third arm. I've had way more exposure than you from Mom and Dad's stuff, and I'm fine. The side effects are mostly mental."

"Always knew you were a basket case," muttered Rebecca.

"You'd hardly notice, under normal circumstances," continued Danny. "It makes you more, um, passionate, but also more obsessive. It's small things, usually. Like, if you really like comics, you daydream about getting that one issue you're missing, or about what will happen next in the story, or you write fanfiction or something. If you like to garden, you're gardening every day, you fertilize, and you've always got all the weeds out. It usually isn't anything bad. Usually, it's good. Like, with the band kids. They practice all the time, they're passionate about music, so they're placing high in all those competitions, and they sound really good. I've always thought that it makes Amity Park more colorful. More interesting. Because they say that you should follow your passion, and it's easier to find it in Amity. The thing is, because of the 'obsessive' part, you can wind up doing things that don't make sense, logically. Just like with OCD, if you can't do your thing, you get anxious. You try to do it, but it doesn't work. That's what's happening here, Dash, Dale. You have to redirect your passion."

Dash glared down at Danny. "Are you saying that because I think you're Fen-trash, I have some kind of mental defect?"

Danny bit his lip, trying not to riposte with the obvious. "No," he said, patiently. "It isn't a defect, just a difference. Because of all the ectoplasm here, the effect is getting stronger, and you don't really know how to deal with it, so you're doing this." Danny spread his hands. "You're obsessing over strength, over being tough, over being on top. That's why you're out here picking a fight you can't win, for weapons we don't have. You want to show that, despite everything that's happened lately, you're still strong. But you aren't going to be the strongest here. Not when we're dealing with ghosts who could wipe Amity Park off the map in less time than it takes to brush your teeth. You have to redirect your passion, focus on something else. Sports, maybe. Or, um, do you collect anything?"

Danny didn't want to mention the teddy bears out loud. "You could try thinking about that."

"Or I could just beat you up," suggested Dash, trying to step around Sam.

"You will be doing no such thing," said Dr Iceclaw. Dash started as the ghost drew himself to his full height.
"Um, Danny," said Mia, hesitantly, "you're saying that we have obsessions? Like ghosts?"

"No, not really. It's more like, um, you're all a step or two closer to ghosts that normal humans are. It's called liminality. It's not- You're not dying, or anything like that. It isn't harmful, these two just aren't dealing with it in a healthy way. It can actually be really helpful in some situations, like, here, in the Ghost Zone. I think- I think that I explained to some of you before, how humans can manipulate ectoplasm to some degree? Well, that gets easier when you're liminal, because you already have ectoplasm in you, and working for you. You have experience with it, even if you don't know it. Then, because you have a bit of the other perspective, of, um, a ghostly perspective, it's easier to work with some of the Zone's weirder rules. Like, earlier, Valerie, you asked me how I was walking on the side of the ship? That's how. I just shifted my perspective, so that was down for me."

The blank stares that Danny was getting told him that he hadn't been as clear as he wanted to be.

"Jazz, help."

"Alright. You have all had health at this point, correct? Do you remember the lessons about hormones? Think of ectoplasm as a kind of hormone in this situation. Your bodies are trying to adapt to it. It would have happened back home anyway, but it is happening faster here, and in a more stressful environment. Just like with puberty, though, you have to learn to live with the changes in a healthy way. I didn't take into account how the environment, both the higher ectoplasm levels and the stress, would affect the process until, well, just now."

"Were you ever going to tell us?" asked Star, angrily.

"Honestly, no," said Jazz. "Not unless it became an issue or a ghost brought it up. The effect is typically a lot more subtle than Danny made it sound. He and I are more affected because we grew up in a high-ectoplasm environment. You guys never encountered tangible ectoplasm until high school. Our house is full of the stuff. We've both accidentally eaten some, more than once. You all know what our parents are like. For me, it manifests in my schoolwork, and my interest in psychology."

"And with how you always have to be right, and with being an adult."

"Thank you, Danny, but I think that I've managed to get over those."

"What about Danny?" asked Nathan.

"If you had ever seen his room," said Tucker, "you wouldn't be asking that."

"Space," said Danny. "I've got the whole sky mapped out on my ceiling." He sighed. His next sentences would be much less true. He didn't like lying, but he still didn't trust his class with his real secret. "Originally, anyway. But after the ghosts started coming, I started to get really anxious about safety, and that's one of the reasons I got involved with Phantom, I guess. After that, well, I spread out in a bunch of different directions. It makes it easier to handle." He paused. "But, none of you ever noticed, before this? I mean, even if you take away the ghosts, even if you look at before the ghosts, Amity Park wasn't exactly normal. Like, take these two," he gestured at Sam and Tucker, "and the meat versus vegetarianism thing. Back in freshman year, they both organized elaborate protests in a single night. That really shouldn't have been possible. No matter how gross the turfwiches were, getting so many people so passionate about a week-long experimental school menu so quickly isn't something that would have happened anywhere else. I guess it took me a while to realize, too, because Amity Park is normal for me, but it isn't like we live on an island. If you watch the news, or TV shows, or read, you see that most people are kind of apathetic, comparatively."
"I knew it!" exclaimed Hannah.

"That does make a lot of sense," said Sarah, "but, Hannah, you said that it was because the government was dumping psychoactive chemicals into the water supply."

"Eh, close enough."
Chapter 93

Chapter 93: From the Hammock

This was not going quite as badly as Danny had feared, but it also wasn't going as well as Danny had hoped.

Dash was looking uncertain, now, but Dale had taken his place as the chief aggressor, and Dale was... Danny had a habit of apologizing for or explaining away the behavior of his people. He liked focusing on their positive features.

Dash had a number of those. He was a leader, he was loyal to his friends, he was a team player, and, while this next was hypocritical at best, had, in the past, protected Casper High students from bullies hailing from other schools.

Dale had fewer. He acted as a sidekick for Dash, most of the time, but he was a lot meaner, and he only acted in concert with others when it benefited him directly and immediately. That didn't mean that he didn't have any positive features; he cared deeply for his younger siblings, and his cousins, but it was hard to see that right now, especially in the face of what was evolving to be a rather blatant display of sexism.

Danny was considering taking a leaf from Sam's book and throwing a shoe at him. Sam was barely restraining herself. Jazz had gone very pale. The other girls of the class had pulled back with curled lips. Most of the boys were listening with slightly opened mouths. Mr Lancer's eyes had gone huge, and he seemed to have lost his voice.

"Okay," said Danny, after a particularly vile insult sent in Jazz's direction. "That's enough." There was no call for that, for any of this. Jazz had just been trying to reason with him, she had just been trying to make it easier for him to understand.

"What, you're finally done letting girls fight your battles for you, Fenton?"

Danny smiled pleasantly. "Dale, you're an idiot for even asking that question. I'm going to remind you, again, that both Jazz and Sam could destroy you. Whether I let them fight my battles is moot. I'm certainly going to let them fight their battles."

Dale's eyes narrowed in incomprehension. "What?"

"Ancients preserve us," said Danny. "Look, you aren't going to win this battle. Heck, Tucker could probably beat you."

"I resent both that you brought me into this discussion, and that your phrasing implies that I'm the least capable of fighting out of all of us."

"But, you are."

"Yeah, but you don't have to say it. And I think that right now, you're the least capable of fighting."

Danny grinned lazily. "Wanna bet?"

"No," interrupted Dr Iceclaw.
Danny sighed, and adjusted his position. "Are you done yet, doctor?"

"I was waiting to ask you if you mind me making you a splint."

"No, of course not," said Danny.

"Stop ignoring me!" said Dale.

"Hey, Dash, I bet that someone has a football somewhere, or even a hacky-sack, and the deck is big enough. You should just try to relax."

"Relax? After that attack?"

"Why not? It happens all the time back home. I guess the real problem is that mast."

"I said, stop ignoring me!" Dale yelled, frustrated. He tried to push by Sam, who flipped him onto the floor. "What."

"Danny warned you," said Sam.

"Seriously," said Danny, closing his eyes as Dr Iceclaw started forming an icy splint around, "Dale, even freaking out about getting home would be more productive. Find something else to do."

Clockwork was tired.

This was a feat. An impressive feat. Clockwork was the Master of Time. He had done things that were much more difficult. He was a ghost. He had no need to sleep.

"One more time, Lobo," said Themis. "How does your client know Phantom? I don't want an account of his entire day up until meeting him, just the meeting itself."

"I'm only trying to give you the context, My Lady."

Themis drummed her fingers on the table expectantly.

The advocate sighed, and then said, "He once gave Phantom directions to a lavatory when he was visiting Albion."

"Hemlock," said Themis, bored.

Hemlock stood. "My client has never been to Albion." He sat.

"Lord Clockwork, can you confirm?"

Clockwork nodded to his own advocate, a three-eyed blue-skinned man of indeterminate age that he had known and tolerated for many years, and stood to speak for himself. "My grandson has never been to Albion, Lady Themis."

Themis nodded. "All of you who are representing clients who are citizens of Albion, come forward." After a moment of hesitation, ten ghosts floated forward. "Which of the Albionese monarchs employ
"your clients?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Then, "My client has authorized me to inform you that he was coerced by the sixth King of Albion via a threat to his primary Obsession in the form of his bookstore." The other advocates booed the one who spoke.

"Astraea."

"I have already recorded it, honored grandmother."

"Good." She tilted her head. "You are all from the firm of Bloodroot and Larkspur?" Her lips thinned as no one disputed the claim. "Having heard all of your cases, the firm of Bloodroot and Larkspur are hereby banned from this and all cases sponsored by Libra for the next year and a day for advancing false claims of standing. Furthermore, you may inform your clients of my decision that none of them have standing in this case. Goodbye."

The advocates grumbled as they filed out. The year ban was really just a slap on the wrist, one that Bloodroot and Larkspur had incurred many times. Not only that, but they weren't even the first firm to be given that penalty this trial.

The number of ghosts in room had been reduced by a third. Good progress, overall. However, it would likely be over a week before they had processed everyone, and weeded out the more elaborate falsehoods and even simple cases of honest, but inappropriate claims. A person who, for example, saw Daniel regularly in one location or another, and liked him, but did not often speak to him, may wish to make an argument against those who had attacked him, but would not necessarily have the required relationship with Daniel to have standing in the trial.

This, the weeding out of those without proper standing, always seemed to drag on interminably. Clockwork would suggest a different method, but honestly couldn't think of one that would be agreed upon. He was the Master of Time, not a legal specialist, despite his mastery of loopholes, nor was he much of a diplomat. In fact, with a few exceptions, he was intensely asocial.

Dr Iceclaw carried Danny to his hammock, and gave him instructions to stay there until assistance and transport arrived from Elysium.

(The ship was no longer moving, the loss of the mast stopping it dead in the sky.)

Danny grumbled and huffed. He wasn't pleased to be restricted to the hammock. He didn't like being stuck. Although he wasn't as much of a free spirit as Ellie and was firmly tied to Amity Park and its people, he liked to retain what freedoms he had.

Still, Dr Iceclaw intimidated him somewhat, especially with his talk of how Danny could permanently damage his ankle with this. So Danny curled up in his blankets, turning himself into a burrito, hugged his stuffed animal (he still wasn't sure what animal it was supposed to be), and sulked. Maybe he could at least get some sleep out of all this.

"You know," said Sam, sitting on her own hammock, "this isn't going to stay quiet. Once we get back home, this will spread like wildfire. Or the plague. Or something else unpleasant."
"Bad news?" suggested Tucker.

"For a lot of people it is bad news," said Jazz.

"Yeah," grumbled Danny. He looked over his shoulder, to where the rest of the class, including Mr Lancer, had gathered by the stair. He sighed. He wasn't going to get any sleep. "Look," he said waving a hand, "I get that you guys have questions. Come on over."

The class trooped over, some hesitant, some belligerent. Dale in particular had a foul expression on his face. But he also looked pensive. Like he was thinking. Hopefully, he was thinking, and not working himself into a mood or frenzy.

"Um, Jazz," said Star, "what do you mean bad news? Danny made it sound like it was, um, just a thing."

"Not everyone will take it that way," said Jazz, glancing at Dale. The boy opened his mouth, but was silenced by a glare from Sam.

"Like the Guys in White?" asked Star.

Danny inhaled sharply, and tried to sit up, but Sam pushed him back down. He hadn't been thinking about them in relation to the news of liminality.

"Heck!" he exclaimed.

"Danny?" said Mia. "What's wr-"

"The Guys in White! I wasn't- Heck! You can't tell anyone about liminality!"

"You aren't the boss of us, Fentoenail!" said Dash.

"No, I'm not, but, look, if the Guys in White or other ectologists find out that people in Amity are liminal, they'll! I don't know. A lot of them, most of them, are completely unethical. They don't believe that ghosts are sentient, they don't believe that ghosts have feelings, and the Anti-Ecto Acts mean that they can act on that."

"The what?" asked Mikey.

"The Anti-Ecto Acts."

"I've got them on here," said Tucker. "Digital version and all, if any of you are interested."

"They say that any animate thing with more than a certain amount of ectoplasm in it-"

"-or that produces ectoplasm in any amount." inserted Tucker.

"-counts as a ghost. That means liminals."

"But- But we're human," protested Sarah.

"Doesn't matter," said Tucker, searching his PDA for the Anti-Ecto Acts. "During the Summer that didn't happen, they chased us across the country when Danny got outed. Tried to kill me and Sam a couple of times, too."

"I knew it!" said Hannah.
"The 'Summer that didn't happen?'"

"Long story, Ricky. Long, long story." One that nobody here needed to know the details of. "But the basics are that a lunatic, an official lunatic, by the way, he was diagnosed with all sorts of mental problems, who hated Phantom and I broke out of prison, stole a ghost artifact that has since been destroyed, used it to try to take over the world, but lost pieces of it, outed me as liminal and kidnapped my family, Tucker's family, and Sam's family to force us to find the pieces."

"Forced you by...?" Mia trailed off, hesitant.

"By threatening to kill them. Pretty basic evil jerk stuff, to be honest. While that was going on, we were being chased by the Guys in White who wanted to dissect me. Or vivisect me. I was never entirely sure on that point. They were pretty vocal about it, too. Anyway, we managed to get control of the artifact, eventually, and used it to make it so that none of it had ever happened. Then we destroyed the artifact."

"You destroyed something that could let you rule the world?" asked Paulina.

"Why are you emphasizing 'you'?" asked Sam. "Is it really that hard to believe?"

"Yes," said Paulina, bluntly.

"Well, technically it was Phantom who started in on it," said Danny, "but we all broke out the hammers after he did the initial exploding. We didn't want anything to be left behind. Anyway, the point here is that if you don't want to get dissected, vivisected, or both, by crazy government scientists, don't go spreading this around."

Dash scoffed, but looked unsettled. "You're just trying to scare us."

"Nope. You'd know if I were trying to scare you. If anything, I'm just repaying a favor."

"What?" asked the blond boy, his eyebrows knitting together.

"The reason that Sam, Tuck, and I were able to get away when I was first outed was because you guys, all of you, helped us. That's how we know, we know, that you can do better than this, that you can handle this situation, that you can handle liminality. Actually," Danny said, adjusting himself in the hammock, "forget handling it. Forget dealing with it. Embrace it. Like I said, it isn't a bad thing."

"Right," said Rebecca, crossing her arms. "And you've embraced this... thing?"

Danny shrugged. "It took me a while," he admitted. "But, yes. I know that this is a massive," he waved his hands in the air, "revelation that I've just dropped on you out of nowhere," he brought his hands down, "but compared to the other stuff you've gone through in the last few days, is it really that bad? I mean, being liminal isn't going to kill you."

"Unless you tell a Guy in White," added Tucker.

"Being liminal, in and of itself, isn't going to kill you," rephrased Danny.

"Really," said Jazz. "all it does is make you more like yourself, more intensely yourself. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," said Sam, "but the thing is that both good and bad traits and interests are magnified, so you have to watch out for the bad ones getting away from you. Like, I've always been... pushy, but after I started coming here, I started to get really pushy, and about doing things that could be dangerous,
and I had to notice that before I could keep myself from doing it, which wasn't easy. It took a giant, stupid, fight with Danny for me to realize it."

"I was at fault for that, too," said Danny.

"You were the one with the legitimate grievance, though. I was just angry because you weren't doing everything I said."

"I had to work through that kind of thing, too," mumbled Tucker.

Danny was frowning now, because he hadn't thought that it was that bad. Nothing that had happened was really their fault. If anything, Desiree was to blame both times... If they were talking about what Danny thought that they were talking about, which they might not be. Then again, Danny's perspective on the whole thing was skewed. He was a ghost. Obsession was hardwired into his core, and, at this point, probably into his brain as well.

"So," said Mikey, slowly, "you said that there were good parts to this?"

"Yeah? Well, passion, being passionate, those are good things, aren't they?" asked Danny. "Clear goals, a purpose..." He trailed off. "No?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of superpowers," said Mikey.

"Oh. Yeah. Um. Not really superpowers. Just the whole, ectoplasm and Ghost Zone rules are easier to manipulate. You might wind up with some abilities, but you'd need to practice, like, a lot."

Mikey licked his lips. "Like those kids in Harmony? They didn't really show us outright, but... They did things, when they thought that no one, none of the adults, anyway, was looking. Especially the little ones. I think they assumed that we could, too."

"They did?" asked Danny, surprised.

"They what?" exclaimed Valerie, her eye twitching. Apparently this was too much for her, but...

"Valerie, you know that your suit only works for you because you're liminal, right? I mean, you got it from a ghost in the first place. I don't know the details, but, seriously, where do you think it goes when you're not using it?"

Valerie took a long, shuddering breath. "I- That's not- That's not the same."

"It is, though," said Danny. "It's in you, part of you. It's made of ectoplasm. You know it's made of ectoplasm. You have to."

"No, none of this makes sense," said Valerie. "If they were ectoplasm, they'd show up on my scanner. If this liminality stuff were true, my scanners would pick up all of you."

"Scanners like that have lower detection thresholds built in," said Jazz. "It's so that they don't pick up themselves, and ectoweapons, and stuff like that. Your detection thresholds are probably higher than our parents' detectors, too, due to the provenance of your suit."

"Provenance?"

"Well, what else should I call it?" asked Jazz, shrugging at her brother.

"Origin, maybe?" suggested Danny.
"How are you okay with this?" demanded Valerie. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

Danny tilted his head, trying to figure out what he could say that would help Valerie. "Danielle," he said finally.

He didn't expect such a wide reaction, such a number of gasps, mutters, and exclamations, from the other students.

"What?" he asked in trepidation, resisting the urge to hide behind his blankets.

"You know Phantom's sister, too?" asked Paulina, jealousy boiling off of her, almost literally. Danny could feel the emotion, thick and heavy in the air. He was almost grateful.

Danny had been expecting Danielle to be a reference that only Valerie would get. Paulina's question was an amazing distraction. "Yes? I mean, we're friends, Phantom and I, so..." He shrugged. "He knows Jazz. It shouldn't surprise you that much."

"So, what," said Hannah, "you're going out with her, or something?"

Danny blanched, both from the disturbing mental image, and from the tripling of the jealousy in the room. That couldn't all be coming from Paulina. Could it? What the heck had Ellie been doing to them? On the other hand, Ellie was apparently healthy, and had been with his classmates long enough to leave an impression and a name with them. That meant that he would likely be seeing her soon. Yay! He loved seeing Ellie.

"No," he said. "Gosh, no. We're like- she's like- She's a friend. Just a friend. It would be like dating Jazz. That's gross. Super gross. No. Nope." He pulled his blanket over his head. "I'm done!" he said, voice muffled. "I'm done! That's too gross. Go away."
Chapter 94

Chapter 94: Bow

Hiding under the blankets and refusing to answer questions proved to be surprisingly effective, especially once the two adults, Dr Iceclaw and Mr Lancer, weighed in, and swept the others away. He felt a little guilty about all the turmoil he had caused, but he had covered all of the most important parts of liminality. They would be fine. Eventually.

Once he was sure they were gone, Danny poked his head out of his blanket burrito.

"Wow," said Sam, "that was brave."

"Hmph," said Danny, sticking out his tongue. Then, "It worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah," said Sam. She stretched. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine," said Danny. "I think I'm going to try to take a nap. Will one of you wake me once the Elysian rescue crew come into sight?"

"No problem," said Tucker. He looked down the hull. "They're lurking," he said.

"I'll make sure that no one jumps him," said Jazz. "You two go up, get some fresh air, don't worry." She waved them off.

Danny stirred blearily as a cold weight settled around his shoulders. He blinked, a blurry blue and purple image swimming before his eyes. "Grandfather?"

"I am sorry I've been away," said Clockwork. "The initial committee has been dragging on."

"'Sokay," said Danny, drifting back to sleep.

Danny next woke to Jazz prodding him lightly. He groaned, and sat up. "They're here?" he rasped. His eyes were sore, and full of sand, and he had a trail of dried drool down the side of his face. He rubbed at it.

"Not exactly 'here' yet, but we can see them," said Sam. "You should wash up," she continued.

"Yeah," said Danny, "I should do a lot of things." He glared at his injured foot. "You guys have a brush?"
"Here," said Jazz, producing one from... Somewhere. Danny thought that he was supposed to be the only one here with access to a bizarre dimensional pocket.

"Was Clockwork here earlier?" he asked, taking the brush, and running it halfheartedly through his hair.

"Not that I noticed," said Jazz.

"Okay," said Danny, frowning at his foot again. "I think I'm going to need help getting to the head. Maybe one of you could get Dr Iceclaw?"

Once Danny had reached the minimum level of hygiene necessary to meet the Elysians coming to rescue him and his classmates from their becalmed ship, he asked to be brought out on deck. He had to ask because he really, truly, couldn't walk. It hurt too much. The ankle wouldn't take any weight, and it had swelled horribly. He shouldn't have left the wheelchair behind, not that it would have been much use here on the ship.

Dr Iceclaw had been reluctant to bring him out at all. He was convinced that Danny would do something stupid again. That was reasonable. Danny was essentially certain that he would do something stupid again. It was almost a basic character trait of his. The question was when, and exactly how stupid it would be.

Although, that might just be the pain talking, or the stress, or any of a number of other things.

Danny sighed, and resettled himself in Dr Iceclaw's arms, bracing himself as the ghost went up the stairs. He was still half-wrapped in blankets, another requirement of the doctor's.

He was then placed, carefully, on a bench that had been prepared with blankets and pillows by Sam and Jazz. Dr Iceclaw then propped his leg up, and Sam and Tucker wedged themselves on either side of him.

"It's just a sprained ankle," protested Danny. "I still have a sense of balance. I'm not going to spontaneously fall over."

"You want us to move?" asked Sam, raising an eyebrow.

"No," said Danny, leaning into her.

Tucker threw an arm around Danny's shoulders. "Don't worry, dude. All of these guys are really laid back. No one will care."

"Not worried about the ghosts," mumbled Danny. He wasn't sure how to articulate what he was worried about. He was just... worried. He looked at Dr Iceclaw. "I am healing, at least, right?"

"You are, indeed, Young One."

(Danny had managed to convince Dr Iceclaw not to call Danny 'Great One' in front of the humans. This was the compromise.)
Okay," said Danny, quietly. He looked away, out towards Elysium. There were several long, narrow ships making their way to the becalmed Glaciinsulo. They wouldn't be too long, now.

He kept his eyes on the ships, the galleys, really, trying to see if he could identify anyone on the decks. Meanwhile, he, Jazz, Sam, and Tucker made easy conversation under the watchful eye of Dr Iceclaw.

"Is that Aglaea Charis?" asked Danny, breaking from the pattern of the casual conversation.

"Your eyes are better than ours," said Sam.

"I know, I just have trouble with names, sometimes," said Danny.

"No you don't," said Tucker.

"Yes, I do. At least with the Aglaeas. There are, like, six of them. I'm pretty sure she's an Aglaea, but which one?"

"Aglaea Charis is the prettier one, right?" asked Tucker.

Sam reached across Danny to prod Tucker. "Is that all you think about?"

"Give me a break, Sam," said Tucker, prodding her back. "How else should I distinguish between them all? I think I only ever met three, anyway."

"Come on, guys, seriously," said Danny.

"I believe that Aglaea Aeclepiada is a doctor," said Dr Iceclaw. "I have corresponded with her in the past. She would likely be wearing a doctor's coat, or carrying a staff."

"Oh, yeah. That would be Aglaea Aeclepiada, then. Yup. And..." He frowned. "I think that Pandora put this expedition together just to mess with people."

"Why would Lady Pandora do that?" asked Dr Iceclaw, confused.

"I don't know," said Danny, "but all six Aglaeas are in that fleet. Can you not see, or..? You haven't met them. Sorry, silly question."

"Ah, it is not silly, Young One. I have not met them, but I also do not have eyes as sharp as yours."

"Really?"

"Truly."

"Huh," said Danny, filing that information away for later. "Anyway, I see Admirals Stheno and Euryale, and... Empusa, with the red hair. I wonder if she got that prosthetic she wanted yet. Then there are the other Charises, jeez, all of them, I can't even name them all, on the third boat with their sister. Gosh, there are a lot of people. I don't know more than a tenth of them. I hope they have enough room to bring us back with them."

"I was wondering why there are six boats," said Sam. "Seems a bit much for, what is it, twenty people?"

"Twenty-two," corrected Tucker. "You forgot to count Dr Iceclaw and Mr Lancer."

Sam shrugged. "I wasn't really counting," she said, "just estimating. But we could all fit on one of
"Probably," said Danny. "It would be a tight squeeze, though, if it was fully crewed. They aren't. It looks like they're self-propelled. Ghost ships."

"Yeah," agreed Sam.

Valerie glared at the ghosts who flitted from the long boats to the ship that she and her classmates had been traveling on. She didn't trust them. She hadn't trusted the other ghosts, the ones who called themselves Libra, either. But she hadn't any choice except to follow their instructions.

When boarding the ship, she had hoped for a chance to escape, to perhaps mutiny, and take control of the ship. But the ship steered itself, and none of her classmates seemed interested in an escape- and Valerie was not going to leave them behind, at the mercy of ghosts, no matter how cruel and stupid they could be. No matter why they were cruel and stupid. She wasn't a ghost. Neither were they. Even if some of them were deluded beyond belief.

She was avoiding thinking about the 'liminality' bombshell Danny had dropped. She was trying really hard to avoid thinking about it.

It just didn't make sense. But it did. It did. It made a horrible amount of sense. There was ghost stuff in her. Of course that would have consequences, and she had been too blind to see that.

Then, there was Danielle. Danielle, who was liminal, too, apparently. Is this, this slow corruption, what had happened to Danielle? Had she slowly grown more and more ghostly, until she was so contaminated that she began to melt? Had she, too, become trapped in the Ghost Zone? Is that why she had such a connection, such an attachment to Phantom? Had he 'helped' her, too? How much longer would it be until Valerie herself began to glow, to float, to change?

What about Danny?

Then, another set of questions, one she had been considering more and more these past few days. What was Phantom? Was he liminal? Was he some kind of alternate universe Danny, as Jazz had suggested? Was he a copy of Danny, as the elder Fentons had suggested? How was Danielle connected to Danny?

Over the last hour, she had formed the tentative theory that Danielle was a girl that Phantom had kidnapped, like the Harmonians, and brought to the Ghost Zone, possibly to his lair, and kept there until she had changed. In this theory, she had been chosen based on her resemblance to Danny.

Except... That didn't exactly mesh with Phantom's standard 'heroic' behavior. It didn't fit with his rather brash, plan on the fly personality, either. Danielle was smarter than to fall for that, anyway.

She was distressingly short on answers.

Could Danielle actually be Danny's cousin? Or maybe... Was this thing, liminality, genetic, as well as environmental? In that case, it was possible that she and the Fentons had inherited their weirdness from the same source.
That didn't make sense either. She was, clearly, more 'liminal' than Danny, or any of the other Fentons.

This whole thing made her brain hurt, and all the colorful ghosts coming aboard didn't help.

They were strange, these ghosts. Valerie was used to seeing ghosts with inhuman skin colors, and extreme body plans. She had become familiar with the four-armed design that these Greek ghosts seemed to like when she and the others had been questioned by Libra. Still, These ghosts were unusual. Most of them were women, many little older than Valerie herself in appearance. Some were beautiful. Too beautiful. Others were hideous. There were few, very few, in the middle ground. Many looked almost human, extra limbs aside. Others looked anything but. Valerie saw horns, leaves bound in hair, ghostly tails covered in brass armor, or allowed to flow away as mist. She saw hair of fire, and skin covered in scales. Many of the ghosts looked like they had stepped out of classical mythology. Some had clothing to match. Others wore more modern garb.

But they somehow made up a coherent whole. They... worked together, for lack of a better term. They all looked similar. Not the same, no. But like they had been rendered in the same style.

It was a little like looking at a crowd of people in a video on the travel channel. Somehow, you could pick out the people who belonged from the people who were visiting. At least, Valerie had always fancied that she had that skill. She could do it to tourists in Amity Park with a high degree of accuracy, in any case.

Then a tall, blue-skinned ghost began to float over from the largest narrow boat. Valerie tracked her. She was clearly important, what with the gold and black armor and dress, and the impressive spear. She also matched Danny's description of the Elysian ghosts' queen, Pandora, with her red eyes and fiery pink hair.

Valerie frowned. Danny had told Valerie and the rest of the class to bow to Pandora. He had also told them a lot of other etiquette related stuff. She didn't remember half of it. Or a quarter of it. She remembered, maybe, an eighth of it, most of that eighth being comprised of how to bow.

The thought of bowing to a ghost left a bad taste in her mouth. Dying because she hadn't bothered to listen to Danny (because she had thought that she would have escaped and gotten home at this point) would leave a worse taste.

She stepped away from the dubious shelter of the door to below, joining the loose congregation of students in the center of the deck. This way, she would be at the center of any action that erupted.

A movement in of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned, and saw Jazz, Sam, and Tucker standing, their hands clasped behind their backs, their eyes on the blue-skinned ghost. The white-furred ghost stood next to them, with the same stance. This caused a ripple in the students who stood near them. Several tried to mimic their position.

Now that Valerie was looking, she saw that the ghosts who had touched down on the deck had assumed the same position. Shoot. This was how they were supposed to stand before bowing. Valerie quickly mirrored the position. This felt weird. Military, almost. It didn't feel Greek. But what did Valerie know? Besides, these were ghosts, and it had been a long time since the heyday of Ancient Greece.

When Pandora touched down on the deck, all of the other ghosts began to bow. Most of them dropped to their knees or tails, but others just bent at the waist, and a few seemed to get away with only a nod. How were Valerie and the others supposed to bow again? She shot a quick glance back at Danny's friends. They were still standing. She was pretty sure that they weren't supposed to be
standing. They were no help.

Well, most of the ghosts were kneeling, and it looked like some of the others, Mr Lancer, Sarah, Hannah, and Star included, were going the kneeling route, so...

Valerie knelt.

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Danny sighed in relief. It looked like his classmates did remember their etiquette lessons. Some of them, anyway. They'd all managed to bow before their hesitation became insultingly long. Pandora would have let it slide, but some of her courtiers were decidedly less generous.

Pandora walked to Danny, smiling, gesturing for those that she passed to rise.

"I am glad to see that you have begun to recover, Daniel," she said in Elysian Greek.

"As am I," said Danny, trying to stay in the formal mode. "Please forgive me for not rising to great you, Queen Pandora."

"Nonsense," said Pandora. "There is nothing to forgive. I rather thought that this would happen, and I have prepared for it."

"Prepared?" asked Danny, confused. "Prepared how?"

Pandora smirked. She actually smirked. Oh, no, this couldn't be good. She then took a step back, sweeping a hand behind her to indicate the latest item coming from the ship.

"Is that a palanquin?" asked Danny, with some horror.

"Yes," said Pandora.

"No," said Danny.

"Yes," said Dr Iceclaw.

Danny got on the palanquin.
Chapter 95

Chapter 95: Magenta

It would be unfair to call the scene that awaited them in Elysium chaos. Someone had clearly put a lot of effort into organizing all the various spectators, photographers, journalists, cameramen, nobles, and foreign dignitaries, but the effect was, well, it looked chaotic. Especially with all of the colors, all of the variety, all of the noise.

It was a bit intimidating, really.

Danny was initially confused as to why they were all there, but then he remembered, oh, yeah, biggest trial in ages. Right. He and his classmates were the biggest and best reality show in the Zone.

Thankfully, they didn't spend much time in the streets outside Pandora's palace. They were quickly ushered inside, and lead to rooms where they were given Elysian clothing and other accouterments.

Then they were brought to a great, vaulted eating hall. Danny and his friends were brought to the place of honor at the high table. His other classmates, to his relief, were scattered around the hall with responsible minders.

The tables were stocked with foods from dozens of Greek cultures, from ancient sitos and opson, to modern gyros. There were also foods that had only ever been served in the Ghost Zone. Keik pyrkagias, prasini soupa aimatos, and Stygian pomegranate were staples here. As was wine. Lots and lots of wine. He had forgotten about the wine.

Danny hoped his classmates remembered not to eat anything that glowed.

He sighed, and snuggled into Sam's side. He took up most of the bench with his sprained ankle, but there was just enough room for Sam to be his support.

"Dude, are you trying to push me off?" complained Sam, trying to shove a piece of bread topped with vegetable opson into Danny's mouth. Danny let her.

"No," he mumbled around the bread. "You're comfortable."

"Lovebirds," sang Tucker.

"You know that the only reason that I'm not hitting you with something is that we're at the grown-ups table."

"Um, Sam, this isn't actually-"

"I know, Jazz. It was a metaphor." Sam made a face. "Sorry, I don't mean to snap, I guess I'm just tired."

"Then you should try this," said Pandora, passing Sam a cup.

"Ooh, thanks," said Sam. "Mhm. I can smell the caffeine. It isn't coffee, though. What is it?"

Sam and Pandora then got into a conversation about the various medicinal plants that grew in the Zone. So Sam was happy. That was good. Danny hummed.
Strangely enough, no one was approaching him. He usually got at least a few people trying to strike up a conversation with him when he visited. Either he looked a lot more pathetic than he thought, or Pandora had warned everyone off.

He would have to thank Pandora. Maybe once she finished her conversation with Sam.

Or maybe not. He saw several Egyptian representatives coming his way. He frowned faintly. They weren't from the Feathers. They weren't wearing Ma'at's symbol. He hadn't ever had much contact with the other Egyptians, unless you counted just a few days ago at Duat Hospital. Maybe these guys were from the hospital. It would explain why they looked familiar.

Actually, wait. They weren't looking at him. They were looking at Tucker. Egyptians. Looking at Tucker. Ooh. He had been wondering if something like this would happen. Well, not *actively* wondering, not with everything else that was going on. It was just something, a thought, that had been hanging out in the back of his brain for the last couple of years.


"Wha?" said Tucker, a sausage halfway in his mouth.

"Do those guys look familiar to you?" he asked. "The Egyptians? I mean, um, the ones with the bandages, and the jackals? They are jackals, right?"

Tucker looked over, and blanched, almost choking on his sausage. "Yeah," he said hoarsely, once he had managed to swallow. "They're jackals. They're, ah, jeez, Danny." He glared at Danny. "You know perfectly well that they look familiar to me. What should I do?"

"What's wrong?" asked Sam.

"I don't think anything is wrong," said Danny, watching the Egyptians approach. The gray-coated jackals were really rather elegant. "It isn't like Pandora would let anything bad happen here, and no one wants to start a war. Just relax."

"What if they want to kill me?"

"No one wants to kill you, Tuck."

"I don't know about that," said Sam, playfully.

"Oh," said Pandora, leaning over. "Those five have been looking forward to meeting you for a while now, since just after the last time you three visited, in fact. They most certainly do not want to kill you, Tucker."

"Right. So what do they want?" hissed Tucker, leaning over so that he was half balanced on Danny's bench. The Egyptians were now close enough that they might be in earshot.

"Probably something to do with your lookalike," said Danny, pulling a bunch of grapes from the table. "Seeing as they're from Duulaman's country. Kingdom? Kingdom."

Then the Egyptians crossed all but the last couple of meters between them and the high table, and came to a halt. The three jackals laid down, and the mummies knelt.

"Great king," said the one on the left. "We greet you on behalf of your kingdom, on behalf of your people."
"Um," said Tucker. "Okay?"

Then the one on the right began to speak. "We rejoice that you have returned to the countries of Day and Night, after so many years," intoned the other one. "We pray that you shall see your kingdom again, and lead us to a new glory."

"I, um," said Tucker, flustered. "I- You know, I'm really flattered, because I am the best, but you do realize that I'm not actually Duulaman, right? I just look like him."

The two ghosts exchanged glances. "You were cursed, to be unable to enter the Aaru or the Houses of the Night until you lived twice," said the one.

"Remember, oh great king, your people. We have waited for you. We can wait longer," said the other, his eyes burning with green fire. "We are not traitors, like Hotep-Ra."

"We pray that you will remember us," repeated the first. "But we will wait." All five of the Egyptians rose, and backed away.

"Well," said Tucker, voice strained, "that wasn't eerie at all."

Dr Iceclaw presented Danny with a pair of crutches and Danny beamed. After being dependent on other people carrying him around for the last several hours, he was ready to do just about anything to have independent mobility again, even if it was something that he would otherwise consider somewhat, well, annoying.

"Thank you!" he said, ecstatic, situating the crutches under his armpits, and swinging out of his seat.

"Alright!"

"Be careful, Great One," said Dr Iceclaw. "You don't want to jostle that ankle, and your shoulders are not entirely healed yet. They won't take much of that before you must rest."

"I know," said Danny, cheerfully, balancing himself. "I'll be careful." He sat back down in the chair. "I'm not going to be running around anymore today, either. Gosh, I'm exhausted." He tipped his chair back until Jazz gently pushed it back onto four legs.

"Let's not add a head injury to your list, okay?" she said.

"You mean another head injury," said Danny. "Wow. That sounded funnier in my head. I must be really tired."

"I don't know why," said Tucker, tapping slowly on his PDA. He yawned. "You had that nap right before we got here."

"Yeah, right after he fought a giant ghost whale," said Sam. "Thanks for not letting Valerie kill it, by the way."

"Wasn't really a 'let' thing, to be honest," said Danny, making a face. "Um," said Danny, turning towards Pandora, "do we have the same room as usual?" he asked.

"All bundled together in the same bed?" asked Dr Iceclaw, archly. "Not with that ankle. All it will
take is one of you rolling the wrong way, and you will be damaged even more. Besides, I need to set up a sling, so that you do not roll over onto it yourself."

"I have arranged for separate rooms to be prepared," said Pandora. "Don't worry, you will all be nearby one another."

Danny sighed, deflating. "Okay," he said. "I guess that's fair. Where am I?"

"The usual room," said Pandora.

"Wait, but, um. Oh. These guys are the ones in the other rooms. Okay. But shouldn't the girls-?"

"We'll be fine," said Sam. "Pandora has enough beds for everyone. Be comfortable in the bed that you're used to."

"It isn't the usual room for me, anyway," said Jazz. "I don't really come here very often."

"Right," said Danny, tilting his head. "You know, you do fit in really well here. I wouldn't think that this was your first long term visit. Right?" he twisted slightly to look up at Pandora and Dr Iceclaw.

"You are doing very well, Jasmine," said Pandora, encouragingly. "You all do well." She paused, two of her hands on her hips, the other two crossed. "There are some colleges here. You should take a look while you are here."

"I don't know..." said Jazz.

Danny yawned hugely. "I've gotta sleep now, guys... I'm sorry."

"Yeah, we're tired, too," said Jazz. "We can talk about this tomorrow, right?"

"That will be fine," said Pandora, warmly, patting both Danny and Jazz on the shoulder.

Danny swung back onto his one foot and crutches, and started for the door. He knew where he was going. His friends walked with him, none of them really talking. Danny was glad. He was far too tired right now.

Dr Iceclaw then spent several minutes fine-tuning the sling he had set up over the voluminous bed of the trio's preferred guestroom. Danny, meanwhile, spent the time trying to get comfortable. Jazz, Sam, and Tucker took advantage of his relative immobility to poke him with pillows, throw blankets at him, and generally fool around to Danny's sleepy delight, Pandora's restrained amusement, and Dr Iceclaw's frustration.

Finally, however, Danny got tucked in, pillows piled around him for support, and was left alone. Even the wisps chose to flit off, jingling something about exploring while Danny slept, and about how they had heard that humans liked to sleep in the darkness. Bless them, trying to be so solicitous, so careful of him. He really didn't mind the wisps' faint glow. He actually liked it. It was comforting, like nightlights, like starlight and moonshine.

For a long while, Danny was content to drift on the edge of sleep, aware of the room around him, but only vaguely. Fragments of dreams buoyed him up, geometric clouds, images and sensations, the feeling of being just about to hear a story, to have an answer, to be held closely.

But then a feeling of uneasiness overcame him, and hooked him out of those half-formed dreams, giving him the uncomfortable impression of not having slept at all, his bedclothes bunched uncomfortably under the small of his back, his blankets, pillow, sling no longer cradling him, but
constraining him. The vastness, the emptiness of the bed felt suffocating and exposing in equal measure. He tried to shift into a more comfortable position, but no matter how he laid himself among the pillows, he couldn't quite recapture sleep. Nor could he shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Being who, and what, he was, he couldn't ignore that, even though there was an insistent, tired, voice that told him that he should, that Pandora and her people would take care of it, that they wouldn't appreciate him poking his nose into things.

His core twinged, momentarily more painful than his ankle, or any other part of his body. Danny briefly wondered if his painkillers had worn off, but Dr Iceclaw would be showing up if that was the case. He would just go look around, take a walk, settle his mind. Everything would be fine. The GIW were gone from the Zone, he was surrounded by allies, what could be wrong?

He shouldn't ask that question. He knew better.

Still, it was probably just some weird sound that he associated with trouble at home. He levitated a little bit to pick his leg up out of its sling, carefully rolled to the edge of the bed, and picked up his crutches. Then he picked himself up out of his bed, and made for the door. He might as well stop by the bathrooms while he was up, he was a little thirsty, and his mouth had that gross just-woke-up taste, even though he could have sworn that he didn't actually fall asleep.

He passed the threshold, and paused, something, some sound, some movement, making him turn sharply to the right.

The magenta firefly that was the business end of a blaster stared back at him. Beyond that, Danny could see Valerie's silhouette against the dimly glowing walls.

"I'm sorry, Danny," she said, voice barely above a whisper.

"Valerie, wha-"

She shot him.
Chapter 96

Issitoq watched Elysium from far above, waiting, turning the artifact over in his hands, his claws clinking against the glass. It would be so easy, so, so easy to just destroy it... Or so he would like to think. In truth, a fight against Pandora, Ancient Master of Hope, and all her followers and guests would be difficult even with the artifact.

Besides, that would invite open war between the Observants and everyone else, and even Issitoq wasn't ready for that. Yet.

He would try to do this the normal, the subtle way, one more time. That's why he was waiting here, waiting for the signal from his... He could not think of them as employees, or allies. They were too far below him to be that, and too truculent to be servants. Pawns, perhaps. Yes. Pawns did nicely.

In truth, Issitoq shouldn't be here. The signal wouldn't even be for him. It was meant for others that he recruited. Ghosts sane enough to know that tying the fate of the Infinite Realms to Clockwork's pet, Clockwork's brat, who hadn't even two decades to his name, would doom them all, but bold enough, and stupid enough, or, sometimes, greedy enough, to be manipulated into attacking Elysium. They would be a fine distraction.

It would be hard to restrain himself from attacking Pandora when she appeared, from attacking that brat when he came within reach, but he had to. He couldn't be associated with the abomination’s demise, or that of its humans. Not unless there was truly no other way. To do so would set him back centuries, possibly millennia, politically, and he couldn't have that. Not if he wanted to advance an appropriate candidate for kingship. Someone who would be appropriately respectful of tradition, and the authority of the Observants, who, after all, had taken on the burden of rule after Pariah Dark fell to madness.

Then, there, a red-sailed boat took to the air, swiftly flying away from one of the dock towers of Elysium. There. That was the signal. A great roar arose from the sky, and then a legion of ghosts seemed to precipitate from the empty air.

Issitoq flexed his fingers. That was the first of two boats. The second would contain the abomination and its humans.

And the ghost who would get rid of them.

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Valerie caught Danny before he hit the floor, a sick feeling in her throat. This was the second person, the second human, she had shot tonight. She took a deep breath and slung Danny (gosh, he was so light, so boneless and limp) over her shoulder, briefly checking that he was still breathing.

She had shot him with the stun gun. It was designed to incapacitate possessed humans. She had shot Mr Lancer with it, too, and now the teacher was being carried by Dash and Kwan, just out of sight
Valerie poked her head into the room looked around, and swore under her breath. Sam, Tucker, and Jazz were not in the room. That wasn't what she had been told, and they had to be running low on time at this point.

They had to be nearby, but Valerie hadn't enough time to check all the rooms here. She hadn't even enough time to one, judging by how Penelope was waving frantically at her from around the corner.

Valerie jogged over, trying to keep her footsteps light and quiet.

"We need to go now," hissed the girl, brushing back her long red hair. "If we don't leave now, we'll miss our window." She glanced over her shoulder nervously, green eyes bright against her pale skin.

Penelope had approached Valerie and the others after they had been placed, Penelope had used the word stored, in a long dormitory. She had come in through a skylight of all things.

Valerie had been shocked. Despite the people of Harmony, she had not expected to see another human here, in 'Elysium.'

But then Penelope had told her that it was common for humans to be here, for them to be, quite literally, spirited away. They were used by the ghosts as pets, as slaves, as toys, and, on occasion, as experiments.

Penelope said that liminality was one of those experiments. Brainwashing was one of their experiments. That the ghosts considered Danny one of their successes. She admitted that she didn't know everything, just what she caught eavesdropping on her 'owners,' but it was enough to scare her. It was enough to scare Valerie. It was enough to convince Valerie that they all needed to leave now, and Penelope was only too happy to oblige. That, she said, was why she was here, after all. She had a way out, a way home, back to Earth. The only reason she hadn't taken it before now was because she couldn't pilot a boat on her own.

Valerie was convinced. So were some of the others. Some, but not all. Paulina wasn't. Mia wasn't, nor was Mikey, nor, surprisingly, was Hannah. Most of Valerie's fellow students were on the fence.

Mr Lancer, on the other hand, was vehemently against the idea of even listening to Penelope. He had thought her suspicious. He had wanted to go to the ghosts, turn the girl in.

That's when Valerie had shot him.

She hadn't really meant to. She certainly hadn't wanted to. It just... happened.

After that, after Mr Lancer had dropped unconscious to the ground, no one had much wanted to argue with Valerie anymore. It was strange, having people look at her that, looking at her with fear in their eyes, but Valerie shook it off.

The ones who were with Valerie were happy, at least. They wanted to go home, and Penelope had a way.

"I haven't found the other three yet-" started Valerie.

"We don't have time," repeated Penelope. "If we don't go now- Our distraction will go to waste. It's them, or all of us."

"Valerie," said Rebecca, desperate, "we can tell the government, or the police, or ghost hunters, or
something about them. Please."

"I-" started Valerie.

"I don't want to die here," said Rebecca. "I don't want to be stuck here for my whole life."

"If we don't leave," said Penelope, sharply, "then the ghosts will be free to keep playing with your friend's mind, with all of your minds, and bodies, and souls, and mine, too. Is that what you want, Valerie? Is that what you want on your shoulders?"

"Okay, okay," said Valerie, putting a steadying hand on Danny's back. "Let's go."

Penelope lead them through the halls swiftly, at times seeming to fly. Dash and Kwan, weighed down by Mr Lancer, struggled to keep up.

Then there was a great noise from above, and bells began to ring. Lights flared to life.

"That's our distraction," said Penelope, unfazed. "Now we'll be able to get out of the palace."

Valerie did not like the sound of that distraction, but there wasn't anything to do about it now.

They slipped past guards, and servants, and found their way out of the palace and into the city, where Penelope gave them disguises, picked up another human acquaintance of Penelope's, and led them out, farther and farther away from the palace. They went quickly. The explosions and bright lights behind them were a good motivator.

No one looked at them twice. They were, apparently, more concerned about what Valerie could now see was a giant ghost army hanging in the sky. It reminded her of when Amity Park was sucked into the Ghost Zone. Unlike then, however, a second army of ghosts was rising to meet it.

It didn't take too much longer to reach their destination, a tall tower at which several ghostly ships were docked.

"Bertrand," said Penelope, "you have the key?"

"Of course," said the man in a clipped British accent. He elbowed his way through the small crowd of students. Valerie was impressed that he wasn't out of breath after that run. Then again, neither was Penelope. That was a bit strange. Even the athletes were out of breath.

Valerie didn't have much time to ponder this. Bertrand had unlocked the door and everyone was thundering up the steps. Actually, she hadn't had any time to think this whole night. Penelope kept rushing her.

The boat that they boarded was much smaller than the ones that they had come in on. It didn't even have a lower deck from the look of it, but it still fit all of them with room to spare. It had red sails.

Penelope ran around, directing everyone to hold this, or that, or that other thing, to pull on ropes, or lift levers, or oars. Then she and Bertrand threw off the moorings. Some of the students had questions, good questions, about whether or not the attacking, or defending, ghosts would come after them, but Penelope ignored them efficiently, sweeping their concerns away, or distracting them with more instructions.

"Not if you do this properly," Valerie heard her saying to more than one student, "and don't distract me with stupid questions!"
Valerie was getting the impression that, if she and Penelope had met under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have liked the other girl very much. Her words were too sharp.

Once the running around had stopped for the most part, Valerie scanned the boat for somewhere that she could put Danny down (and somewhere she could direct Dash and Kwan to put Mr Lancer down, because at the moment they were just standing around, taking up deck space), and found Mia sitting off to one side, her hands in her lap, tears in her eyes.

"Hey," said Valerie, "Mia, what's wrong?"

"She said I was too blind to be helpful, so I should just get out of the way."

Valerie frowned. "You aren't blind," she started.

"Yes I am! And I keep getting in the way, and I'm holding everyone back, and I'm distracting you right now. You should just ignore me."

"That's- Actually, I have something you can help me with."

"You do?"

"Yeah, can you watch Danny and Mr Lancer for me?" she said, laying Danny down. "Tell me if they start to wake up?"

"I, um, yeah. Yeah, I can do that."

"Great. Dash! Kwan!" Valerie called, louder than she really needed to, and waved. "Bring Mr Lancer over here."

The two boys jogged to Valerie, banging Mr Lancer's limp right arm into every rower's bench on the way over. Valerie suppressed a wince. He'd have a bruise come morning, but the important thing was that he was with them. He'd thank them, he'd thank Valerie, for this some day. Some day soon. When they got home. So would Danny. He'd be angry that they'd left Jazz, but he'd understand. They had to go. This was their only chance to get away.

"Lay him down here," she told them. "Mia's going to look after them."

"Thank god!" said Dash, loudly. "I thought I'd be carrying him forever. He needs to lose some weight."

"Yeah, sure," said Valerie. "Thanks Mia. Let's see if Penelope needs us for anything."

Penelope did need them for something. For several somethings. They were so busy that Valerie couldn't even say when they had gotten out of sight of Elysium. Penelope was a hard taskmaster.

At last, though, they were all given a moment to rest. They needed it. They were exhausted.

"How much farther is it to the portal?" asked Rebecca.

"Oh," said Penelope, leaning back to watch as an island went by. The sheer number of them made Valerie very nervous. "Not too long. You people need to learn to how to be patient. I've planned this day for years, and look at me. Totally calm. Right, Bertrand?"

"Right, Penelope," said Bertrand from where he was manning the rudder.

"Valerie!" called Mia. "Valerie! Danny's waking up." Danny groaned lightly at the words. "Hey, it's
okay. You're okay."

"Oh, good," said Penelope, rising, smiling sharply. "I guess I don't have to wait anymore."

Issitoq would have smiled as well, if he had a mouth. The second red-sailed ship had long since sailed out of sight, and Issitoq had left Elysium himself, not wanting to get involved in the battle, but Issitoq was an Observant. All-knowing. All-seeing.

It had just taken a few changes, a tiny expenditure of power, and now the abomination was alone, isolated, and incapacitated, at the mercy of one of its worst enemies. Issitoq stroked the artifact that now hung around his neck. It was even more useful, more versatile, than he had realized. Now he could focus on restoring the prestige and power of his order its proper station.
Danny woke up in pain. This was depressingly normal.

What wasn't normal was that he was waking up after Valerie shot him. Why had she shot him? What had he done? What could he have done? Sure, she did shoot at him a lot, but not when he was Fenton, not after apologizing.

Save that for later. For right now, what he should be doing was assessing the situation, figuring out what was going on. First, people were talking. He could hear Valerie, and his other classmates, and... Someone else. He couldn't place the voice right now. It, no, they, there were two of them, sounded human, but something about them put his guard up. They were familiar, in a bad way. Danny immediately blamed them for whatever was happening.

He didn't hear Jazz, Sam, Tucker, or Mr Lancer. Had they been knocked out, too? Danny would have to assume that he had no back up against... whoever had convinced Valerie to shoot him. Or Valerie, for that matter. If she could be convinced to shoot him once, she could be convinced to shoot him a second time.

So, he had a vague understanding of who was with him. Where was he? He was lying on something hard. His fingers twitched, brushing the ground beneath him. It felt like wood. It was probably wood. It was also rocking. Rocking. Like on a boat. Was he on a boat?

That was- That was bad. Being on a boat was bad. That meant that he wasn't in Elysium anymore. Depending on how long Danny had been unconscious, they could be miles and miles away from Elysium.

He didn't know how to deal with this. He really and truly didn't know how to deal with this. He had reached the end of his creative rope some time ago. He was mentally exhausted. If there had been someone to fight, that would be one thing. Even if he was injured, even if he wasn't really in fighting shape, he could fight. But, from the sounds of things, his classmates were looking for a portal. They had decided to do this. They had decided to kidnap him. If nothing else, he would have thought that it was clear that he wanted to stay in Elysium. That Elysium was safe. Safe for him. Safe for them.

He didn't know how to keep them safe, if they were going to do this.

No. No, he should stay calm. Stay calm. He could do this. Somehow.

Actually, and this was a bit of a shock to realize, but he might not have to figure this out on his own. Pandora probably already knew that they were gone, and she'd be looking for him. Not to mention Adrestia and the rest of Libra. The best solution might be to fake being asleep until allies showed up. That way he wouldn't have to have an exhausting argument with his classmates (and especially Valerie).

The only problem was that his classmates weren't the only ones on this boat (assuming that it was a boat). He liked those two extra voices less and less as time went on, and there was something in the air, something in the ambient ectoplasmic noise, that just rubbed Danny's core the wrong way.

Where were they going?
Okay, maybe he couldn't just wait. Not if Mystery Voice #1 and #2 were leading his classmates into danger. But he should still feign sleep for now, try to figure out who they were, why they had made off with his people.

Too possessive. Dial it back. Dial it back.

Just breathe. In, out, in, out. He could fake being asleep. He could put together clues. He wasn't panicking, even internally.

Yeah. That lie needed some work.

He was having some trouble with picking up information. Maybe it was the topic. Maybe it was how his head was still fuzzy from being unconscious. Maybe it was all the negative emotional energy.

Negative emotional energy... Why did that...

"...Right, Bertrand?"

"Right, Penelope."

Danny jerked in shock. Oh. Oh, heck. That was... Ow. Ow. Oh, jeez. His ankle. And his shoulder. And his back. What was wrong with his back? And everything else, too. Ow. And, maybe he hadn't been faking sleep so much as he had been half asleep. Or a third asleep. Or two thirds asleep. That happened sometimes when you effectively had three brains.

Then he heard Mia shriek, and he was brought back to the problem at hand. Penelope and Bertrand. Spectra and Bertrand. With his classmates. Hurting his classmates. What had she done to Mia?

"Time to wake up, little brat," said Spectra, grabbing his face.

He forced his eyes open, and aimed a sloppy punch at Spectra's face. She just laughed, and leaned back to squeeze Danny's ankle. Danny's vision turned into TV static, but this wasn't the first time Danny had fought through pain. He kicked her, hard, with his good foot, letting his ghostly strength bleed through. That gave him time to get his sight back and to get into a more defensible position.

Then Spectra did what Spectra did, and burst into black flame. Danny barely had enough time to process that before Bertrand jumped him, turning into a saber-toothed tiger mid-leap. As he and Bertrand tumbled, Danny saw his classmates scatter, and Valerie activate her suit. Well. At least one of them was awake.

Danny reached for his core. Spectra and Bertrand wouldn't shy away from murder, not when they talked people into committing suicide on a regular basis. But when he tried to change, to go ghost, all he felt was a burst of pain.

"Poor little brat," mocked Spectra, her flames eating away at the boards and railings of the boat. "Still a little sleepy?"

Danny hissed, and instead directed his energies into a knife made of ice. Even that stung. He slashed at Bertrand, cutting deep into the green ghost's ectoplasm. He took that moment to look at his classmates.

"Look out!" he shouted. They were not in a good position, and Spectra's flames were sneaking up behind them at an alarming rate. Then Danny was on his back again, his knife knocked from his hand. Where were Sam and Tucker? Jazz? Mr Lancer? Please say that they weren't under those flames.
"Oh, what an optimistic little thing," cooed Spectra. He couldn't see her, Bertrand filled his field of vision. "You still think that they'll listen to you! They picked a complete stranger over you. Do you know what they were arguing about? Whether or not you had tricked them into bowing to Pandora when you and your little friends didn't. Isn't that just lovely?"

Danny could feel himself weakening. Spectra was doing her vampire act.

"And don't you little toys try to get away. This is your fault, you know, for believing me in the first place. I mean, really, I came in through a sky light, I told you nothing about myself, I gave you nothing, and I still had you wrapped around my finger in minutes. How much do you hate this little brat, here?"

Valerie shouted something incomprehensible, and fired her gun until it suddenly cut out. Danny tried to see what was happening, but Bertrand had him pinned.

"None of that, either," said Spectra, her voice sickeningly sweet. "Goodness, but you are incompetent. I suppose that I can't blame you too much, though. Hanging out with that... Thing... would make it hard for anyone to tell the difference between a human and a ghost, and of course he lets you overestimate your abilities by taking it easy on you." She sighed. "I was told to kill you all. But..." she trailed off, playfully. "Let's play a game, shall we? I've always liked your human game shows. Survivor, in particular."

Danny tried to push off Bertrand, letting frost flow to the surface of his skin. "Spectra, you- Ah!" he broke off as Bertrand slammed him down. Danny grit his teeth against the pain. He had to think, had to use his head. Maybe... This was still the Ghost Zone, wasn't it?

"Oh, you aren't doing so well, are you? But that's what core damage does, I'm afraid. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Let's play a few rounds of Survivor. You get to vote on who dies first. Isn't that fun?"

"Don't do it!" shouted Danny, anger and desperation lancing through him. He had to stall long enough to formulate a plan, and this sounded like something that would cause lasting bad feelings even if Danny stopped it in time. "Don't do anything she says!" He was in the Ghost Zone, and he was liminal. Even if his powers weren't working very well currently, he could still manipulate ectoplasm by will alone. Between what was working, and that, he might have a way out of this, a way to save everyone.

"Well, you could do that. Then I'll just kill all of you. Now rules, rules... Oh, yes. You can't pick this lovely little brat." Spectra swooped into Danny's field of view and pinched his cheek. "I want to make him watch. Save him for last." Danny tried to bite her fingers, but missed. "So who's going to die first?"

There was silence. Good. Danny could focus on his thoughts. On what he was about to do. On what he could do. He had a few options, and he had to pick the best one, because he doubted that he would get a second chance on this.

Then, Spectra gasped. "I almost forgot the most important part!" she said gleefully. "Bertrand, make sure he can see this!"

Danny was dragged up by Bertrand, his head caught in a lock as the shapeshifter turned into a strongman. He could see his classmates, all of them huddled in a circle of black fire. Valerie's suit was in tatters, and she was cradling her left arm. It looked broken. His other classmates were covered in bruises, especially Dash and Kwan. Had they tried to fight? To his relief, though, he was able to spot Mr Lancer. He looked fine, if unconscious.
This was good. Danny could *see* what he had to do now.

"Who shall it be, who shall it be?" asked Spectra, morphing back to a young, human-looking form and prancing across the deck, flames flickering in her steps. "The annoying compulsive liar?" she asked, pointing at Elliot. "The dead weight who always has to be coddled?" she jabbed a finger at Mia. "The school bully?" she leered at Dash. "There are so many choices!"

"Don't-"

"Oh, shut up! Who will it be?"

To Danny's relief, his classmates remained silent. Telekinesis was difficult even with a clear head, as was applying his will to ectoplasm so far away.

"Do I really have to show you that I'm serious? Hm? Well. Let's start with you, Valerie, dear." She reached into the circle of fire to pull Valerie out by her broken arm. "You wouldn't survive this, anyway. Danny-boy here is the only one who likes you, isn't that right? You were thrown out of your little friend group years ago, and no one else would take you in. You were a bit of a bully, too, weren't you? Even to sweet little Danny."

Danny caught Valerie's eyes flash red, and a blaster appeared in her good hand, but then Spectra swept her hand down and-

-Danny felt his Obsession flare-

-it was like time stopped.

*She would not hurt them anymore.*

The tiller snapped. The boat rocked, and the sails filled, angling downward. The boat plummeted, then the directions changed, the boat snapping back and forth. Spectra and Bertrand were thrown off balance. Such was the risk of using an external point of reference for one's gravity and position. Even though Bertrand was floating, he was thrown as well, off into the void. The boat sped on, faster, faster, faster, Danny whipping it forward with spectral wind.

Danny was incandescent. He was eldritch. Ice and mist boiled off of him. Green fire snapped in the air around him, just inches from his skin. His good foot barely touched the deck, his other injured foot tucked up behind him, knee bent.

Spectra snarled, showing needle-like teeth. "Not worried about your secret anymore? Not worried about what they'll think? About how they'll fear you?"

Danny tilted his head. Valerie was alright. His classmates were alright. Mr Lancer was alright. Sam, Tucker, and Jazz weren't here. They hadn't ever been here. Danny couldn't feel them, couldn't see any bones that might be theirs. There was no sent of cooked meat mixed in with that of ectoplasm. They must be somewhere else.

He snapped his attention back to Spectra just in time to see her razor-tipped fingers approaching his face. He grinned, sharp, wicked, and unblinking as he violently tipped the boat to one side. Danny stayed still, perfectly balanced. His classmates, already on the ground, and a good deal heavier, did not move nearly as much.

"I thought you liked rocking the boat, Spectra?"

"They'll know that you're not even human. They know already, you little abomination!"
They'll fear you. They already do. I can taste it."

Danny didn't respond. He knew it was true, and Spectra knew that he knew. The thing was, he was far more afraid of them than they could possibly be afraid of him.

Or than he was afraid of Spectra.

"Do I get to vote? Because I vote for you," he said, keeping his voice even, pleasant, because he knew that would annoy her. It worked.

Maybe a little too well.

Danny's head swiveled towards the shrieks and protests of his classmates. The black flames that encircled them had grown higher. Bigger. Hotter. Danny tapped the cold in his chest and yanked it out, throwing it like a blanket over the fires.

He crumpled, gasping, the wind dying. The boat stopped rocking, though its momentum kept it hurtling forward. Danny could feel his skin growing warm. He had hurt himself again. Clockwork would be so disappointed. At least the fires had gone out. But-

Sharp claws seized him by his chin. "Little brat," hissed a red-eyed monster whose breath smelled like brimstone and despair. "Miscalculated, haven't you? If you left them to burn you could at least have saved yourself. I'm going make you beg for death by the time I'm though with-"

There was a crack from somewhere beyond Spectra, and she pulled away from Danny, leaving five deep, slightly burnt, but still bleeding cuts on his face. Dash, of all people, stood behind her, broken oar in his hands.

"Um," said Dash, wide-eyed. Evidently, he had thought Spectra would go down after one sharp blow to the back of the head which was... kind of dumb, actually. She was a ghost. But Danny appreciated the sentiment.

Danny lunged at the mass of flames that served as Spectra's lower half, trying to knock her over before she could try to strike at Dash. He didn't knock her over, but he did manage to make her miss.

In retaliation Spectra shot a ghost ray at the back of Danny's head.
Chapter 98

Chapter 98: Red Redux

Valerie didn't quite register anything as wrong until Penelope blasted Mia away from Danny with a ray of green energy and fell on the semiconscious boy like a hyena on fresh meat. Then Penelope burst into a mass of black flame and Bertrand- the other ghost- got in on the act, turning into a giant cat. Almost everyone was frozen in shock, but Valerie had two years of ghost hunting under her belt. Even though she was surprised, she acted. She called on her suit and started shooting.

Then Danny had to pull yet another outrageous and impossible thing out of thin air. Literally. That knife. How did he do that? Some other freakish benefit of liminality?

Then he turned, looking straight at Valerie and shouted, "Look out!"

Look out for- Since when had the boat been on fire?! Why was the boat on fire?!

Valerie leaped back, keeping up her rate of fire. All of her blasts were deflected by the fiery ghost's shield. She couldn't figure out why. Her blaster had worked on the whale!

"Oh, what an optimistic little thing," cooed Penelope. "You still think that they'll listen to you! They picked a complete stranger over you. Do you know what they were arguing about? Whether or not you had tricked them into bowing to Pandora when you and your little friends didn't. Isn't that just lovely?"

Valerie cringed internally at the reminder. There was more truth in that statement than she would like to admit. That was what Dash and Dale had been complaining about when Penelope had dropped in through the skylight. They had chosen Penelope's story over Danny's... And Danny's stories at least had some corroborating evidence. Penelope's had just been the one Valerie wanted to be true.

"And don't you little toys try to get away. This is your fault, you know, for believing me in the first place. I mean, really, I came in through a sky light, I told you nothing about myself, I gave you nothing, and I still had you wrapped around my finger in minutes. How much do you hate this little brat, here?"

Valerie swore. Her father would be deeply disappointed that she knew such words, but she couldn't help herself. How dare that ghost-!

Then her gun cut out. Apparently it hadn't had enough time to recharge. Either that, or it was still messed up from all the nonsense in Phantom's lair. It didn't really matter right now. None of her other weapons would respond to her. Penelope flicked out of view, then reappeared only inches from Valerie's face.

The ghost that had been Bertrand slammed Danny down on the deck, and Penelope raked her claws down across Valerie's body. Valerie cursed again. It hadn't hurt, but it made her suit spark and tear.

"None of that, either," said Penelope, her voice sickeningly sweet. The ghost had a hold of Valerie's arm, and she wrenched it hard, before flinging Valerie backwards, through a wall of flame. She rolled until she bumped up against Dash, and suddenly realized that she and the rest of her classmates were trapped. "Goodness, but you are incompetent. I suppose that I can't blame you too much, though. Hanging out with that... Thing... would make it hard for anyone to tell the difference
between a human and a ghost, and of course he lets you overestimate your abilities by taking it easy
on you." She sighed. "I was told to kill you all. But..." she trailed off, playfully. "Let's play a game,
shall we? I've always liked your human game shows. Survivor, in particular."

"Spectra, you- Ah!"

Valerie couldn't quite make out Danny beyond the great green bulk of Bertrand and the dancing
black flames, but she could hear his pain, and she sucked in air between her teeth.
"Oh, you aren't doing so well, are you? But that's what core damage does, I'm afraid. Now, where
was I? Oh, yes. Let's play a few rounds of Survivor. You get to vote on who dies first. Isn't that
fun?"

Core damage? They had been talking about the core of the Ghost Zone back in Phantom's lair. Had
it done something to Danny?

"Don't do it!" shouted Danny.
"Well, you could do that. Then I'll just kill all of you. Now rules, rules... Oh, yes. You can't pick this
lovely little brat." Penelope bent down, out of view. "I want to make him watch. Save him for last.
So who's going to die first?"

Silence. Valerie hadn't the first clue how to get out of this, and it sounded like none of the others did,
either.
Then, Spectra gasped. "I almost forgot the most important part!" she said gleefully. "Bertrand, make
sure he can see this!"

Danny was dragged up by Bertrand, his head caught in a lock as the shapeshifter turned into a
strongman. He looked terrified.
"Who shall it be, who shall it be?" asked Penelope, morphing back to a young, human-looking form
and prancing across the deck, flames flickering in her steps. "The annoying compulsive liar?" she
asked, pointing at Elliot. "The dead weight who always has to be coddled?" she jabbed a finger at
Mia, who was still lying on the ground. "The school bully?" she leered at Dash. "There are so many
choices!"
"Don't-"

"Oh, shut up! Who will it be?"

Valerie was trying to summon a blaster to her hand. It wasn't working very well so far. The tears in
her suit were sparkling, and bits of it were growing hot.

"Do I really have to show you that I'm serious? Hm? Well. Let's start with you, Valerie, dear." She
reached into the circle of fire to pull Valerie out by her injured arm. "You wouldn't survive this,
anyway. Danny-boy here is the only one who likes you, isn't that right?" That was, again, more true
than Valerie would like to admit. Star was the only other one who still hung out with her, and even
then, not always. "You were thrown out of your little friend group years ago, and no one else would
take you in. You were a bit of a bully, too, weren't you? Even to sweet little Danny."

Untrue-!

Finally, finally, Valerie got a blaster into her hand.

Then it felt like the bottom dropped out of the world. Valerie fell to the deck, then looked around
frantically, trying to find the source of the problem. The tiller had snapped off. There were snapping,
splintering, creaking, crackling sounds coming from all sides, and the wind howled loud in Valerie's
ears, even drowning out her classmates screams. The boat was still on fire. Valerie narrowly avoided
falling into the flames.

Once she had recovered herself, she managed to find Danny. He was standing up on one foot, swaying back and forth, smiling weakly. His eyes flickered green and blue, like a dying light bulb. Occasionally, a green spark would leap from his skin, and the air around him seemed... uncertain. Wavery. But that might have just been the work of the fire and all the heat it was producing.

Was this liminality? Was this one of those powers that Mikey was so keen on? If so, it was a lot more than Danny had initially made out.

Danny was talking. He was saying something.

The fires flared, reaching inwards to lick at Valerie. She heard Kwan scream, and Hannah, and then others, and she was glad that her suit protected her from the majority of the heat.

Then the fires disappeared in a wash of cold.

Danny eyes were a glowing an impossible ice blue. Then he crumpled, the winds falling with him.

Valerie struggled to her feet, trying not to jostle her arm. Penelope was still here. Where had Bertrand gone? Where was her blaster?

Then Dash rushed past her with an oar. What the heck was he doing?

There was a sharp crack as Dash brought the oar down on Penelope's' head. The top half of the oar broke off, and Dash was left staring, open mouthed, as the ghost whirled, and growled at him.

Valerie was sure that Dash was dead. She was absolutely certain that he was going to die. There was murder written on the ghost's face and, suddenly, Valerie remembered-

Penelope Spectra. The former school psychologist, who Danny and Jazz had said had been a ghost, an evil, shape-shifting ghost who existed to make people feel terrible. A ghost who tried to murder Jazz. A ghost that had given the whole school depression for weeks.

Danny lunged at Spectra's knees. The ghost stumbled, missing Dash, who only fell over, but then whirled, and threw a bright green bolt at the back of Danny's head. Danny slammed into the ground and fell still.

A blaster came into Valerie's hands. It was her very largest. It really should be called a bazooka. Parts of her suit were hot, parts of it were burning. She brought the crosshairs up to bear on Spectra and pulled the trigger. A massive fuchsia flare erupted from the mouth of the enormous gun and engulfed Spectra. When Valerie blinked the shadow of the lights out of her eyes, Spectra was nowhere to be seen. All that was left of her was something that looked like a glowing, crystalline, ember. Valerie walked up to it, and punted it off the ship, and into the swirling, rocky gloom below.

"Oh my god," breathed Dash. "What the hell. Why didn't you do that earlier?"

"Couldn't," said Valerie, kneeling next to Danny. She deactivated her suit, revealing circuitry-shaped burn marks on her arms and clothing. She put her hand in front of Danny's mouth. He was still breathing, good. So now... Recovery position. That's right. But what about... "Mia? Is Mia okay?"

"I'm fine," said Mia, voice wavering. "I'm, um, I'm fine. I don't know how..."

"Anyone else hurt? Is Lancer waking up yet?"
"We've got some burns over here!" called Mikey.

"Oh my god," whimpered Paulina.

Valerie swore. She didn't have anything that would work for burns. Heck, she didn't have anything, period. Hopefully there wasn't anything too serious. "Try not to touch the burns," she said, "and pull any clothing that got burnt out of them." Valerie turned back to Danny. Now she just had to lift him up, put his hand-

Danny's eyes snapped open, and darted up to Valerie's face. Then he jumped back, trying to get to his feet, crying out and falling when his ankle collapsed under his weight.

"Danny, are you..." Valerie trailed off when she saw the look in his eyes. He was afraid of her. He was afraid of her, and not without reason. She had shot him. She had- She had caused this.

But then Danny's eyes flicked off of her, up, towards the sky, to the rocks and other islands passing by. "Oh no," said Danny, looking even more scared. He turned towards the bow of the ship. "Oh no."

Valerie followed his gaze.

Directly in in the path of the boat was a large island.

"Oh," said Valerie. She whirled to look at the tiller. Broken. Completely broken. "Oh, jeez." Could she summon her board? A quick attempt showed that the answer was no. Well, she wouldn't have been able to ferry everyone off the boat in time, anyway. So what-?

"We have to-" Danny tried to get up, and fell again. "Gotta turn the- gotta turn the boat we- Heck. No tiller. We- Um. Then we-" His eyes flickered green. "No. Not working. That's not working. We..."

"We're going to die, aren't we?" asked Rebecca. "All of this, all of this nonsense, and we're going to die.

"Wh- No."

"We'll figure this out," said Valerie, without much hope in her voice.

"Yeah," said Danny. "Yeah we- We can." He looked back up towards the approaching island. "We can do this. We-" He looked back at the class. "Remember what I said about how we can manipulate ectoplasm? Remember that? Willpower, and stuff, you know? This is kind of a fly or die situation here. I- We can do that. We can make the boat turn or- No, that won't work. Boats are- they're too defined. They- The wind? No, atmospheric ectoplasm will be too thin for you guys to grab on to effectively. I- The island. That's the first kind of thing Sam and Tucker did, right? Yeah. We can- Look, everybody! We can survive this, you just, you just all have to believe that that, there, it's like a cloud. It's like, made of pillows."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Elliot.

"Just work with me here!" said Danny. He had given up on standing, and was just holding his injured leg out at an awkward angle.

Valerie looked up at the island. "What do we need to do?" she asked.

"Just- Just focus. Just believe. Believe that it will be a soft landing. Yeah. Yeah."
The island was approaching, coming ever closer.

"Yeah," said Valerie.
Chapter 99

A couple days before the events of the prior chapter...

Ellie was thoroughly enjoying her newly acquired retinue of will-o-the-wisps. They were just so enthusiastic. So eager to please, so easy to please. They were cute, fuzzy, and cuddly, and lit up her room like soft, friendly nightlights.

True, she didn't have a solid grasp on their language, she had spent most of her travels focusing on living, human languages, so there was a barrier there, but she was getting better. That psychic link with Danny really came in handy. Meanwhile, she was fascinated by the Ghost Zone's legal process. Yes, many parts of it were tedious, but she whenever she became bored, she could leave it to her advocate and peruse Libra's vast collection of artworks. It was a little odd, how many paintings they had when almost all of them were blind, but Ellie didn't judge. That was their job.

She was also studiously avoiding the Fentons.

She would likely leave Libra in the next few days, and make her way down to Elysium. Danny would be there soon, might already be there, actually. She could have gone with the humans, gotten a free ride and met up with Danny earlier, but she wanted, no, needed, a break from Valerie's suspicious stares.

Ellie hummed, and the wisps crowded closer. So nice.

"Danielle."

She turned away from the painting she was viewing. "Clockwork?"

The old ghost smiled. "How are you?" he asked.

"I'm okay. I thought that court was still in session."

"It's in recess," said Clockwork. "This is more important." He came up alongside her, and scanned the painting. "You have good taste," he observed. "I need to ask you a favor."

"Um, sure. Anything." She drifted closer to Clockwork, basking a little in his ectosignature.

"I owe you an explanation, first. Daniel has told you how my powers work. My limitations."

It hadn't been a question, but Ellie felt compelled to answer. "A little bit," she said. "I asked, but he didn't want to get into details."

Clockwork nodded. "My sight can be blocked. Obscured. Confused. It is not an easy thing to accomplish, but there are a number of methods by which one might do it." He raised his hand to touch the scar that crossed his eye, and morphed into his young adult form. "Beginning late tomorrow, there is a blur stretching from Elysium to Missing Theory, very near the Digressed Tower, and not ending for several hours. You know of the Digressed Tower."
"Yeah," said Ellie, although, again, it wasn't a question. "If we're talking about the same thing. Vlad called it the Bends, usually. But I heard other people called it other stuff. The place of all the things that might have been remembered. The Philosopher's Mistake. Sojourn's Gravestone." Ellie wasn't entirely sure at first why she was listing all the names like that, but then blushed as she realized that she was trying to impress Clockwork.

"The Bends is as good a name as any." Clockwork then frowned. "There are too many possibilities stemming from whatever happens in that blur. Too many different versions of myself, all clamoring for attention. But I cannot go. I have responsibilities here, at the court. Too many of them. My absence would be taken advantage of. Even this short absence will cause problems. Pandora can take care of anything happening near Elysium."

"But you want me to go to Missing Theory," said Ellie. "Okay. Yeah, I can do that. Does it have... Do you think this has anything to with Danny?"

"That's likely," admitted Clockwork. "Almost certain, really. He might even be causing it. He does tend to complicate things, doesn't he?" He smiled fondly. But then the smile faltered. "Be careful, Danielle. Missing Theory can be dangerous."

"I know."

Azalea heaved a giant box up onto the table, then smiled broadly. "Your mail!" she said, splaying her bandaged hands out on the top of the box. "We screened it, of course. You wouldn't believe how many people tried to sell you lethal stuff. Or maybe you would. I don't know. Um. So," she took the lid off of the box, "I sorted these into three categories. Personal." There were only three letters in the stack. "Offers for legal alliances." This stack was larger, the thump on the table meatier. "Hate mail!" This stack was the largest yet, and it collapsed, individual letters sliding across the table, when Azalea took her hands away. "What do you think?"

"Personal?" asked Jack.

"Why bring hate mail?" said Maddie at the same time.

"Personal is..." Azalea picked up the letters. "Mr Phantom, your daughter, Jasmine, and... shoot. This should have been screened."


Reluctantly, Azalea handed over the letters. One was from Danny, the other from Jazz, both on the same stationary. The third was from...

"Vladdie?" asked Jack, looking over Maddie's shoulder. "Why's he sending us mail?"

Maddie frowned. "I don't know," she said, "but I don't like it. Remember what Danny said, Jack. Vlad isn't what we thought."

Jack nodded. "I saw that girl, the one Danny told us about."
"You-?" Maddie shook her head. "We'll talk about that later."

"Sorry, I forgot."

"It's fine, sweetie," said Maddie. She looked back down at the letters. "There's really too much going on..." She made a face and opened Jazz's letter first. She just... She had to come at this slowly.

_Mom and Dad_, started the letter.

_Danny and I are fine. Danny is getting proper medical attention. It will still be a long time before he is really better._

Maddie bit her lip at the veiled jab.

_He does forgive you. I forgive you, too. It's just hard. It's really hard. We're both worried about you. There are just so many ways that this, that everything, could go wrong. Don't insult anyone. Don't try to escape. Our advocates are working on a way to make sure that you survive this. Please listen to yours. Mr Wolfsbane is top notch. His associates are, too. Don't turn your nose up at alliances. If you manage enough of them, with the right people, you can essentially settle out of court. It is a bit more complicated than that, but your advocate should explain. Our advocates will be sending letters for official legal reasons._

_We're going to be going to Elysium soon. Our friend, Pandora, lives there. She's making room for all of Danny's classmates. Direct your letters there._

_I love you, _

_Jazz_

Maddie took a deep breath. That was about what she had expected from Jazz. Jazz had never been one to mince words when she thought that Maddie and Jack were doing something wrong.

She put Jazz's letter to the side, and picked up Danny's. Jack was staring at it, too, his lower lip held between his teeth.

It took her several tries to open the envelope. Her hands were shaking. She even gave herself a paper cut. But, eventually, the letter slid out.

_Hi Mom, hi Dad_, said the small piece of paper.

_This isn't going to be a long letter. I'm not good at writing. His handwriting was shaky. Maddie knew that Danny's cursive was usually very neat. To see it like this... She knew that it wasn't just because he was upset. This was caused by being hurt._

_I want you to know that I forgive you. That I've always forgiven you. I always will, no matter what. I love you. And I'm sorry for not being more honest, and getting us into this mess._

_Please be careful. There are a lot of politics going on._

_I love you, _

_Danny_

That was shorter than she had hoped, but it was more than they deserved.

"He still forgives us," said Jack, softly. He touched the letter gently with one large finger. "He still
loves us."

Maddie nodded. She didn't know what to think anymore, but she knew that she had been wrong. So, so wrong, and she must have hurt Danny so badly. Looking at the ghosts here, at Wolfsbane, Azalea, the courthouse staff, and all the 'advocates' who had been visiting, or trying to visit, Jack and Maddie, Maddie could not longer call them mindless monsters. They certainly weren't human, but they had their own rituals, and they could at least formulate an argument.

She read the letters again. Again. If she focused, she could almost imagine her children writing them. But reality closed back in, and she started focusing on what else was in the letters.

"What does he mean by politics?" she asked.

Azalea tilted her head. "I'm pretty sure we've explained that," she said. "That weapon, his fрайdmates, his guardian, his liminality, the fact that he's a child." The ghost shrugged. "I'm sure that those things can cause a trial to get big on your side, right?"

"Yes," said Maddie. "But you wouldn't necessarily call that 'politics.' What makes this so political? What even is politics, here? Do you have some kind of district attorney that can be voted in and out?"

"Um," said Azalea, blinking. The sound of buzzing intensified. "I think it might be better to try and show you." She stood. "I'll be back in a second. Read those letters."
Chapter 100: Ethics of Madmen

Vlad waited for the response to his letter.

Of course, he couldn't be sure when it would be read, so he did most of his waiting in his Amity Park mansion. He had things to do there, if he was to maintain his power. He had taken measures, however, to ensure that the GIW would not disturb him or any messenger that might come for him. His laboratory in the basement was triple-shielded, among other things.

If Vlad could convince Jack and Maddie that the best thing for Daniel was to stay with him, it would put him in a much better bargaining position. He had already convinced a large number of other interested parties to back him. His position was only logical, after all. He was the only one who could truly assume responsibility for the young half-ghost when he was on the material plane, and he had human law behind him on that front. Jack and Maddie's will had him as Daniel and Jasmine's guardian in case of Jack and Maddie's disappearance or death.

At the moment, however, Vlad was working on expelling the GIW from Amity Park. Having them still be here when the trial started would hurt his position significantly. He had to be able to provide a safe environment for Daniel. He was having trouble finding the proper angle, however. It hadn't been quite long enough to argue that the GIW had failed and were now using the tragedy as an excuse to expand their power, even though Vlad knew that the GIW agents who had gone into the Zone were either dead or about to suffer a far worse fate.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. Everyone in Amity Park hated the GIW, but the hope that they would bring back the children was a strong motivator. But Vlad couldn't bring the children back until the trial was over, and it would be difficult for him to win unless he could get rid of the GIW. It wasn't quite a catch-22.

His mind drifted. He had half a dozen unworkable ideas jotted down in front of him. Perhaps something would come to him if he stepped back, unfocused his mind.

Inevitably, his thoughts returned to the trial. A surprisingly large number of people favored giving Daniel a Lethean drought, forcing him to forget his human life, and placing him with Clockwork. The proposal had a certain logic to it. It could be considered a kindness to give the child a clean slate. It would keep him from tearing himself apart over his Obsession, over the fates of his parents and his erstwhile haunt.

Vlad could easily argue against that, however. It was considered cruel to separate a ghost from their haunt. That bond was not dictated only by memory. It was more akin to the bond a ghost had with their lair than anything else. What had Daniel done, to deserve the pain its slow dissolution would cause?

Then there were the ghosts who would attempt to attain guardianship themselves. Those would be quickly dismissed. Vlad had, to his vast disappointment, discovered that Daniel already had a ghostly guardian. Although that ghost was not one who was allowed to leave the Ghost Zone often. That was the only reason Vlad had a chance of getting guardianship of Daniel in the human world.

On the other hand, he could make a separate ploy to get custody of Jack and Maddie. Or, if he was
being honest, just Maddie. He didn't really want the complication of Jack. Not that he had told the
two of them that in his letter.

A separate ploy...

Perhaps... Perhaps... He just had a thought. If he could get the surviving GIW agents to be destroyed
in a manner that would be obvious to the remaining agents in Amity Park, and, more importantly,
Amity Park's citizens, then perhaps Amity Park would rebel, chase off the GIW.

Or... He didn't necessarily have to bring Daniel back to Amity Park right away. He did have other
holdings where Daniel would be safe, and in the human world, ready to return to Amity Park
whenever it became safe. Yes. Yes. He would have to think on that, and on the disposition of
Jasmine. As his only other human family, not counting Maddie's stepsister, Jazz would be an
important-

The alarm on his portal went off, startling him from his thoughts. He turned eagerly to the portal.
Had Maddie already responded to his letter?

A vulture winged its way out of the portal, wheezing. Vlad was never quite sure why they did that.
They didn't need to breathe.

"Where's the letter?" he asked, before realizing that this was not the one who he had tasked to wait
for a response, but the one who had been shadowing Daniel.

The vulture shook his head. "No letter. Elysium is under attack."

Tucker was looking for Danny. Actually, everyone was looking for Danny. He had been
conspicuously absent during the battle. Even if it hadn't lasted a half an hour, with Pandora doing
most of the work, Danny normally would have shown up to try and help. Even if all he was capable
of was getting people out of the way of the fight, that was what he would have done. Danny was
completely, fundamentally, incapable of ignoring this kind of thing.

But he hadn't been in his room, either.

Now, Tucker was making his way down to where Valerie and the others had been bunked. It was
possible that Danny went to them first, to check that they were alright, and then they talked some
sense into him. Or even physically restrained him. In Danny's current physical state that was
possible, especially when Tucker considered Valerie. Or, maybe someone had freaked out and
Danny had stayed to comfort them. That was possible, too. More possible, actually.

Tucker didn't quite believe it, though. He had a bad feeling. A really bad feeling. It wasn't like
Valerie was exactly the kind of person to shy away from danger. She should have been out there,
too, but she wasn't.

He opened the door to the guest dormitory. As expected, the room was empty.

Tucker sucked in a long, shaky breath. Well. Maybe the others had had more luck.
Mr Lancer woke up on something hard and lumpy. His back was very unhappy. Very, very unhappy. He was sure he hadn't fallen asleep on anything that had felt remotely like this. Where had he-?

He sat up, breathing heavily. Miss Gray had shot him. She had... He blinked. He was... He hadn't expected this. He wasn't sure what he had expected, waking up on the guest room floor, maybe, but not this, not waking up on the ground, outside, in the Ghost Zone. The sky above him was full of rocky islands impressed on a cloudy background of what looked like ever-shifting stairs. The ground that he was lying on was covered in something that was like crabgrass except that it was a dark, almost black, purple.

"Robinson Caruso..." Where- Where was he? Why had Miss Gray brought him here? Where were his other students?

A look around answered that last question. They were all strewn around him, unconscious. Well, maybe not all. He couldn't tell who all of them were from where he was sitting, but a quick count showed that he was three heads short. With some effort, Mr Lancer got to his feet.

He didn't know what to do. He knew some first aid, but first aid implied that second aid was on its way, and he didn't have anything to give first aid with. At least he could put them into recovery position.

God, some of them were burned, their clothing and hair singed. He didn't have anything to treat them with. At least everyone he checked was breathing, and didn't have any obvious bleeding. That meant that they would probably wake up. Right?

Then he found Danny.

Danny looked horrible. He was, much like Mr Lancer himself, and unlike the other students, still in his pajamas. He was covered in bruises and long, bleeding gashes. Even his face. Especially his face. Soot streaked his clothing and face. His ankle was tightly bandaged, and the skin around it was swollen and discolored.

Mr Lancer knelt down by him, his hand fluttering, hovering over Danny, afraid to touch him. Mr Lancer could hear him whimpering, sniffing and gasping. There were wet, shiny tracks through the grime on his face.

Well, he clearly wasn't having trouble breathing, but his ankle, and those cuts. They looked more like claw marks than anything else, and they looked like they might be infected. His ankle. There was something Mr Lancer could do about Danny's ankle. He could untie it, get blood flowing to the toes again. They were more than a little purple right now.

He exhaled slowly, shoulders shaking. First- First he had to go through the procedure. The proper first aid procedure. Yes. "Mr Fenton?" Danny flinched, but otherwise didn't respond. Mr Lancer sucked in another breath. "Daniel? Danny?" He touched Danny's shoulder. He felt hot. That was probably a bad thing, considering what Danny was supposed to be. He shook Danny lightly, hoping that the boy would wake up. He didn't. Alright. Okay.

Danny gasped when Mr Lancer first touched his ankle. It was a pathetic, little noise, somewhere between a squeak and a sob. The skin felt feverish, and Mr Lancer's fingers left pale prints on the
swollen flesh. Mr Lancer ran his fingers along the bandages, trying to find their edge, occasionally glancing towards where Danny's fingers were digging into the soil and grass.

Eventually, he found it, tucked neatly through another. Mr Lancer slowly unwound it, trying not to notice how Danny's breathing hitched and grew more ragged each time he had to move the injured limb. But then Mr Lancer unwound the last layer, and Danny seemed to relax a little.

Mr Lancer leaned back, trying to look at anything but Daniel's leg. That only gave him more things to worry about, however. Like Danny's arm. It looked broken. Or like how no one else was awake yet. Or like how he was on a random island in the *Ghost Zone* with no help in sight and no idea how he got there, except that Miss Gray was somehow involved. The rest of his class, too, although it looked like Danny was as unwilling a participant as Mr Lancer himself. What was he going to do?

Danny reached out with one arm, still whimpering. Mr Lancer took his hand, rubbing it with his thumb, coming closer to the young boy again. Danny, showing considerable strength despite his obviously weakened state, pulled himself halfway up onto Mr Lancer's lap. His breathing evened out considerably. Mr Lancer could feel him vibrating (Trembling? Purring?) under his hands.

"What is this?"

Mr Lancer flinched, and looked up. A ghost was floating there in tattered medical scrubs.

"Humans?" continued the ghost, red eyes wide. "Here? Injured, too? Oh no, oh dear, no. We can't have that. I think that I do remember how to treat humans..." The ghost rubbed his chin and floated lower.

"You'll help us?" asked Mr Lancer, surprised and desperate.

"Hm? Oh. Oh yes, yes. I can't have you dying on me, now. There are so many of you, and it's been so long since I've had a proper control group," the ghost said, beaming. "We're going to have so much fun when you're all healthy."

It took Mr Lancer far too long to interpret the ghost's meaning. "No," he said. "No. Stay back!"

"And miss out on all the experiments I have planned?" asked the ghost, now almost to ground level. "Never!"

Very briefly, a lime green shield flickered into existence between Danny and Mr Lancer and the ghost. The ghost stopped, surprised, the smile melting off of his face. "Liminal?" he asked. Then the fragile shield guttered and died, while Danny groaned, and pushed closer to Mr Lancer. The ghost's smile returned full force. "Even better!"

Then the ghost was hit with a green bolt of energy that came from above and behind, plowing him into the ground. Mr Lancer traced the line of attack back up to where it had originated. That was the girl who had been in Daniel's lair, who looked so much like him, who introduced herself as Daniel's-as Phantom's- sister.

She looked furious. Her eyes glowed like tiny green suns, her hair streamed behind her, bright white vivid against the green.

"Even better?" she asked, acid in her tone, green light bubbling from both hands. "Then you'll love this!"
Chapter 101

Chapter 101: In the Eye of Time

It took time for Azalea and Wolfsbane to arrange for Jack and Maddie to take their 'field trip,' as Azalea called it. In the meantime, they read letters. Lots of letters. Dozens and dozens.

Alliances were the topic of conversation in most of them. Vlad's letter (Which they still hadn't responded to). What could be given, traded, taken. Proposals of combined force and arguments that could be made. Wolfsbane recommended some of them, argued against others, and stayed neutral with several.

Azalea had made almost the exact opposite arguments. She and Wolfsbane said that it was practice, her being the devil's advocate, as well as being a good thought experiment.

Some of the letters were terrible, frightening. The options they espoused were troubling. They spoke of all the fates that could befall them. Or Danny. Many of them, including Vlad's, wanted them to sign over Danny in exchange for helping Maddie and Jack get a lighter sentence. That was, in a word, disgusting.

Others desired Jack and Maddie's service. They wanted something from Jack and Maddie, or they wanted them, themselves.

Maddie didn't know what to think, honestly. Wolfsbane and Azalea were trying to explain the legalese to them, the reason that such and such a punishment was worse than another, why some things wouldn't even be considered, but it all seemed incredibly arbitrary.

But there were no letters on the table today. They were all stacked neatly in their boxes. Jack and Maddie were going out today. They were just waiting for their chaperons. Apparently, two was too few a number for Libra when those two were Jack and Maddie's lawyers.

The door opened, and a young woman walked in, smiling. Her eyes were glowing white except for black lines delineating her irises. She had four arms, three of them holding briefcases. Her hair was black, and pinned tied back with glowing, star-shaped hairpins. She wore a neat suit and skirt, and a pin shaped like a pair of scales on her lapel. Her skin was as white as marble, her teeth sharp and even.

"Hello," she said, not quite looking directly at Jack and Maddie. She held out her free hand to the two of them, even as she pushed the door closed with her opposite elbow. "My name Astraea. I was the first sponsor of your case." She paused. "I'm sorry, are you from a culture that doesn't do handshakes?" she asked, lowering her hand.

"Apparently," said Azalea. "How are you, Astraea?"

"Well, thank you. How are the bees?"

"They're great."

"Still pursuing madness?"

"I think I'm catching up, yeah."
Astraea smiled, then turned to face more in Wolfsbane's direction. "And how are you, Wolfsbane?"

"Quite well," said Wolfsbane. "Do you know when Lord Clockwork will be arriving?"

'Lord' Clockwork, Danny's 'guardian' was going to be the fourth chaperon. It would be Maddie's first time meeting the man... The ghost. She hadn't made her mind up about whether or not she wanted to hate him. On one hand, she was furious that any ghost had so much influence over her son. On the other, it sounded like he really had helped Danny, protected him from those 'Observant' people.

"He will be on time, as always," said Astraea. "It's still early." She paused, smiling gently. "Court just let out for the day. Mother wants to give the halls a chance to clear out. Do you two know what you will be seeing today?"

"Some art," said Jack, shrugging.

"Well, that, too," said Astraea. "I'm afraid I don't have any first hand experience, but I'm told that it is quite stunning. But, it should help you to understand our culture a bit more, and we can explain once you have questions."

"Right," said Maddie. Suspicion echoed in the back of her mind. She had become... more relaxed around ghosts, but that didn't mean that she trusted them on any level.

"I don't suppose that you have any questions now?" asked Astraea, tilting her head.

Oh, Maddie had questions. She had so, so many questions. Questions that she had asked, questions she had received no satisfactory answers for.

"Not science ones," clarified Azalea. "We aren't scientists. She means cultural questions."

"Quite," said Wolfsbane, making a face.

Maddie made a face right back. Azalea had been singularly unhelpful on that front. Wolfsbane had been better, but he hadn't been there nearly as often, and had always steered the conversation back to legal matters.

"Yes," said Astraea. "I have spent my years studying constructed laws, not natural ones."

The thing was that Maddie couldn't see that there was anything that could be called 'ghost culture.' Nothing unified, in any case. It was all chaos. Islands of coherence, but nothing else, like the Ghost Zone itself. More to the point, it was all stolen from human cultures.

Here, with Libra, it was all Greek themed. But, in the hospital, everything had been Egyptian. The Zone's Core had been keen on Sumerian mythology. Danny's lair had been... different. But Danny was human, too. Danny was still alive, still vital, still creative. Danny had always been creative.

The only things that she understood to have any consistency across all those little islands of 'culture' were the three taboos, and she already understood those. Well, she understood them as well as anyone could. Even Danny had admitted that he didn't fully understand them, back when he first explained them. It was only to be expected. If ghosts were capable of creating a coherent, consistent, comprehensive, set of laws, they wouldn't be such a problem.

The ghosts also seemed to think that she and Jack didn't fully understand the gravity of their crimes, the depths of their sins.

They were wrong. Maddie knew. She had caused Danny's death. She had as good as killed him. It
had taken her some time to fully realize that, but here, in this small room, it had fully sunk in. Really, she would be willing to take any punishment, except... She thought back to Danny's letter. He wanted them to survive this.

What she didn't understand was why this had become 'political.' Azalea and Wolfsbane had freely said that there were other murder trials, and that they weren't infrequent. She had thought that, perhaps, it was related to the GIW's attack on the Core, but that didn't seem to be the case. The surviving GIW agents were being held for a separate trial regarding that, but this, about a crime the victim hadn't wanted reported, was the big trial.

That was what she wanted an explanation of, and what Azalea and Wolfsbane both seemed at a loss for.

"Time out," said Clockwork quietly. He closed his eyes, feeling along the fabric of time. Whatever had happened in that stretch between Elysium and the Digressed Tower had made the blur over his sight stretch and expand. It was giving him a headache, a distraction rivaled only by the itch in his scar.

Despite what he had said to Danielle a few days ago, Clockwork normally would have left to deal with, or at least directly look at, such a block. The time line was his first responsibility, and the obscured region had been far too close to where Daniel was. Now, Daniel was in it, and it was very nearly driving him mad with worry.

But even so, Clockwork was still bound to the Observants and their orders. He had been disallowed from looking into it, disallowed from acting on it, disallowed from speaking of it, except with other ghosts who could manipulate time. He couldn't defy that. The only loophole had stemmed from the Observants' ignorance of Daniel and Danielle's potential, and Clockwork dearly hoped that his use of that loophole would not put Danielle in undue danger.

Clockwork despised this feeling of powerlessness, of uncertainty, but knew that this was what most other beings experienced constantly. Clockwork's abilities were an incredible privilege.

He wanted his children to be safe.

Behind the door he was staring at were two people who wanted the same thing.

Briefly, Clockwork considered changing his appearance to something more impressive. He did want to impress the Fentons, in more ways than one. It wouldn't be wrong to say that he wanted to frighten them, just a little bit. He was a ghost, and Daniel was his. They had hurt him. More than once. It was not wrong to want them to be afraid.

However, that would likely be unproductive, and Daniel would not thank him for it. Besides, too large a change between what he looked like when he was with Daniel and what he looked like when he was with the elder two Fentons would be remarked upon. It was best to just go in as he was. He would be unsettling enough for humans.

"Time in," he said.
The fight between Ellie and the spectral doctor turned vicious fast. Neither wanted to use anything that could be called 'area of effect,' or that could easily miss, so they moved into a close range melee. At least, that's how Ellie was interpreting events.

The 'doctor' kept screaming about test subjects. Ellie screamed right back, only partially aware of what she was saying. Something about failing his ethics tests in college. That wasn't a bad one. She should save that for if she ever fought a deranged scientist again.

Considering that she was in Missing Theory, that was likely.

The ghost fought with syringes, three in each hand. He got in a couple early, grazing shots on Ellie's. Each needle scratch went numb seconds latter. Actually getting an injection would be bad.

Ellie needed a weapon of her own.

Ellie wasn't as good at ice as Danny was, but she was better at pure ectoplasm constructs, courtesy of training with her 'dad,' so smacking the scientist around with a giant green flyswatter was simplicity itself. The implied disrespect also made the ghost furious. Furious was dangerous, but, as Vlad had drilled into her, furious meant distracted. Distracted meant vulnerable.

Ellie whistled.

The ghost, laser-focused on Ellie, never even saw Cujo.

The huge canine ghost clamped his teeth around the scientist's midsection, shook him back and forth, and flung him away at high speed.

"Good boy, Cujo!" said Ellie, patting him on the head as he shrunk back down to puppy size. "I knew you could do it." Cujo wagged his tail briefly, but then whined, and darted down to the surface of the island.

Ellie, as much as she wanted to go to Danny right away, paused, surveying the scene below her. There was Danny, half-held by his balding teacher, at the center. Several other students lay unconscious surrounding them. Others still were up, moving shakily around the island, looking for cover, or simply sitting, staring. It didn't look like any of them had been up for very long.

The air tasted burnt with fear and confusion, and Ellie could hear Danny's core weeping. It made her bones hurt on the inside.

It looked like she had her work cut out for her.
Ellie dropped to the island, next to Danny. The other students could wait. Danny would probably argue about that, but he was unconscious. So he'd just have to deal with it.

Her eyes traced over Danny's injured and beaten form. Not only did this not look good, but... "He isn't putting out any energy," she said.

"What?" asked Danny's teacher. His name was Mr Lancer, if she recalled correctly.

She looked up, searching his face.

"Please," said Mr Lancer. "I know. If there's anything I can do to help..."

"He- Usually, when I'm around him, he puts out extra energy because I used to not be stable... It's like an instinct thing which isn't very healthy, mind you, 'cause our bodies aren't supposed to do that, but... He's really hurt. I- We need to get him somewhere safe. We need to get you all somewhere safe, and you all need to calm down!" she shouted. "We've already chased off the other guy, okay?"

Many, although not all, of the students stopped screaming.

"Valerie!" snapped Ellie, searching for and finding the girl. Gosh, she didn't look much better than Danny. Whatever. She was still more together than almost everyone else. "Get everyone up, we've gotta get somewhere safe."

"I- Danielle, what are you doing here?"

"I'll explain when you do, for right now, I need to deal with my bro- with Danny. Go get everyone up," she ordered again, turning her attention back to Danny.

Honestly, she didn't even know where to start. She wasn't exactly a medical professional. She was almost afraid to touch him.

The wisps had no such compunctions. The dozen or so little wisps that had followed her out to Missing Theory were ghosting up and down Danny's body, putting out energy. They clustered around his ankle in particular. She hoped that they knew what they were doing. From what she had heard, they had overloaded Danny massively the first time they had met him.

Now, the question was, where could she take these guys, and how would she get them there? There weren't any areas under truce nearby except- She groaned. The Digressed Tower would not be a fun place to bring a bunch of humans. This was going to be a train wreck.

"Your name is Danielle, right?" asked one of Danny's classmates. His name might have been Mikey.

"Ellie, yeah," she said, distractedly. "Okay, I think that I know a place where you'll be safe but how am I going to get you all there?" The island was, well, an island. "Danny didn't get a chance to teach any of you guys how to fly, did he?"

"That's a thing?" asked Mikey. "We can do that?"
"I'll take that as a no," said Ellie. Maybe Valerie could take someone with her hover board? No, that wouldn't work. She could carry two other people, tops. Ellie would have her hands full with Danny. A few people could ride on Cujo if he got big, and then... That left, like, more than a dozen people. Heck. She couldn't leave them here. Well, technically she could, physically speaking, and she could probably convince herself that Danny needed more help than they did... That would be really easy, actually, since he was curled up in Mr Lancer's lap, unconscious and crying. But if she left these guys here, they'd be picked up by some mad scientist or another, and Ellie knew exactly what that felt like. And then... "Valerie, is your suit working?" Valerie could probably fight off low-power ghosts.

Valerie paused from shaking awake one of her classmates. "No," she said finally. Then she caught sight of Cujo. Her eyes widened. "Oh my god.. That's-! That's the dog! That stupid ghost dog!"

She took a threatening step forward, and Cujo yipped and growled, interposing himself between Danny and Valerie.

"Not the time, Val," snapped Ellie. "Work out your issues with my dog later."

"Your dog?" asked Valerie. Then she shook her head. "No. You're right. You're right. How is Danny?"

"He's..." Ellie trailed off. "I've seen worse?" She hated how that came out as a question.

"Yeah! What was happening with Fenton anyway?" asked... Dash. That was was Dash. "He was glowing, and, like, there was that sword. Where did that come from?"

Ellie winced. It sounded like Danny had a lot to explain. Ellie shrugged. "I don't know, I wasn't here."

"Speaking of which, Miss Gray," said Mr Lancer. "I'd like to know how we got here."

The students erupted into a dozen more-or-less consistent explanations.

"Wow," said Ellie. "You guys are really gullible."

"Oh come on," said Valerie. "She looked human, she had a human disguise."

"Valerie, dude. First off, is every human you've ever met trustworthy? And secondly, just because someone looks human, it doesn't mean that they are human. You know me, right?"

"Right..." said Valerie slowly.

"That doesn't mean that you shouldn't trust me, I just, like, yeah. Danny told you about liminality, right?"

Valerie was interrupted before she could answer by a girl wearing pink. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to the Digressed Tower," said Ellie. "It's a truce zone. We shouldn't be attacked there. I just need to figure out a way to get you all..." Ellie trailed off as a movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Several smaller rocks and floating islands had lined up at the edge of the island, forming a path. "What the heck?"

She flew over to the impromptu path, Danny's classmates trailing behind her. She gazed up along it's length. It looked like it was going in the right direction. This was weirdly convenient.
"Okay," said Ellie. "It looks like we do have a way to get there."

"What?" said Valerie. "We're just going to follow this sketchy path that appeared out of nowhere while you were talking about it? You were saying that I'm gullible. Doesn't this just scream trap to you?"

"You have a better idea, Valerie?" asked Ellie, putting her hands on her hips, and floating a little so that she was at eye level with the other girl. "Besides, we've got a bunch of people who all want to get out of here, so the Zone could just be responding to that. I've see that before. Or-" Her eyes flicked to Danny. He did have a tendency to pull powers out of nowhere. Could he be doing this, somehow? No. Not when he was unconscious. "Look, this isn't any worse than you blindly doing whatever Vlad tells you, is it? And it's way, way better than you blindly following freaking Spectra of all people. So let's get everyone up, and get to the Tower, so that you can rest, and I can go get help from Elysium or something. Okay?"
Chapter 103

Chapter 103: Obligation

It had become obvious that Danny and the others were no longer in Elysium. Painfully so.

Jazz, Sam, and Tucker were sitting in a... Actually, Jazz didn't know what to call this type of room. A sitting room? A waiting room? A reception room? It could have been called any of those, but the furniture was unremittingly Greek, and ghostly Greek at that. There weren't really chairs, but these reclining couches.

They were waiting here because, once the entire island of Elysium had been searched, there wasn't much that they could do. The three of them could manipulate ectoplasm enough to hover in place and sort of move around, but beyond that they weren't very useful. Not compared to ghosts who could cover much more ground, and could actually defend themselves against whoever had taken Danny.

Someone had to have taken Danny. He would never have left on his own.

They were all trying to distract themselves. Jazz herself was bent double over her book, trying to figure out how to use what was in it. Tucker was typing away at his PDA, and he had, somehow, managed to find a laptop, another phone, three very old looking desktops, a small satellite dish, and an antenna to plug into it. She suspected that he was trying to jury rig them to detect Danny's energy. Sam was slouched down on one of the couches, glaring at a potted plant. Jazz didn't know what was up with that, but there was probably something going on there, too.

Jazz hated this. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened. It wasn't the first time she had to wait while Danny was off who-knows-where, injured, possibly, probably, in danger. But she was going to do her very best to make sure that it was the last.

Suddenly, Tucker dropped his PDA. That was a shock. Tucker never dropped his PDA.

"Are you okay?" asked Sam, pushing herself up into more of a sitting position.

"This isn't working," said Tucker.

Jazz bit her lip. "Well, it- If you're looking for Danny, none of that is really designed for that," she said, trying to be comforting.

"I know," said Tucker, looking down at his PDA. "That doesn't make it okay." Then he stood up, grabbing his PDA and putting it in his pocket. "I'm going to go talk to the Egyptians."

"I'll go with you," said Sam, hurriedly.

"Are you sure that's safe?" asked Jazz.

"Hey," said Tucker, his voice high and nervous, "Danny said that he's on good terms with the Egyptians, so..." Tucker shrugged. "It should be fine?"

"Tucker," said Jazz, trying to keep at least some of her stress out of her voice, "you do realize how long the 'Egyptian' culture lasted for, right? You realize that Danny is only on good terms with the
"Feathers, right?"

"I know that!" said Tucker. "I'm not an idiot. I study stuff. Especially stuff that is directly relevant to not getting brainwashed by my jerky past life or- or whatever Duulaman is to me."

"I wasn't- I didn't mean- Um." Jazz licked her lips, snapped her book closed, and stood up. "I'm coming too!"

"Great," said Tucker.

"Good to establish that," snarked Sam, shooting one last glare at the potted plant.

It didn't take too long to get directions to where the Egyptian ambassadors were staying. Everyone in the halls was busy, trying to either set up search parties or repair damage from the battle, but they recognized the three humans. No one begrudged them a few seconds and a pointed finger.

Interestingly, the Egyptians weren't idle either. One of them was standing outside their room, speaking (in Egyptian) into a telephone. Not a new telephone, either, or one of those 'GZ' steampunk-looking phones that tech-oriented ghosts sometimes had, but an incredibly old-fashioned one with a separate earpiece and mouthpiece. A second Egyptian ghost was holding up the contraption, with one of the jackals standing nearby, wearing a satellite (connected to the large, boxy phone with wires) on its head.

Jazz felt her mind stutter to a halt. Yes, she had seen weird things in the Ghost Zone, but this felt exceptionally weird for some reason.

"Um," said Tucker. "Hi?"

The ghosts jumped, startled, hanging in the air. "Great king!" exclaimed the one who had been speaking, dropping the receiver. He drifted eagerly forward, but stopped himself several feet from the trio. Behind him, the second ghost stumbled and dropped the phone.

"I- Um," said Tucker, staring at the contraption with some consternation. "What are you doing?"

"I was speaking on the telephone device!" said the ghost, smiling. "We learned of your love of technology, great king, and we have taken it upon ourselves to modernize."

"Cool," said Tucker. "So we were- I was wondering.-"

It was at that point that Box Ghost hurtled down the hallway. He then seized the phone, pulling out the wires, and zoomed away at high speed, cackling loudly.

"You know," said Jazz, contemplatively, "I really should have known that would happen the moment I thought of that as boxy."

"That is the fourth one this week," said the Egyptian ghost, as the jackal growled and took off after the Box Ghost.

"We were wondering if you could help us find our friend," blurted out Tucker. "Danny. Phantom, I mean. He's missing."

The Egyptian blinked. "But of course, great king. We have been doing so." He blinked again, tipping his head to one side, and hummed. "But perhaps we could show you how you, yourself, could help. Your powers are very great. You need only unlock them."
Clockwork's vision cleared without warning to his mixed relief and consternation. Relief, because he could see that Daniel was going to be fine (although he certainly wasn't at the moment), consternation, because, from what he could now see, much of the work that he and Frostbite had done on Daniel's core had been undone.

At the moment, there was little Clockwork could do, however. He had roped himself down with this obligation to Daniel's parents, and he had to carry it through.

Issitoq received a new vision of the future, more terrible than any he had received before. It took him to the floor, clutching at his head. His subordinates crowded around him, trying to lend aid.

Horrible images flashed in front of his eyes. The citadel of the Observants burning, thrown down, brick by glowing brick, crushed under the feet of that thing. A crown of ice and silver sparking on snow-colored hair. A pack of green and black dogs following at the heels of abominations. Water and fire and frost, time itself shattering, coming under its rule. The Infinite Realms, warping and changing, unrecognizable, islands on islands, unnatural colors bleeding through the veil. No. No, this could not be allowed. Issitoq had an obligation, and would follow it to its bitter, bloody end.
Chapter 104

Chapter 104: Three Steps Back

Danny was laying on Mr Lancer. This was good. Mr Lancer was soft and warm and comfortable and he had feelings. Good feelings. Concerned feelings. They were tasty. Danny was hungry.

Were people talking? People could be talking.

Danny snuggled closer to the soft and the safe, whimpering as something (everything) hurt. Hurt, hurt, hurt. It hurt so much. He curled inwards. Here was Mr Lancer. Mr Lancer was an adult. A safe adult. Danny had done his homework. It was fine. No yelling. Please.

(He was aware that this train of thought did not make a huge amount of sense.)

Then-

Was that Valerie?

Every nerve in his body was suddenly on high alert. His eyes snapped open and he pulled himself up by the fabric of Mr Lancer's shirt, panting. This was his Mr Lancer. His, his, his. He would protect. Valerie would not touch. No.

Oh. There was Ellie. Ellie.

She looked worried, so he gave her a shaky smile. But then his eyes slid off of Ellie, searching for Valerie. Valerie. There were a lot of his people here, actually. Valerie. What was she doing? What was she doing here with Ellie. Was she working for Vlad again? Was she hunting Ellie again? She couldn't be hunting Ellie! No! That was a no, couldn't be allowed. Why would she be doing that? Why was she touching Sarah? No. No touching! No touching for Valerie!

"Danny, Danny, no," said Ellie, gently touching his face, turning it so that he was looking back at her. "It's okay. Breathe. Look at me. Relax." She ran her hand through his hair and down the back of his neck. Now Danny noticed the little ones, the little ghosts. So nice. So sweet. He noticed Cujo.

"Good puppy," he said, leaning back against Mr Lancer's shirt and closing his eyes. "Ellie, what happened?" Something petulant and ghostly might have snuck into the last word.

"Uh, it sounds like you got into a fight with Spectra?"

"Oh," said Danny. That did make sense. That made sense. But why did Valerie shoot him? What did he do wrong? It hurt. He briefly pried his eyes open again, letting them flutter around for a moment before closing them. "Where?"

"Um," said Ellie. "We're in the Grinder."

"Wha?"

"The Grinder. Missing Theory."

He jolted awake again. "No," he said. Missing Theory was not a good place and hadn't been for decades. Over half a century, really.
"It's okay, it is okay, I'm going to get everyone to a safe place. Promise." Somehow, she got her fingers in just the right places, moved them in just the right way to unknot his muscles. Right. Cousin. Sister. Twin. Clone. Very nice. His head lolled back, his neck suddenly too weak to hold it up.

"Okay," said Ellie as Danny rotated slightly to hug Mr Lancer. He was clearly asleep. "Just keep, um, petting him."

"He's not a dog, Ellie," said Valerie, crossly.

"Yeah, I'm just not taking the time to flip through a freaking thesaurus, okay, Val? Keep petting him, he'll probably stay asleep, one less problem. Um. I'm going to put you on Cujo. You keep a hold on Danny. Everyone else, we're going to walk to the Digressed Tower. Yay. Cujo, come here."

"Ah, Danielle," said Mr Lancer, trying to get more of a handle on the situation. "Why did Danny react like that?"

"It's Ellie," said the ghost girl, "and, um. Jazz told me once that Danny doesn't get a lot of, you know, gentle physical contact except when he's actually safe, so he tends to fall relax... Or something like that. I wasn't really paying attention." She paused to adjust the position of the ghost dog. "Something about it being reassuring?"

"That's good to know," said Mr Lancer, adjusting his grip on Danny, who was nuzzling into his shoulder like a small child and making some very distressing noises. That actually did explain a lot about how Daniel acted. "But what I meant was, why did he react like that to the name of this... Place."

"I-" said Ellie. "I will explain once we're all moving okay? Is everyone up?"

Danielle was a much harder task maker than Danny, or any of his shadows had been. Although, that might have been because of where they were. In the short time that they had been on the road, they had been attacked twice more. Ellie had driven them off easily both times, but the attacks had clearly put her on edge.

"You guys have to hurry up," she said, for what must have been the fifth or sixth time. The large green dog Mr Lancer was riding ruffed in agreement, and Mr Lancer adjusted his one-handed grip on the dog's collar.

"That's easy for you to say when you can fly!" snapped Valerie. "Why are you acting like this?"

"Like what?" asked Ellie, scowling down at Valerie.

"Like, mean!" said Paulina. "Phantom would never treat us like this!"
The ghost girl flipped over in the sky. The ghost in Mr Lancer's lap whimpered, and Mr Lancer realized that his hands had stilled. Ellie had been right. Danny had become agitated each time he stopped. Of course, he had also become agitated during the fights, and whenever Mr Lancer began to work himself into a panic. Keeping Danny calm was having the side effect of keeping Mr Lancer calm.

"You want to know why I'm acting mean?" asked Ellie, voice dangerous. "Gee, I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm trying to get you to a safe place, but you keep stopping and complaining. Maybe it's because you were in a safe place before, but then you decided to go ahead and kidnap my cousin-" Ellie broke off, skin paling. "Danny. You kidnap Danny, who put a lot of effort into getting you to that safe place in one piece. So, forgive me if I'm not going to be as nice about it as he was." She zoomed back to the front. Or tried to.

"Your- Wait, Ellie, your cousin? I thought that Phantom was your cousin!" shouted Valerie.

"Shh!" hissed Ellie, swinging around. "Do you want to be attacked again?"

"I thought that you were Phantom's sister," said Hannah.

"I- Um."

"Miss Gray," said Mr Lancer, trying to defuse the situation at least a little bit. "Perhaps you should let Miss Phantom lead us on? So that we can get under cover?"

Valerie glared up at him fiercely. "She hasn't even told us where that is, not really. I want at least one answer before I even think of trusting ghosts again!"

Ellie's face crumpled. "You don't trust me?"

"I- I didn't mean that. You aren't really a ghost, after all-"

"What are you talking about?" interrupted Dash. "She's definitely a ghost."

"No, she's not," said Valerie as Ellie glared. "She's not a ghost at all. She's human, like we are. She just- She's just been used as an experiment by ghosts. Ellie, if you just realized what they've done to you-"

Ellie's face was a study in disbelief. "Is this something that Spectra told you?"

"Just because she said it doesn't mean it isn't true," protested Valerie.

"Miss Gray, she had you shoot me," said Mr Lancer, trying to keep the hurt out of his voice.

"Look, Val-" started Ellie, before flinching and and glancing quickly around, as if she had heard something.

"Just one answer, Ellie," continued Valerie. "Just give me one answer. One full, complete answer."

"I- Fine," said Ellie, eyes still scanning the horizon. They snapped back to fix Valerie with a glare. "One answer, but then you have to stop complaining, okay?"

Valerie hesitated, then nodded. "How are you related to Danny? Really. This Danny."

Ellie inhaled sharply, floating back slightly. Her eyes darted to where Danny laid curled against Mr Lancer.
Then she sighed, as if in defeat, and descended to land on the ‘road.’

"You were right about me being an experiment,” said the girl, voice bitter. "But it was just Vlad. He made me."

"What, like, he's your dad?” asked Valerie.

"You could call him that, yeah,” said Ellie. "But we don't share any DNA."

"Hold up!” said Hannah. "Ghosts have DNA? And by Vlad, do you mean Vlad Masters? Because I knew there was something sketchy about him-"

"*Please* don't yell. And yeah, Vlad Masters. He's liminal. Really, really liminal. He-"

"He can turn into a ghost,” interrupted Valerie. "Yeah, I know."

"Great,” said Ellie, and Mr Lancer felt his world come apart a bit more. He, like Hannah, had always felt like there was something off about the latest mayor of Amity Park, if he really wanted to get into, there had always been something off about all of Amity, much as Daniel had explained. However, saying that Vlad Masters could *turn into a ghost* was a bit beyond that.

"Just like you, actually,” continued Valerie, an edge of anger on her voice.

"Uncool, Val. Really uncool. You want to know how I'm related to Danny? It's because Vlad decided to use his DNA to make my human half, okay? He took Danny's DNA, probably because he's obsessed with his mom, and then he took Phantom's ectosignature and stuff, then he squished them together and *bang* that's me. Except, oops, he somehow managed to make me a girl, so he didn't want me until he decided that he wanted to know why I didn't melt right away like all of the other clones he had made, which was a thing that had been happening. Okay? Okay. Now let's go."

No one moved. It was like Ellie's words had frozen them.

"I didn't follow all of that,” said Mikey, his voice higher pitched than was usual, "but doesn't that mean that Danny's sort of your dad?"

"Oh, Ancients, no. No. More like a weird sort-of twin. We call each other cousins, okay? I mean, look." There was a bright flash of light, and Mr Lancer had to shield his eyes. "We look like we're the same age!"

"Why'd he pick Phantom?” asked Hannah, eagerly, as Mr Lancer cautiously looked up.

"One answer,” said Danielle. "I said one answer. Now let's go.” Mr Lancer felt his jaw drop. She really looked just like Danny, black hair, blue eyes, even the same style of clothing. He should have expected something like this, but seeing this transformation, this *impossible* transformation, from a spirit to a flash and blood human was a lot different than just hearing about it.

"It's probably because Phantom is a ghost copy of Danny," said Valerie, her tone that of someone speaking to herself.

"What? Where'd you hear that?” asked Hannah as Ellie gasped.

Valerie looked at Hannah. "I overheard the Fentons talking. They said something like that.” She turned back to Ellie. "It's true, isn't it?"

There was another flash of light, and the ghost was back. "Shut up."
"This is important."

"No, shut up," said Ellie, voice hushed, harsh. "We aren't alone."

She floated up several feet and then turned in a full circle, eyes burning bright.

"There's something here that's strong enough to set off my ghost sense even though we're in the Ghost Zone."
Maddie's first impression of Clockwork was 'distracted.' How that stood out to her from behind his obvious, blatantly supernatural nature, she didn't know, but there it was.

The ghost didn't even have legs, instead favoring a long, sinuous, misty tail. His skin was blue, his eyes red lights in shadowed pits. He had fangs. His voice was deep and dark, deeper than the hollow carved in his chest. He was something out of a horror movie, even more so than Azalea, and she had bees flying in and out of her ears.

Clockwork barely spoke as Azalea and Astraea lead them down the hallways of Libra. Maddie got the impression that he was examining her and Jack, but not in an intense way. It was more cursory than that. It was more like he was only confirming what he already knew than trying to find new information. It was unsettling.

Perhaps more unsettling was how all of the other ghosts in the halls bowed out of his way as they passed.

They came to a tall rectangular opening in the side of the hallway. It was framed by carved posts, and had an utterly mundane white sign with black text, the kind you could find at the entrances to museums, set in the middle.

One line was in English. It said, 'Welcome to the Three Knives Gallery!'

"And, we're here!" said Azalea.

"'Three Knives?'" said Maddie, dubiously.

"It's the only name the artists could all agree on," explained Azalea.

"I don't think they actually agreed on it," said Astraea, raising one hand to her lips. "They just sent the form back with three knives sticking out of it."

"Yeah, but they sent it back, didn't they?"

"True. Shall we?" the ghost floated on, past the sign. "Now, if I recall correctly, this first part is a study of the journey of Nick Glass?"

"You are correct," intoned Clockwork.

Maddie exchanged a glance with Jack and followed the ghosts in, Wolfsbane close behind them.

The first painting looked normal enough at first glance. It had a renaissance look to it. Grandiose, but focused on a simple scene, a street in what was probably a European city. Germany, perhaps, judging by the whitewashed walls and strong crossbeams. Most of the people were just going about their business, while one group on the right hand side was trying to catch hold of a runaway carriage. It was a scene of impending disaster. Maddie's eyes caught on a little boy, no older than ten, walking across the street, carrying a tray of glass bottles. He was painted mid-step, head turned slightly to the commotion to his left.
"This is just the artist's impression of the event," said Azalea. "He wasn't actually there."

"It is remarkably accurate, however," said Clockwork. "All things considered."

"I don't understand," said Jack. "This looks like a normal painting."

"It is a normal painting, though?" said Azalea, head tipped to one side.

"The significance of the painting," said Clockwork, "is that it depicts the moment before the death of Nicholas Glass." He turned slightly. "This next one depicts the moment just after."

Maddie scanned the picture again. Her lips tightened. The boy, younger than Danny, blonde hair blowing in the wind, small fingers clutched around the box, was shown here seconds before his death. Only ghosts would so prominently, so proudly, display something so cruel.

Her eyes then flicked to the second painting. It was different, incredibly so. The paints were unearthly and layered thick upon the canvas. They shimmered and sparkled. Some glowed. As Maddie stared at the painting, whole layers faded in and out of sight.

"You would see more if you were a ghost," said Azalea. "Our senses are different from yours."

"Truly, it is a pity," said Wolfsbane, "that you cannot experience the full glory of Ormolu's work. I am told, however, that you should be able to experience it well enough."

"Told by who?" asked Maddie, sharp and suspicious.

"Other humans and liminals who have been here," said Clockwork, almost, but not quite, dismissively. "You are hardly the first."

Maddie returned her attention to the painting. It was mostly swirls of different shades of green, clouds of ectoplasm, buoying up lavender and violet islands, but in the center of the piece, on the largest of the islands, stood a translucent figure, it's back to the viewer. It was small, with robin's-egg blue hair, and white skin. Its shoulders were embedded with glass like diamonds and emeralds. The figure itself was surrounded by a halo of light. The mood of the painting was reverential.

The next several paintings were more like the second. They were pictures of the child's ghost moving through Ghost Zone, interacting with various ghosts, many of whom seemed to be offering him shelter, a place in their homes. Even so, each subsequent painting showed him somewhere else, with different ghosts.

"Who is this person?" asked Maddie, glaring at the latest. "Some leader of yours? Are these some, some chronicle of his rise to power?"

"No," said Wolfsbane. "Just of his quest to return to his family."

"That's what he was doing when he died," added Azalea cheerfully. "It's such a cute little Obsession isn't it? And fascinating. Not many people want to get home that badly."

"This is where he succeeds in doing so," said Clockwork, indicating a picture some distance down the gallery.

Maddie walked up to it. It was of the street depicted in the first picture, but, this time, instead of a disaster, the focal point was a swirling green portal some distance above the ground. The boy was peeking out of it, smiling. The next several scenes looked like they were of the ghost setting up a haunt in his former home.
"I don't understand. Why is this so important to you?" asked Maddie.

"Children are rare," said Clockwork. "They are precious to us."

"They're precious to us as well."

Behind her, one of the other ghosts made a small, polite sound of disbelief.

"They are rarer here," continued Clockwork. "It is not easy for ghosts to have children. Children among the Dead are rarer still." He floated onward, slowly, to the next section.

These paintings seemed to be by a different artist, in a slightly different style. They still featured children, however: a little girl surrounded by an army of dolls, androgynous twins twined around one another, an older boy wearing a chef's hat, a mermaid girl, a young woman with hair made of fire and a neon-pink guitar, a trio of teenagers wearing lab-coats gathered around something that looked disturbingly like a nuclear reactor.

"Obsessions," said Clockwork, by way of explanation. "It is difficult for a child to become a ghost. It is believed that it is harder for a child to attain the state of mind necessary at the moment of death."

"But when they do," said Azalea. "Wow."

"There is a belief," said Clockwork, "that those children who become ghosts are those who would have been listed among human greats, should they have lived. There is truth in this. As with all the Dead, they had enough passion to sustain them beyond death, and they had it as a child. But children tend to be more singular, more focused, in their pursuits than other ghosts."

"You've drawn them almost like people draw saints," observed Maddie.

"That's an interesting comparison," said Astraea. "Is that true?"

"I don't know," said Azalea. "I was dead before saints were really a thing."

"Art is interpreted by the consumer," said Clockwork.

"So the point of this was to show us how much you value children," said Maddie, folding her arms.

"Yes and no," said Clockwork. "It isn't as if this gallery was put together just for you."

"That's true," said Astraea. "This gallery is so that advocates and witnesses can relax and be entertained in between sessions. We aren't going to put anything unduly distressing here. That's what the doors are for." She paused, tilting her head to one side. "Active holding, too, I suppose. I am told that the artwork in there is rather violent in nature."

Maddie frowned. Though it was, in retrospect, obvious that this wasn't something that was here just for them, but that fact was very nearly offensive.

Then it hit her. This was art made by ghosts. <i>Ghosts.</i> They didn't portray tired and tried themes, either. The ghosts had picked their subjects, had made these things, had demonstrated creativity, something she hadn't believed was possible, not really.

She took a deep breath, trying to settle herself.

"Well," she said, instead of screaming. "What's next?"

They walked through the gallery, Azalea taking most of the burden of explication. Then they
reached a large painting, one that was easily twice as tall as Jack, and even wider than it was tall. It shone in shades of blue and white, with highlights of neon red, green, silver, and gold. There must have been hundreds of figures in the picture, not all of them recognizably humanoid. Many, but not all, or even most, were children or teenagers. They were what looked like a terraced hall carved entirely of ice, gathered around a tall, snow-crusted, and, surprisingly, decorated tree. A small figure dressed in white stood in front of the tree, raising a flute of sparkly red liquid in a kind of toast. Other characters either looked on, or engaged in their own small vignettes. It looked like some kind of celebration.

"Children's Day," said Azalea. "It's the seventh day after the Solstice. Usually. Some people do it earlier, some later."

"You would call it the twenty-eighth of December," said Clockwork. "The date falls during what many call the Christmas Truce."

"You celebrate Christmas?" asked Jack. "Does that mean that Santa is a ghost?"

Maddie groaned internally, but tamped down on the desire to argue.

"Some ghosts celebrate Christmas," said Clockwork. "Others celebrate Yule, Hanukkah, Natalis Invicti, Yalda, the Festival of Lights, or the Solstice itself. All of us, however, celebrate the Truce, a time of peace throughout the Infinite Realms. This particular celebration took place just last year, in the Lands of Ice."

Azalea hummed, harmonizing with her bees, and floated upwards, closer to the top of the painting. "Here's Lady Tsurara and her attendants," she said, indicating an Asiatic ghost with long, black hair, snow colored skin, and blue lips. She drifted then, picking out other, apparently important, ghosts.

"Daniel and Danielle attended this celebration," said Clockwork when Azalea paused.

"You mean," said Jack, "Danny's in this picture?"

"He is," confirmed Clockwork.

Maddie scanned the painting, looking for Danny, searching for his dark hair, and blue eyes, but came up empty. Then she realized that she shouldn't be looking for her son Danny, the human. She should be looking for her son Danny, the ghost. She should be looking for Phantom. She found him then, braiding ice-colored flowers into the wispy green hair of a younger ghost.

He wore white, like most of the other ghosts in the picture, and painter had rendered his eyes a luminous, icy blue. A green-eyed girl that looked far too much like Danny stood nearby, grinning over a glass of what looked like ectoplasm. She already had several flowers in her hair, and was twirling another between her fingers.

Danny looked happy. Carefree.

Later, they were led back to their room, the door locked behind them. Both Maddie and Jack sat quietly for some time. The 'field trip' had given Maddie much more to think about than she had expected.
"He was in the picture," said Jack.

"He was."

"So was that girl, Danielle. I think that she must be the clone he told us about."

Maddie nodded despondently, then rubbed her eyes. "This really isn't something that just happened to him, is it?"

"It's been going on for a while."

"No, I mean, it isn't something that is just- that's just been done to him. He's part of it. He's chosen to be part of it." She swallowed, the edges of her eyes burning. "I can't believe we missed all of this."

"He was trying to hide it."

"That's not an excuse. We're his parents. We should have noticed that he had- That he- That he practically died, right under our noses. Did we even notice him going off to that- that party?" Jack didn't answer, but then, he didn't need to. "Are we bad parents?"

"I don't know."
Chapter 106

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not adding anything yesterday! I kept forgetting, or being in the middle of something when I remembered, and when I finally remembered while I was in a place to do something about it, it was almost midnight, so I went to sleep instead. Sleep is important.

Chapter 106: Encounter on the Road

"My, my," said a voice that Ellie knew too well. "I hadn't realized that you had grown so sensitive, my dear little ermine. Or perhaps it is I who has grown in power."

"Vlad," hissed Valerie, unhelpfully.

The ghost flickered into visibility in the middle of the crowd, causing some of the students to scream, and crowd to the edge of the road. With a lazy flick of his hand, Vlad called up a construct to push those few who were teetering back up onto the path. "I couldn't help but notice," continued Vlad, as if he hadn't nearly caused a disaster, "that you felt the need to reveal my secret to all these people."

"You could have stopped me," said Ellie, building up a charge of ectoplasm in her far hand, "seeing as you're this close and all."

"Oh? And how would I do that? I could never hurt my beloved daughter."

Ellie's eyes narrowed. So, this was a ploy to get on the good side of the court, to rack up points in the arena of public opinion. To convince them to give him Danny.

"What are you talking about?" asked Valerie, sounding utterly disgusted. "You tried to melt her."

"A misunderstanding," said Vlad smoothly, flicking a bit of imaginary dust off of his robe. "I had no idea that you were in such dire straits. I just wanted Miss Grey to bring you back home. I missed you."

Ellie could almost believe him. Almost. She wasn't as gullible as she had been. She'd been born two years ago, not yesterday.

"What do you want, Vlad?"

"To help, of course. Provided," he smiled sharply, "that you keep my secret. If it got out... Well, I couldn't be responsible for the consequences."

"Consequences?" asked Mia, voice thin.

"Yes. Consequences," said Vlad, examining the back of his glove. "You may note that I have quite a lot of power at my disposal, both, shall we say, temporal and spiritual. I generally prefer not to exercise it."
"You're not here to help," accused Valerie. "You're just here to take advantage!"

"Really, my dear, I-"

Danny groaned loudly, and Ellie was momentarily torn between continuing to glare at her 'father,' and rushing to Danny. Then Danny moaned again, and won out. To his credit, Vlad looked worried, too, and had the sense to stay back when Ellie hissed and Cujo growled at him.

Danny was rubbing his eyes with one hand, the other being occupied with holding onto Mr Lancer.

"Danny?" said Ellie, softly, not wanting to startle him. "Are you awake?"

"Waszgoinon?" He pulled back his hand. "Whozzere? 'Llie?"

"Yeah, it's me. How do you feel?"

"Nh," said Danny, pulling himself up. "Ow. Mier Lanner?"

"Danny, maybe you should lie back down," said the teacher, putting a steadying hand on Danny's back.


"I'm here to help, little badger. I heard that you were hurt, and lost, and came straight away to help."

"Really?" said Danny. He didn't sound nearly suspicious enough for Ellie's taste. He swayed against Mr Lancer, tucking his head into the bend between Mr Lancer's neck and shoulder. "Oh. Cujo. Hello. Good puppy. And hello my good buddies on my foot. You're so good and fuzzy."

"Daniel," said Vlad, sounding miffed that Danny had gotten distracted so easily.

"Hi Vlad," said Danny, he blinked once, twice, hard. "Whatcha doing?"

"I am here," said Vlad, "to bring you and your..." He trailed off frowning. "Where are your friends?"

"They're- They're-" Danny sat up straight, wide-eyed. "Ellie, where are Sam and Tucker? Where's Jazz?"

"They're fine, they're back in Elysium," said Ellie, trying to be soothing, shooting another glare at Vlad.

"Oh," said Danny. "Okay." He sounded somewhat more lucid now. "Ellie, where are we, how did we get here, and what's Vlad doing here?"

"Missing Theory, Spectra, and being a jerk," answered Ellie.

"That's not good," said Danny mildly. "Missing Theory is dangerous."

"I understand that," said Vlad, gliding closer, hands clasped behind his back. "That is why I am here, not being a jerk. I have come to take you, and your... classmates to a safe place."

"Ellie's already taking us to a safe place, though, and you tend to put price tags that are too big on your help," said Danny, tone still fairly neutral.
Vlad's lips twitched in annoyance. "Daniel, she is taking you to the Bends, and while it does operate under a truce, it is hardly a safe place."

"Safer than being with you," shot back Ellie. "Besides, I've been there tons of times, and it's perfectly fine."

"The Bends?" repeated Danny, quizzically. "Think I've heard of that..." he muttered, under his breath. "Why've you been there?"

"Well," said Ellie, "Vlad brought me there once. Then, after that, I thought that figuring out who I wasn't would help me figure out who I was."

Danny's lips moved silently as he processed that information. "Oh!" he said, suddenly. "The Digressed Tower! I've hear of that! That's the one that got set up to study psychology! That uses Sojurn's Doorknob and the Lethe to turn you into alternate reality versions of yourself and screw with your memory and stuff! That was mostly abandoned because the scientists couldn't remember the designs and plans that they agreed to outside when they were inside, and they all built different stuff, and made the floors do the wrong thing, and ran different experiments, and there wasn't any scientific rigor." He paused. "I was doing research for Jazz. Anyway, I think that has a bunch of permanent parties, now, on account of it being 'trippy.'" He smiled brightly, pleased with himself. "Clockwork hates that place!" His smile faltered, and his eyebrows went down. "Wait..."

"Hold it," said one of Danny's classmates, a blonde girl with a bob, "where are you taking us?" Several others made sounds of agreement, but they were all ignored.

"Yes," said Vlad, "so you see why it would be imprudent to bring humans to such a place. I, on the other hand, have several much more appropriate safe havens at my disposal."

"Nah, I think we're good," said Danny. "You can come with us, though. So can your friend."

Vlad's frown deepened, gaining a quality of concern. "My friend? Daniel, are you seeing double?" He glided forward, but stopped short when Cujo started growling again. "One of you check his eyes, I think he might have a concussion."

"Actually," said an entirely unfamiliar voice, "I think he is speaking of me."
Chapter 107

Chapter 107: Skills

Danny smiled vaguely in the direction of the newcomer (who was actually some distance down the road, so he probably wasn't Vlad's friend). He was aware that his emotions and thoughts were out of whack, again, but there wasn't exactly anything that he could do about it, and the wisps moving around on, and partially inside, his ankle felt so nice and soft and fuzzy. They were good friends. Good little soft fuzzy foot friends. They were so nice, helping him like this.

The new ghost looked nice, too. At least, Danny hoped that he was nice. He could tell that he was powerful, very powerful, so if he wasn't nice, that would be a problem. But he looked nice. Muscular, but in a kind of laid-back way. Not like a body builder. He was wearing an apron. A nice apron. Not that appearances really mattered in the Ghost Zone. Except that they did, sometimes. Hm. Appearances. Appearances could be deceiving.

"Hello," he said. No reason not to be polite. Yet. Even Vlad hadn't done anything too bad yet, and he had kept people from falling off the path. "My name is Danny. What's yours?"

"I am called Smith," said the ghost. "I am also going to the Digressed Tower. Shall we travel together?"

"Sure," said Danny. "The more the merrier, right?" Of course, Smith didn't look very merry. Now what had he been thinking of before? He frowned. "Hey, Ellie? Is going to the Digressed Tower really a good idea?"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to say!" exclaimed Vlad. "Apologies, Lord Smith-"

"Just Smith," said the other ghost.

"Smith. But you will have to continue your journey on your own," he made a small, supercilious incline of his head. Danny noted that he actually looked rather pale, as if the ectoplasm in his face had drained away. Huh. He wondered what could cause that. Maybe Smith had surprised Vlad more than Danny had first thought.

"That's not what I meant. Ellie, I've seen alternate reality versions of myself before, and they weren't all very nice. Some of them were really mean, and kind of scary. Are you sure this is okay?"

"Um," said Ellie, looking rather pale herself. "It doesn't actually pull different versions of you from other universes. It just... Changes you, temporarily, I guess, to be more like them. It's like being in, um, a dream, and you're one-hundred percent certain that you're a cowboy, but then you wake up, and you've never been in a hundred feet of a horse. Besides, the more important something is to you, the less likely it is to be changed. So, for ghosts, it can't change Obsessions." She paused, and Danny nodded. "Are you really Smith?" she asked. "Like, the Smith?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Cool."

"H-Hey!" said Elliot, grabbing everyone's attention. "What if we don't want to go to this- this creepy Tower place? Huh? If- If you're really Mayor Masters, can't you just, you know, take us home?"
"Elliot!" hissed Valerie. The hairs on Danny's arms and neck went up. Was Valerie going to do something bad to Elliot? Elliot was kind of stupid, but he didn't deserve to be shot. Usually. "You can't trust Vlad. Did you not just hear him threaten us and our families?"

"Yeah, but I'm not going to be running around screaming that our Mayor's a ghost! People would think that I'm crazier than Wes Weston, and he..." Elliot trailed off.

"Wes," said Hannah, "Wes thinks that Danny is Phantom."

A golden-yellow aura swirled around Jazz's hand. She held her breath. This was as strong as she had been able to make it so far. She moved her hand sharply away, but a bright yellow shape remained floating in the air in front of her. She flexed her hand, and the disembodied glowing one copied the motion. Good. Now to try moving it.

Slowly, carefully, she started to move the ghostly hand down, towards the bench in front of her. There was a small rock there that she had selected for her next test.

Unfortunately, the hand dissipated before it got very far. Jazz sighed, and looked up, across the stadium. This was where the Egyptians had brought them to train. The Greeks of Elysium, like their real world counterparts, had an appreciation for athletics. They had allowed Jazz, Sam, Tucker, and the Egyptians access to the structure without argument. There hadn't been any sports scheduled for this morning, and there were other areas for people to play, if they really wanted to after the night they'd all had. There probably would be, actually, considering Obsessions.

Jazz hoped that they weren't disturbing anyone too much. Honestly, looking at what they were all doing now, they probably didn't need the whole stadium. A large room would have more than sufficed.

Tucker, for example, had apparently hijacked his training in order to teach his 'followers' the joys of technology. He was elbows-deep in... something. Something made out of wires and pressed with hieroglyphs. His PDA was hooked up to it. At least he looked like he was enjoying it, so he had successfully distracted himself.

Sam, meanwhile, was sitting about a quarter of the way around the stadium, surrounded by a small crowd of Elysians. They looked like nymphs and dryads. At least, they looked like what Jazz expected nymphs and dryads to look like, green and floral nature spirits with long hair and white dresses. All of them had potted plants. Sam seemed to be taking turns glaring at each one.

Yeah, Jazz didn't know what was going on there, much less how Sam had attracted such a crowd. They hadn't told very many people that they were coming here, and those ghosts hadn't been around when they came in. She sighed. She wished that she had some help with this. The book was good, but there were bits that she didn't understand.

There was only one thing to do, though, and that was practice. Practice, practice, practice, even though she wanted to be out there with her little brother who was hurt and sick and probably all alone with his classmates who would neither know nor understand his needs.

She built up the aura around her hand- in her hand, too, now that she thought about it- and tried moving it again. But this, too, flickered and failed.
She tried again.

Tucker was deep in his work. So deep, he barely noticed what he was doing. He had put himself there on purpose. His best friend, favorite teacher, crush, former club-mates, and classmates were missing and here he was, explaining transistors to a bunch of dead Egyptians. Well, that wasn't quite what he was doing, he had segued from mundane electronics to ecto-electronics and ecto-entropic processes a while ago, but the point stood.

He hated feeling useless. He hated feeling helpless. If he had even the materials in the Fenton's lab... If he had the materials in Danny's lair... If technology wasn't so schizoid here in the Zone...

There were a lot of 'ifs.' But Tucker refused to be the useless friend in this situation just because he didn't have access to the internet, hardware stores, fast food, and all the other trappings of modernity. There were at least some trappings of modernity here in Elysium, Greeks and hellenophiles were still dying, after all, and that was, like, a thousand percent more than in Maddingly when it was under Aragon's rule, so there was that. He hadn't been useless in Maddingly, when they went to rescue Sam. Not that Sam had needed to be rescued. He had actually turned out to be weirdly good at archery. Weirdly good. Like he had done it before.

… Had he been twisting the wires into hieroglyphics?

… And was the... thing he had been making working better now? Was it glowing? Was it powered up? Where was the power coming from? He hadn't plugged it in while he was still working on it, had he? If nothing else, Danny's Accident had shown him that was a bad idea. He pulled his hands away.

"Did anyone plug this in? Or turn it on?" he asked.

"No, great king," said one of the Egyptians.

"Weird..." said Tucker."

"Like this," said Delphinium, holding the plant's stem between her fingers, turning the tightly furled bud so that Sam could see it. The plant was called hot house sermon, and it was a Ghost Zone native. As she watched, the bud flushed with florescent colors, and expanded, revealing a spray of brilliant stamens and a single, tall pistil. "You see?"

Sam frowned. No, she didn't see. She shook her head.

"Are you sure this is your thing?" asked another nymph, Chrysopeleia.

"Pretty sure," said Sam. "I mean, I've always liked plants, and when Undergrowth was doing his mind control thing on me I was able to do this. I just.. I don't know. What am I supposed to be
"Not see. Feel," said Chrysopeleia. "The energy, the life. The buzz beneath your skin. The way it twists, the way it curls. The spark of animation!"

Another one of the girls who had gathered around Sam like a friendly plague, laughed. "That's what you feel? Well, maybe you can feel that, but it isn't what really matters, is it?"

"I don't feel that," confirmed Delphinium, sounding confused. "I thought, excuse me here-" she then lapsed into Greek, the other nymphs and dryads either nodding in agreement and smiling, or shaking their heads and frowning. "-so it may not work in English? No, I don't think that will work. I know you don't have much Greek, but you don't happen to know any Latin, do you?" she asked Sam, hopefully.

"Not enough to follow a technical conversation," said Sam. She rubbed her hands on her knees, trying to get sap off of them. "Maybe you could just tell me how I'm supposed to feel when I'm doing this?"

"I don't think that we can," said Delphinium, slowly. "You aren't a ghost, after all. You don't have a core... Perhaps we're going about this the wrong way."

"Yeah?" said Sam, raising an eyebrow. She was trying to keep the sarcasm from her voice.

"Try focusing on the plants instead."

Sam sighed. That's what she had been doing. She propped her head up on her fist, and glared tiredly at the plant. She was getting a lot of glaring practice in, if nothing else. Danny had better be ready when he came back, because he was going to get the glare of a lifetime unless he had a really good reason for being gone, in which case Sam was going to beat the heck out of that reason.

He probably had a good reason for being gone. Sam wished he didn't. A 'good reason' usually included him getting beaten up and- Oh, who was she kidding? No matter how ridiculous Danny's existence could be, he wouldn't just run off, especially not when he was so hurt. He had clearly been kidnapped and she was worried out of her mind.

Staring at plants might have been the only thing that she could do right now, but that didn't keep her from feeling like she should be doing more. She should be out looking for Danny, or at least looking for someone who could find Danny.

Her eyes went wide.

"I am so stupid," she whispered.

"Excuse me?" said Delphinium, delicately.

Sam stood up. "I am so stupid!" she repeated. She wove through the dryads and stepped over the plants before jogging down the stone bleachers to the bottom of the arena.

"Sam?" said Jazz. "What are you doing?"

"Writing a letter!"
Chapter 108

Chapter 108: All Travels


Well, that was somewhat hurtful.

"Paulina," started Valerie, not taking her eyes off of Vlad and Smith, "this isn't the time-"

"Yeah, and it wasn't the time to play twenty questions with Ellie, either!" said Paulina. "You still did it, so what? Now we're stuck here with these two weir-! Um. People. Gentlemen."

"Excuse me," said Vlad, apparently displeased by how Paulina was referring to him.

"She's got a point," said Danny. He might have actually sang it. He wasn't sure. He was just so happy that Paulina had remembered some part of what he had been trying to teach them all, that at least some of his classmates might progress beyond the 'might as well be actively trying to kill themselves' stage. It really helped him ignore the tight ball of anxiety that had formed when he realized where he was and who he was with, as well as the giant weight that Hannah had dropped on his head.

"Get over your stupid crush already," hissed Valerie. "You just like Phantom because you think he looks pretty. Hasn't this at least taught you that appearances-"

"That's not why I like him!" said Paulina, fists clenched. "He saved my life! And he listens to me, and he answers my questions, and he's not all like, oh, because she's pretty she must be stupid." She paused. "He saved you, too," she said, with venom.

"Children," said Vlad.

"Hey, you guys-" started Ellie.

"Your attention please!" shouted Mr Lancer, at teacher volume. Wow. That made Danny's ears hurt. "Please, we are exposed here. We were attacked just an hour ago. If we are all agreed that we aren't going to attack each other we should go and have these arguments somewhere safe."

"I'm not going to attack anybody," said Danny, trying to be helpful.

"Yeah," said Ellie. She drifted backwards, down the path. "C'mon, Cujo."

Danny wobbled as Cujo began to trot long after Ellie. "Good boy, Cujo," he said. Then, quietly, "Ow."

"Are you alright?" asked Mr Lancer.

Danny shrugged. "My ankle hurts a little, I guess."

"A little," repeated Mr Lancer, his voice heavy with disbelief.

"Mhm," said Danny, nodding. "I think these guys are making it not hurt so much. But," he confided,
"they're also messing up my thinking a bit. Like a drug." He nodded again. "Friendship is the best
drug," he said, trying to communicate the seriousness of the matter to Mr Lancer. Then Danny
realized that he was sitting on top of his teacher. He blushed. "I should get off of you," he said.
"Sorry." He tried to ease himself off of Mr Lancer, but overbalanced, and nearly fell off of Cujo.

Ellie, however, had been waiting for him to do just that, or something like that, he guessed.

"Thanks, Ellie!" he said, smiling. He blinked. "I think I'm going to have to ask my little friends to
come out of my foot."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Ellie. "Your ankle is really messed up-"

"See, he can't be Phantom. He's too lame!"

"Excuse me," said Danny. "I am not lame. Most of the time. I guess I'm literally lame right now, with
my ankle and all, but I don't see how that would stop me from being who I am."

"Danny," said Ellie. "Maybe you should wait until you're feeling better to talk about this."

Vlad flew up alongside them, then, cape fluttering in the wind. "If you would just come with me,
you wouldn't have to worry about this, or," and he lowered his voice, "what that Smith might do to
your little friends. You do realize he is one of the most powerful ghosts in the Zone, don't you, little
badger?"

"I don't think he's going to do anything, though," said Danny. He was now sitting on Cujo, but was
keeping himself steady by holding onto Mr Lancer's sleeve.

"I can hear you," said Smith, from behind them.

Vlad blanched (He hid it well. Danny wouldn't have detected it if he didn't know Vlad so well).
Danny smiled absently, and started to hum at the little wisps, asking them to come out of his foot and
ankle. They complied, singing back to him, and perching on his shoulders. They tickled his neck and
cheeks, making him smile. The pain that began to build in his ankle, however, was not as pleasant.
Well, he'd experienced worse.

"Danny," said Valerie.

He tensed. He had almost forgotten how he'd gotten here, but now it was back at the forefront of the
mind.

"What?" he replied, shortly.

"I'm sorry I shot you," she said.

The other students objected to that statement.

"Why don't you say you're sorry for threatening us all at gunpoint?" asked Nathan.

"Hey, you went along with it," said Lester, defending Valerie. The various dissatisfied arguments
only escalated from there. The only common theme was that no one was particularly happy with
Valerie, or with being left in the dark, and they didn't really like the idea of going to a weird alternate
reality tower. So there was more than one theme, actually.

"At least they're still moving," said Ellie, voice flat. "I don't know how you deal with them all the
time."
"I don't, really," Danny admitted. "Being with them this long is kind of unusual. How've you been, Ellie? How was Africa?"

"Africa was good," said Ellie. "A bit too hot, though. At least in the places I went to. I think I'm going to stick to the temperate zones and the arctic for a while. But I'm going to go back eventually. Seeing all those animals was really cool. Have you ever seen a real live elephant?"

"In the zoo once, I think," said Danny.

"Doesn't count," said Ellie, decisively.

"If you came back to me," said Vlad, "you could have an elephant of your own."

The two Phantoms stared at Plasmius. "You'd buy an elephant?" asked Ellie, finally.

"If it would bring you back home, I would put up with even this..." he trailed off, looking distastefully at Cujo. "Animal."

Ellie scoffed.

"I know you don't believe me, Danielle, but all I have ever wanted is love."

"Sure," said Ellie.

"And, truly, I am here to help. The Bends are not a safe place."

"Didn't stop you from bringing me there."

"You were with me," said Vlad, with some exasperation, "and we only went to the floors that make the least dramatic changes to a person's outlook and personal history."

"Well, you're with us now," said Danny, not wanting to deal with a fight. "And it isn't like we're planning on going through the whole Tower, right?"

"Um," said Ellie. "It depends."

"On what?"

"On were exactly this road goes."

"It goes to the Tower," said Smith. "The twenty-second floor."

"Oh," said Ellie. "Why? How do you know?"

"I made this path."

"Neat," said Ellie. "So, um, Mr Smith-"

"Just Smith."

"Smith. Why are you going to the Tower?"

"I left something there that I must retrieve."

"Cool," said Ellie. "On the twenty-second floor?"

"Yes."
"That's the left/right floor, right?"

"Indeed."

"The what?" asked Danny.

"The floor that finds the most spot in your life where choosing to turn left or right was most important, and then it changes that so that you did the other thing," said Ellie.

"Oh. Okay."

"That's not going to change all that much, though, is it?" asked Mikey.

"For most people? Probably not," said Ellie. "But for some people it changes a lot."

"So," said Mr Lancer, after a moment. "What does that mean for us going through the Tower?"

"Well," said Ellie, blushing green. "Um. There's a casino attached to the Tower on the seventy-seventh floor, and there's a guy there who owes me a boat."

"Owes you a boat."

"Yep," said Ellie, popping the 'p.' "Did you know that ghost ice is really expensive in some parts of the Zone?"

"Yeah," said Danny, slowly. "But why does a guy in a casino owe you a boat?"

"Because she won it from him, duh, Fenton. You can be so dense."

"I don't want to hear that from you," said Danny, fixing Lester with a look. "Did you?" he asked Ellie.

"Yeah."

"Nice," said Danny. "But I think that trying to bring these guys through, what, fifty-five alternate realities might be too much."

"Well, there are bypasses on some of the floors, like, ramps and things built on the outside, so we wouldn't have to go through all fifty-five."

"Okay, but, um. Would we remember the bypasses?" asked Danny.

Ellie shrugged. "With so many of us, the chances should go up, right?"

"I guess," said Danny. "Maybe we should just stay on one floor and wait for someone to come get us. Pandora will be looking for us."

"Come on, when does anything ever go that smoothly for us? We'd better have a back up plan, right?"

"Okay, okay," interrupted Hannah before Danny could respond. "But are you Phantom?"

"I'm Phantom," offered Ellie.

"No, I mean, Fenton. Danny. Are you Phantom?"

The gears of Danny's mind turned slowly as he blinked at Hannah and the rest of the expectant class.
"You know," he said, "I think that with this one thing, just this once, I'm going to be a jerk, and not tell you."

"What? But- But you- Just say yes or no!"

"I keep trying to do that with Wes, but does he listen? Noooooo."

"What is wrong with you?"

"Well, for starters, my ankle is screwed up beyond belief. My lower leg looks like a sausage with some toes stuck onto it."

"Nah, it's way too lumpy to be a sausage," said Ellie.

"I didn't say that it was actually a sausage, my leg isn't made out of intestines. It just looks like a sausage. Hey Dash."

Dash's head snapped around so fast that he tripped over his own feet and nearly face planted.

"Woah," said Danny. "Are- are you okay?"

"Uh," squeaked Dash. He actually looked somewhat frightened, which was not ideal.

"I just wanted to say thank you?" said Danny, voice tilting up at the end of the sentence, no longer certain that this was a good idea. "For hitting Spectra? I mean it was kind of-

"Duh, Wimptonio," and the fear in his eyes was gone, replaced by his usual swagger, "of course I did, 'cause otherwise you'd get your wimpy butt squished."

"You- That- You realize that that had almost none of my name in it, right?"

"Aaaaand here we have the Digressed Tower," said Ellie, before Danny could go off on a rather ghostly rant about names. "Yay. Look at that."
The Digressed Tower was a lumpy, crooked, mostly oblong thing. It was not particularly pretty, or impressive, it was covered in bulging, rickety additions, and there was a distinct bend somewhere between a half and a third of the way from the top. Still, it was striking amid the relative desolation of Missing Theory.

"Cool," said Danny. "It's kind of sad that this is only thing left here after the wars, though."

"It isn't the only thing," corrected Ellie. "I'm pretty sure that there are still other communities, and there are doors to Method."

"Erm," said Mr Lancer. "What wars are you talking about?"

"The science wars of the fifties and eighties," said Ellie. "It started out as just being like, doctors and biologists and stuff about ethics, but it spilled out into other disciplines, too."

"Very good, Danielle," said Vlad. "You were paying attention after all."

"Not really," said Ellie. "Hey, Danny, do you know anyone in Method?"

"I've never been there, unless you count peaking out of the door in the Library of Tongues," said Danny. "You know how it is."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean. But, um, doesn't the Artwalk connect to Method? You know anyone on the circuit?"

"Yeah, but I don't know how to get there from here. Now, if I got within sight of the door to the Library of Tongues, that would be a different story. Still, I try not to expose myself to mad scientists more than I absolutely have to."

"I know, I know, it was just something that occurred to me. I'm sticking with the boat plan, though, don't worry."

"Science wars?" inserted Mr Lancer.

"Yeah. Blame the Nazis, I guess," said Ellie. "You can blame basically everything on the Nazis, right?"

"Right," said Danny. "But in this case it's true. Stupid Nazis, making things hard for everyone else."

"Gotta hate the Nazis," said Ellie.

"Hey," said Mikey, "are those ghosts?"

"Yeah. Don't point, it's rude," said Danny, gazing at the distant specters with an appraising eye.

"Why're you so surprised, anyway?" asked Ellie. "We did say that this was a truce zone, right? Of course there are going to be people here."
"I think I said something about the giant party, too," said Danny, picking out a floor near the top that practically strobed with rainbow colors. There must be a rave or something going on there.

"That you did. Just be cool guys, and, um, try to remember what we're trying to do. That's getting to the casino off the seventy-seventh floor, in case you weren't paying attention."

"I still think that we should just wait on the twenty-second until Pandora sends someone to get us," said Danny. "I don't want to lose anyone because we wound up on a floor where they think we kidnapped them, or something."

"You kind of did, though," said Kwan.

"Other way around, actually," said Ellie. "Seeing as you weren't paying attention, and all. But, sure, Danny, we can wait. This is just a back up plan. Because there's no way we're going to be left in peace."

"Which is why."

"Give it a rest, Vlad."

"I thought this was supposed to be a truce zone," said Mikey.

"These are ghosts," said Ricky. "Apparently they have a different definition of truce."

"Not really. Danny and I in particular just have bad luck. We get attacked all the time when we aren't supposed to."

"This is true."

"So, backup plan?"

"Casino boat is the back up plan," said Danny, resigned. He rubbed his face. "I guess trying to find a door to the Library, Method, or the Artwalk can be the third backup plan. This is going to be worse than herding cats."

(Several people objected to being called cats.)

"Come on, I've been through the whole thing. The changes aren't that bad."

"My dear," said Vlad, "you have had a significantly shorter life than most of the people here. Trust me when I say that small changes can make quite the difference over time. That is, after all, the whole purpose of the Bends. Which, incidentally, was envisioned as a philosophy experiment as much as an experiment in psychology, Daniel."

"I know?" said Danny, giving Vlad a quizzical look. "Look, Ellie, give me an example of what one of the floors does, other than the left/right floor, and I'll try to explain why I'm worried."

"The eighteenth floor removes a regret," said Ellie.

"Provided that the removal of such does not mean that you would never go to the Bends," added Vlad in a typically condescending tone. "That is the common theme between the transformations."

Danny nodded slowly, his eyes lingering on Vlad. Now that his mind was clearing somewhat (the pain was helping with that, to some degree), he was wondering why Vlad's appearance hadn't startled him more. Or maybe startled was the wrong word. Upset. Angry. Frightened. Vlad showing up usually elicited all of those emotions. Could it simply be the knowledge that Vlad couldn't attack
without severely undermining his position with the council? Or maybe he just didn't see Vlad as a threat (disturbing in its own right, for multiple reasons). Or perhaps he had just acknowledged, subconsciously, that, even with the addition of Vlad, the situation couldn't possibly get worse.

(He was also fairly sanguine about Smith being there, but that was a completely different thing. Smith had never attacked him or Amity Park before. Danny was more than willing to give him the benefit of the doubt if it prevented conflict.)

"Okay," said Danny, slowly. "Give me a second here. So, assuming that it's the biggest regret that could be changed with that constraint, I'd probably have told Mom and Dad what I do with my spare time way earlier, which would mean that the circumstances under which I was in the Tower would be much different. My entire life might be different. So, I might not even know why we were there, I might be surprised that everyone is with me. I might expect Sam and Tuck to be backing me up. I might be less injured. I might be more injured. I might be friends with Dash." The expected interruption did not happen. Dash was looking unusually contemplative again. "Ellie, depending on how all that played out, I might not even know you. You might not exist in a time line where I told Mom and Dad what was going on right away. I don't know how I'd react to you in such a situation. I mean, our first meeting wasn't exactly smooth sailing. Then, there's Vlad."

"The only thing I regret, little badger, is-"

"I'm going to stop you right there. I've heard the story about how you going to ask my mom out so often I could probably recite it." Danny paused, and twisted so that he could see Vlad better. Which was a mistake because he moved his ankle. Which hurt. A lot. "Speaking of you, though, nobody's ever stopped being dead because of the Tower, have they? Because dying is something people tend to regret."

"No," said Vlad.

"Like I said," said Ellie, "the more important a thing is to you, the less likely it is to change, and, um, considering that Obsessions are ghostly Obsessions..." She shrugged. "At least, I've never heard of someone suddenly being alive, or being dead, or whichever, because of something the floor did."

"Right. Because you have to be a ghost to have an Obsession."

"What about that liminality thing?" asked Ricky.

"Not the same thing," said Ellie, apparently feeling comfortable enough to flip herself over. "You don't have cores."

One part of Hannah was listening to the ghosts' conversation intently. The rest of her was not.

Could Wes, her cousin who had all but abandoned all other conspiracy theories for one, actually be right? Even she had thought that he must be wrong, that a person couldn't be alive and dead at the same time, but-

*But-

That wasn't true, was it? Not with those two flying around. Danny hadn't been possessed, earlier, he
had just been... She didn't know what he had been. Not possessed, for one. Or overshadowed, either. In retrospect, that actually made way more sense. Occam's razor. Once you remove the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Or was that Law and Order? Some other cop show? Whatever. They were all run by the Illuminati, anyway. Or ghosts. Ghosts were looking to be more and more likely. Heck, the Illuminati was probably ghosts. Who else would be so obsessed with freemasonry and triangles?

She probably owed Wes an apology, when she got home. If she got home. She'd probably get home. Unless Vlad Masters tried to kill her because he was a ghost too, apparently. How had she not seen that? It was so much more plausible than the immortal mutant psychic theory she'd been working with since he'd been elected.
"You can find him, right?" asked Sam.

She had, perhaps, asked the question too often, because the Unstoppable Mailman scowled. "I can find anyone," he said, one hand on his hip, the other on his horse's reigns, "so long as I have a message to deliver. You do have one, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Sam, offering up the hastily written letter. It had been thankfully easy to find stationary, but the letter would have been a lot easier to write without Tucker marveling about how fancy Sam's handwriting was. He meant well, but gosh, he could be annoying sometimes.

The Unstoppable Mailman looked down on it, mouthing Danny's name. Then he nodded, the ends of his turban fluttering as he did so. Sam was never going to tell him, but he looked incredibly anachronistic. He was wearing clothing from what must be a dozen different cultures. Sam guessed that they must all be somehow related to postal or courier services, but, for most of them, she couldn't see how.

"Yes," he said, "I can do this. It may take some time."

"Thanks," said Sam, sighing.

The corner of the man's mouth jerked up, before his lips once again settled into a straight line. "Thank her Majesty Pandora, she's the one paying for my services." He gave Pandora a small bow as he said this. "A pleasure doing business with you, your majesty."

"And with you, Angaros," said Pandora.

The Unstoppable Postman gave another quick smile, and jumped on his horse. "Until next time."

Jazz sighed. "I hope that will work."

"He always finds the recipients to his letters eventually," said Pandora. "We will just have to wait to see if this avenue of inquiry bears fruit, or if one of my men find him first. Contacting Angaros was inspired," she continued, a note of pride in her voice.

"Thanks," said Sam. Then she yawned.

Pandora raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you ought to get some rest," said the ancient ghost. "I admit that I am not exceptionally well versed in human physical needs, however, I do believe that you have far exceeded the length of time that humans typically stay awake for."

"It's fine," said Sam, waving off concern, "we do this all the time."

"Yeah," said Tucker, voice pitched low, "we're fine, we do this all the time."

"We probably could use a rest," said Jazz. The other two glared at her. "What, it's true!"

"I don't think I can sleep," said Tucker, after a moment. "Didn't think that you could, either, with Danny missing."
"Perhaps you could try something a little more restful," said Pandora.

"Reading, maybe," said Jazz. "You and Danny do say that puts you to sleep, right?"

Tucker snorted, but rolled his eyes. "Dude, that's a joke. You can't program and be completely illiterate." He adjusted his glasses. "My bad grades are a lifestyle choice, Jasmine."

Jazz groaned.

"Okay, yeah, that's not true. It's more like a lifestyle side effect, but word. Wooooords. I know words."

"You sound like you're on drugs," said Sam.

"Yeah, because awesome is a drug- Okay, I'll stop now. Uhm," he said, looking up at Pandora, who had been walking alongside them. "I think I will grab a book. Do you think that your library has anything about Duulaman?"

"Certainly. He was a sorcerer on par with Inanna," said Pandora. "Do you remember how to get to the library?"

"Yeah, I think so. Thank you," said Tucker.

"Ehhh," said Jazz. "I'm going to go with him. You know. Just in case."

"Okay," said Sam. "Have fun." She waved at them halfheartedly as they disappeared around a corner. She sighed.

"Troubles?" asked Pandora.

"Just that I have no idea what I'm doing," said Sam, rubbing her face.

"Very few people do," said Pandora.

"Yeah, I just w- I just want to be one of them."

"Even ghosts do not instantly know everything they can do," said Pandora.

"I know," said Sam. "But what am I supposed to do? I don't want to be the useless friend."

"I doubt that anyone thinks of you that way," said Pandora.

"Basilissa Pandora!" exclaimed a ghost from the end of the hallway. He ran up, and continued on in Greek.

Pandora frowned. "I apologize, I have to take care of this. Be safe, Sam."

"Yeah," said Sam.

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.

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Danny was seriously beginning to regret asking the wisps to come out of his leg. For one thing, his leg really hurt. It was giving him a great deal of pain. As in, 'seriously considering amputation, it'll
probably grow back' pain. For another, this situation had been much funnier, and easier to deal with, when he had been, for the lack of a better word, high. But now that he was back in what might be tentatively termed his 'right' mind he couldn't just abandon reality, no matter how inconvenient it was. Correction: he couldn't abandon his classmates not matter how inconvenient they were.

On the other hand, he would happily abandon Vlad. Vlad could take care of himself, and he was being twice as fruitloopy as usual. Maybe Vlad had chilled out a bit since Ellie almost melted, maybe he had made up with Ellie a bit since the last big fight, but neither of those things had translated into a) people skills, or b) reduced creepiness.

Back on the subject of his classmates, he was freaking out just a little bit. Missing Theory wasn't a safe place. Actually, it was a really exceptionally dangerous place, especially for people like Danny, Ellie, and Vlad. This was where Mengele set up shop when he died. Some of the ghosts here would commit mass murder for the chance to cut up a hybrid like Danny.

(It was actually a good thing that Smith was there, assuming that this was the Smith. Danny had heard stories, mostly from Clockwork and Ghostwriter, about Smith. He sounded like a decent person, and they were unlikely to be attacked when there was such a powerful ghost with them.)

Then there the fact that Hannah had straight-up asked him whether or not he was Phantom. Maybe he should have confessed at that point, at least then he could float instead of awkwardly sitting on Cujo and having Mr Lancer hold on to him. He was probably giving Cujo major back problems. Or he would be, if Cujo wasn't a ghost.

(It just then struck him that he was riding a dog.)

But he just couldn't, and he didn't know if it was out of some spirit of perversity, because he was scared, or what. Because they were going to figure it out. Hannah had already figured it out. He had known that it would come out sooner or later. During the trial, if not before then.

Thinking of Hannah, Danny let his eyes sweep over his other classmates, cataloging their injuries, assessing their mental states, trying to build contingency plans, trying to figure out how to keep their fragile human bodies in one piece when his own was so screwed up. Dash kept giving him weird looks. Mikey looked like Danny had offended him on a deep and personal level. Rebecca and Tiffanie looked like they were in shock, which was bad, but at least they hadn't had a breakdown yet. Sarah and Mia were holding hands (part of Danny was pleased with this development, but he couldn't quite say why) so that Sarah could lead the vision-challenged Mia. Paulina was ranting to Star, who just looked bored, and Kwan, who looked confused. Elliot had latched onto Ricky. Dale was glaring at the ground in front of him. Lester was trying to talk to Valerie. Nathan was looking at Ellie in a way that was really starting to grate on Danny's nerves.

Danny could hardly even look at Valerie. He wasn't sure that he could forgive her. Sure, she wasn't attacking Cujo right now, so there was hope, but it was pretty distant. She had ignored basically everything he had said, everything she had seen, and attacked Danny and Lancer dragging them along with Spectra, of all people. Just because she had looked human, and didn't she realize at this point that humans could be just as awful as ghosts? Didn't she- He forced himself to stop. This wasn't helping, he was shaking and Mr Lancer was looking at him strangely, not to mention Ellie.

He didn't deserve Ellie. She was working so hard, and she had kept his classmates (and Mr Lancer) safe when he couldn't. He wasn't sure how she had gotten them all to listen, all to go, because he'd been having trouble with that under much more favorable circumstances, he was just glad that she had. So glad. (He was so incredibly proud of her.)

They were getting closer to the Tower. Close enough that some ghosts had stopped what they were
doing to watch their progress up the path. Danny kept his eyes on them trying to spot potential trouble makers, but no one approached them. The path was clear up to the door.

The door, which was too small for Cujo to fit through.

Both Danny and Ellie sighed heavily. "Figures," they said.

"I should have remembered this," added Ellie. "You're going to have to get off."

"Yeah, I kind of figured. How do you want to do this?"

"I don't know. You're the one that will have to move."

"Sure, but you're the one that can move."

"Could you float, maybe?"

"Uhm," said Danny, tilting his head to the side and experimentally brushing his core. Even that light touch sent jolts of pain through his body, radiating from his core to the tips of his fingers. He could try to float sans core, just pushing on the ectoplasm with willpower, but one moment of inattention and he'd fall. "No. Best not. Uh. You should float Mr Lancer down first, I think, and then come get me?"

"I think that should work," she said, drifting to Cujo's shoulder and extending her hand. "I'll take you down."

"Will you be alright?" asked Mr Lancer.

"I can stay upright on my own for a few minutes," said Danny, with no confidence whatsoever.

"Yeah, sure," said Ellie.

"Dude, seriously," said Danny. "Give me a break here."

"You already have a break."

"Very funny."

"Come on, Mr L."

Mr Lancer took Ellie's hand, albeit with some reluctance. Danny could emphasize, Ellie looked pretty frail to be lifting a grown (slightly overweight) man like Mr Lancer. But Ellie, like Danny, could easily bench press a bus. Besides, sharing flight wasn't really lifting, it was more like sharing invisibility or intangibility than anything else.

Ellie brought Mr Lancer to the ground then came back up for Danny. For Danny, she slipped closer, coming up under his arm, supporting him with her shoulder. "How do you really feel?" she whispered.

"Awful. Is it really going to be safe in there?" he asked at the same volume.

"Probably. I mean, this floor is just swapping turning left for turning right."

Danny sighed. "Here's to hoping that no one almost turned into traffic and would have wound up paraplegic or something."
“Gosh, Danny, how does your brain work that way?”

“Look at my leg and ask me again.”

“You have a point there, cuz. I'm lifting off now.”

“Mhm,” said Danny, trying to shift his weight to make it easier for her. Of course (remember, Ellie could bench press a bus), she didn’t have any trouble picking him up. They floated down to the ground, Danny’s ankle pulsing at the change from a mostly horizontal position to a vertical one. Even his knee was starting to hurt at this point. Although, after all that he had been through in the last few hours, he’d be more surprised if his whole body didn’t hurt. So.

Ellie stopped a good foot above the ground, and looked around. “Okay,” she said, pointing at Kwan. “You, muscles, get over here.”

“Uhm,” said Kwan, taking a few mincing steps towards Danny and Ellie. Oh, Danny knew where this was going, and he didn’t particularly like it.

“I'm going to hand him to you, okay?”

“Ellie, I don’t think-”

“Clearly. Okay, dude, uh... What's his name again?”

“Kwan,” said Danny. He made a face that he hoped communicated apology.

“Kwan, you're going to take him, don't worry, he's super light-”

“I know,” said Kwan, nervously. “I mean, um-”

“Look, I'm not going to get into whatever it was you were doing. Just put your arms out and don't drop him, okay?”

Grudgingly, Kwan held out his arms. Danny, equally reluctant, allowed himself, to be transferred. Ellie leaned in.

“I know about the bullying,” she said, “and if you hurt him, I'll hurt you.”

“Oh my gosh, Ellie,” said Danny, feeling himself turn pink. “Turn it down a notch, would you?”

“Like you do?”

“Point.” He shifted, bouncing on his good foot, trying to lean on Kwan as little as possible. “Thanks Kwan.”

Ellie smirked in victory. “Okay, Cujo, time to shrink!” The huge dog popped back to puppy size.

“Now, remember, we’re going to stay on this floor until we get picked up.”

“Unless we get attacked or something,” said Danny.

“Then we're going to the casino next to the seventy-seventh.”

“To pick up Ellie's boat.”

“Questions?” asked the two Phantoms.
"Nah," said Ellie a minute later. "It looks like they're just going to stare at us."

"Actually," said Danny. "I've got a question."

"Yeah?"

"Smith?" he tried to say the name as politely as possible. "Why haven't you gone in? We aren't blocking the door, are we?"

"No," said Smith, face as impassive as ever.

"Okay," said Danny. "Well, thank you for traveling with us. It was nice to meet you."

Smith merely nodded.

"Right," said Ellie. "So. Let's go!"

Issitoq growled. If he had been any less angry, any more in control of himself, he would have been disgusted, infuriated, that the abominations had brought him so low. As it was, he was more focused on the fact that they had just entered the Digressed Tower, one of the few places in the Infinite Realms Issitoq's oracular sight and temporal tools were rendered useless, curse Sojourn and his infernal artifacts. Issitoq would have prevented that, but Smith had been with them. Smith. It was a conspiracy, the whole High Council working against him, but then he had known that from the beginning.

Well. There were other ways, and perhaps he had been too hasty, too willing to get his own hands dirty. This was something that could, and should be delegated. Yes. Yes. As he had already demonstrated while organizing the attack on Elysium, there were always fools willing to take risks and break truce and Taboo for appropriate compensation. Issitoq would have to increase the compensation, of course. He would need a higher class of fool for this.
Chapter 111: Conspiracy

Wes Weston's hunched over his computer, his face illuminated only by the blue glow of his screen. His fingers flew feverishly over the keyboard. His website had exploded practically overnight. The reason wasn't hard to deduce. The disappearance of twenty-one children, including Wes' cousin, Hannah, and three adults from the high school gym following a ghost attack was kind of a big thing.

Even so, some of his followers still thought that the ghosts were a hoax, or that his website was some kind of joke or fiction experiment, though. That annoyed him almost as much as the people who didn't realize that Phantom and Fenton were the same person. Almost. At least the non-believers paid. They thought that they were supporting a 'struggling artist.' Whatever.

Well, his website had, over the past couple of days, transformed from a conspiracy theory blog to a GIW hate blog. That probably confused people outside of Amity Park. Whatever. He didn't care anymore. They had to be stopped. Amity Park was essentially under military law at this point. You couldn't set a foot past your door without the white plague descending on you and waving 'certified accurate ghost detection rods' in your face. Or worse.

At least the Fentons' inventions usually worked, allowing for the fact that many of them targeted their son who was a ghost. Infuriating.

At least Fenton's freakishness meant that Hannah was probably fine, so he felt no guilt about focusing on ridding the town of the GIW. Because, Fenton aside, Wes Weston was a capable individual who totally could defeat an entire government agency.

(Maybe if he thought it hard enough he'd believe it.)

"Wes!" shouted his mother from downstairs. "Wes!" she repeated, more sharply. "They're here!"

Wes swore through his teeth. It was later than he had thought. "I'm coming!" he said pushing up from his chair, knocking it over in the process. He then proceeded to trip over his own feet and almost fell down the attic stairs. On the upside, he managed not to murder his cat, Inky. That wouldn't have been a great first impression, but it wasn't like there was anyone down there who didn't already know him.

If there had been, he would have dressed up a bit more, worn something other than sweatpants and a somewhat tattered school sweater.

The living room was stuffed with people. Wet people, which was only to be expected, considering how hard it was raining outside. They were dripping on the floor. The fact that his mother wasn't throwing a fit about the water was a sign that she was almost as invested as he was.

"Hey," he said. "So, I know we're all pretty upset about things, so let's skip that part, and go straight to what we're going to do about it."
It wasn't difficult for a cat like Inky to cross from Harmony to Amity. She did it all the time. Harmony was in the lair of the protector of Amity. There was a connection. Besides, even normal, big, clumsy humans could probably get from anywhere in Amity to the Ghost Zone within a couple hours. Inky was a small, clever, ghost cat. She could go where ever she pleased.

Today she pleased to spy on the Westons and their secret meeting. She approved entirely. Those white-coated men had to be taken care of. She and the other animals of Amity Park had hoped that the disappearance of so many of them over such an extended time, facilitated by said animals, would drive them away, but it was not to be. There was nothing else for it. They would have to die.

Unfortunately, Inky couldn't complete such an undertaking on her own. She was only one cat, after all. She would need the rest of Amity behind her.

But she could make a start by bringing news of the Westons to the Council of Cats.

Smith watched the children enter the tower, then swept his considerable supernatural senses backwards. As expected, Issitoq was watching. Smith's lips thinned ever-so-slightly in disapproval. The Council of Ancients had made their decision. Issitoq should leave it alone, should respect it. This sort of behavior was unseemly in the extreme, not something that a Judge should be engaged in.

That boy would be king. Or, at least, prince. He was far too young to go through the Rite of Ascension. In any case, Smith didn't care what the child's title ultimately was. Smith had one role in this. One that he was going to fulfill, regardless of how petulant Issitoq acted. Smith was a ghost after all. He had his prerogatives.

Well. The child- the children, Smith corrected himself- had gotten to the Tower safely, and he could not forswear his involvement in that, though it had been sheerest coincidence that he had stumbled on them at all. He wasn't heartless, after all. He wasn't just going to let Issitoq murder them.

But now that he was at the Tower, he had to get down to business. With a final glance of disgust at Issitoq, he followed the children inside.

It was a moment of terrible displacement, crossing the threshold of the Digressed Tower, much like tumbling through the great green expanses of the Realms, committed to a direction not of one's own choice. He felt like he had lost something. Phantom did not like the sensation at all. He liked even less that he was being held by what he perceived as a total stranger.

Although, considering the effects of the Digressed Tower, it was unlikely that this person actually was a stranger. It was more likely that this was an acquaintance or ally. Still, the dissonance between what he remembered, and what he was currently experiencing was enough to make him roll out of the person's grasp, and bounce to his feet brandishing an accusing finger.
"Who are-?" The finger descended somewhat when he saw the face, or, rather, faces, staring back at him. "You-" They looked oddly familiar. One of them looked disturbingly familiar. Then there was that jerk Plasmius. But, more pressingly at the moment. "You're human."

"Yeah," said one of them, a pretty girl with long, but tangled, hair. She had what Phantom tentatively placed as a Spanish accent. "So are you."

"What the hell are wearing, Fenton?" asked the large, blonde human who had been holding him.

Phantom opened his mouth to say that wasn't his name, but thought better of it. If they all thought that was his name, then it probably was. In their continuity. It was close enough, anyway. He looked down at his clothes. They were what he remembered wearing, a nice blue tunic and knee-length overrobe with pants that ended mid-calf, but that didn't really mean anything under these circumstances. Of course he would be the only person to suffer such a large change on the left-right floor, on top of all his other weirdness. This was probably the result of something he had done years ago, before he could even remember.

Instead, he stepped back, putting the majority of his weight onto his good foot, his ankle hadn't quite recovered from being tweaked, and folded his arms. He had to suppress a wince, then. He had somehow managed to momentarily forget that he had been shot in the shoulder. And chest. And a number of other places. Those white people had been awful, even above and beyond the part where they had tried to destroy the Realms. They had even attacked his lair, yelling something about liberating his 'human slaves.' They had even managed to hurt Mayor Trent! Just awful. Mayor Trent was one of his favorite adults. Then again, all of the Harmonians were his favorites. All of his friends were his favorites.

But then... Maybe that hadn't happened, after all. He should ask these people what had happened, although there was no real guarantee that they would know, either. They might even think that they had come into the tower for a completely different reason. Which, again, they might have. He didn't know any of these people. Except for Plasmius. Sort of. Except he probably did, if they were traveling together, and they knew his face, even if they knew it by a different leg.

"Danny," said the girl who looked uncomfortably like him, "your leg..."

"What about it?" said Phantom, looking down, momentarily distracted.

"You had hurt it before," she said, hesitantly. "Is this what you meant when you said that some people could be seriously changed?"

"I can't say," said Phantom. "I do not remember having that conversation." A man (Was that Smith?! No, not the time.) came through the door, and floated up and over them. "We are blocking the door. We should move." He looked back over his shoulder, into the room. They were being watched with amusement by a dozen or so ghosts in party hats. Phantom grimaced. He wasn't particularly enamored of this kind of attention. "Here," he said, spotting an empty alcove. "We can introduce ourselves to one another here. I particularly want to know what series of circumstances has put the two of us to a common purpose, Plasmius."

"You mean to say," said the older, overweight man, "that you don't remember any of us."

"Essentially," said Phantom, "with the exception of Plasmius, yes."
Chapter 112

Clockwork was back in his lair, Long Now, for the moment. The preliminary committee was having a short (by ghost standards) recess, so that the participants could check their lairs and other affairs.

He would have preferred to go find Daniel. While it was unlikely that he would take any lasting damage in the Digressed Tower, it was still possible. But the Observants were now putting an almost unbearable amount of pressure on him to stay away. The scar over his eye felt like it had when it was newly carved, and the drain on his powers was making him dizzy. Not for the first time, Clockwork wondered if there wasn't a legal recourse, some way he could throw off the bonds of his signed and sworn contract with the Observants. But now, as ever, he could see no way out.

Perhaps he should try anyway. Lately, Daniel had shown him that, even if he could not see something, did not mean that it did not exist.

In the meantime, it would behoove him to tend to his other responsibilities. It wouldn't do to let the time line get frayed, snailed, tangled, lost to paradox and disaster. He was the Master of Time before all else. Just as Nocturne governed dreams, Pandora stood against the great and unthinking evils of the Realms, Fright Knight lead the harvest of fear, and Nephthys guided others through change and transformation, this was his duty, and his passion.

He started up from the main entry hall, floating through the air of the vaulted room towards the laboratory where he searched for, and unwound, paradoxes.

Before he was even halfway there, however, he froze, and returned to ground level. He was about to have visitors. Unwelcome ones.

The door swung open. A crowd, a small army, really, considering the average Observant's strength and the population density of the Realms, marched in.

"Issitoq," greeted Clockwork, outwardly calm. Inside, he was seething. Yes, the Observants often came to Long Now unannounced, yes, they often 'forgot' to knock, yes, they frequently did both of these things while blocking his vision. But to come in such numbers, to stand in his lair as if they owned it-! It was just far enough beyond their usual behavior, combined with what Issitoq had been doing since the High Council meeting, to set all of Clockwork's alarms to ringing. Literally. Long Now was responding to Clockwork's distress by raising a racket.

"Silence that noise!" demanded Issitoq, his voice high and breathy as he fought to be heard over the tolling of all the bells in Long Now.

The weight of the contract on him, Clockwork complied, but not without difficulty.

Issitoq swept his head back and forth imperiously, his single eye raking over the whole of the room. He gestured to his minions. "Find it," he said. "Bring it back to me."

"Perhaps if you told me what you were looking for," said Clockwork. "I could help you find it more swiftly." And, he did not add, get Issitoq and the other Observants out of his lair and hair all the faster.
"It is none of your concern," said Issitoq.

"You are in my lair," said Clockwork, "so you will find that it is my concern."

"Silence," ordered Issitoq.

Clockwork flattened his lips, and spread his awareness into the bones of Long Now. The Observants were penetrating even the most private areas of his home, and he was, per the terms of his agreement, largely powerless to stop them.

Largely. If he hadn't been ordered otherwise, then he could do whatever he wanted, and there were a number of other loopholes that he could, and often did, take advantage of. Changing the layout of his lair was well within his power.

"Stop that," snapped Issitoq.

Clockwork raised an eyebrow in a practiced display of confusion. Issitoq scowled, and raised his hand to his chest, as if to touch something that laid under his robes.

Then it was like a hammer had been taken to all of Clockwork's senses, a great and powerful weight bearing him down, time itself slipping from his grasp. Clockwork knew, now, what Issitoq had under his robe. Knew, because Clockwork had given it to him, to the Observants, when he had first signed the contract. It was an hourglass. The hourglass. It was filled with grains of dried ectoplasm, Clockwork's dried ectoplasm.

"You will heed me, slave," hissed Issitoq, furious.

"Sir!" exclaimed one of the other Observants. "I've found it!"

Clockwork turned his head, just slightly, to see the Observant running forward, a bright white and green cylinder clutched between his claws.

If Clockwork had a heart, it would have stopped. "You c-

"Silence!" bellowed Issitoq. "You will not tell me what I can and cannot do! Do you forget who it is who keeps you sane? Who keeps you from tearing yourself apart out of madness?" Issitoq seemed to steady himself, straightening. "You. You are under house arrest. Indefinitely. You will not leave this place. You will not contact anyone. You will not tell anyone what has transpired here. You will stay here, and complete your duty to the time line. Unraveling paradoxes. It is all you are good for, after all. Whereas we Observants will preserve it from disaster."

Clockwork doubted very much that they would be saving anything. Least of all the time line.

But they were leaving now, so that was an upside.

"If you even think of going against us," said Issitoq, by way of parting, "of saving that abomination of yours, I will ensure that you suffer."

Then they were gone, their filth gone from his lair. Clockwork picked himself up, and brushed imaginary dust from his cloak and tunic. "Idiots," he hissed. Then, he duplicated. He needed to clean his lair.

His hands were shaking. Issitoq was using the hourglass. Made from his own powers, his own blood, there was no way for Clockwork to fight it. He had known that it would come into play eventually, just as he had known that Dan would. He just hadn't thought that it would be so soon. He
would have to hope that Daniel was ready. He had done his best to make it so, but everything taken together... it was a lot.

But Daniel was strong, he was clever, and he had learned well. He would be fine.

(He had to be.)
"So, we are not here because we are hiding from Issitoq?" asked Phantom, feeling a weight lifting off his chest.

"Who?" asked Dash.

"That's the, what did you call him, the judge?" said a shorter blonde, a girl. Hannah?

"Yes. But to clarify, we are just here because we managed to get lost in Missing Theory?"

"Yeah," said 'Ellie.' She was apparently his sister-by-theft. Which was Plasmius's fault, of course. Phantom didn't know whether he should be thrilled, disturbed, or both. Both, probably. He had always wanted a real family. Pandora, Frostbite and the others were great, but he had always felt like there was something missing.

"That's a relief." He sighed, and ran his hand through his hair. "Are any of the rest of you noticing any significant changes, or am I the only one to change so much?"

The humans shook their heads. Plasmius stayed impassive.

"I think Valerie here had her other arm broken," said Ellie.

"Her arm-? Oh, dear. We should get that in a sling," said Phantom, only now noticing the girl's injury. He pulled a length of cloth from within an inner pocket, and shook it out. "I have some first-aid things with me. Not all of them are for humans, of course-"

"Why?" asked Valerie, sharply.

"Why we should get your arm in a sling? So you do not strain it unnecessarily?"

"Why do you have first-aid things that aren't for humans? You're human, right?"

"Yes," said Phantom, slowly, frowning slightly. It seemed like this was going to be an exercise in traversing a verbal minefield. He hoped that he wouldn't do any lasting damage to his 'normal' self while navigating it. If he was reading the situation correctly, it would appear as if none of these people knew of Phantom's, or, should he say, 'Fenton's,' unique condition. "But most people I know are ghosts, so..." Phantom shrugged, his shoulders brushing the bell that hung off the end of one of his braids.

"Why are you like this, anyway?" asked the redhead with glasses.

"Like what?" said Phantom, racking his mind for this person's name.

"So different. This was just supposed to swap the direction you turned one time, right?"

"I couldn't say. I suppose that one of my choices was more important than it first seemed."

The redhead looked him up and down. "If most of the people you know are ghosts, does that mean you live here in this... universe?"
"In Missing Theory?" The idea surprised a laugh out of Phantom.

"No, in the Ghost Zone," said the boy. Mikey. His name was Mikey.

Phantom hesitated. "Yes. Don't you?"

"No."

Phantom blinked. That was interesting, and unexpected. "Not even in someone's lair?"

"Is that where you live?"

"Yes," said Phantom. No need to mention that it was his.

"How did you get here?" asked Ricky.

"I don't know," said Phantom. This line of questioning was beginning to make him uncomfortable. "I cannot remember living anywhere else." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Here, it hardly matters. My history clearly does not align with the real one. But we should treat any wounds that you have. They may disappear as soon as we leave, but if they do not... At least, you should clean them, so that you don't pick up an infection."

"Clean them with what?" asked Valerie, irritably. "Where? I don't think that there's a bathroom here."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," said Phantom. "But, please, let me look at your arm first."

"Fine," said Valerie.

Issitoq turned the cylinder over and over in his hands. This was a last resort, one he hoped he would not have to sink to. He hoped that the fools he and his subordinates were currently collecting would be enough to finally, finally, destroy Phantom. If not, he would release this monster, and show the Council of Ancients what they had voted for, force them to pick someone reasonable.

Or, if that didn't work, force the other members of the High Council to depose the Ancients, to set up a new, more orderly, method of choosing a king.

Or, and this really was a final resort, create an opening to end the Ancients. Yes, and that option grew more appealing every day, every hour, but, still, Issitoq hesitated. It was against his nature to move against tradition, but here he was. Some things were necessary.

Dan knew the instant that he had been taken from Long Now. He even knew who had done it. In the future that never was, he had destroyed the Observants quite thoroughly, and it would be a lie to say that the thought of doing it again didn't bring a small touch of joy to his fiery core.
But only the thought. Dan knew that his long imprisonment, coupled with the... irrelevance of his Obsessions, his inability to fulfill them, had left him weak. It would be good if he could escape the Observants, let alone take them in a fight.

Part of Dan wondered if he really wanted to escape. Yes, he wanted to continue to exist, he wanted to be victorious, powerful, feared! But he was tired. Emotions had been distant for him ever since he had been removed (like a tumor, like garbage) from his weak, sniveling, human half, but in the darkness of the thermos they were often all he had. That, and eavesdropping on the old man.

Well, it didn't seem as if the eyeballs were going to let him out any time soon, so he didn't have to decide right away. He could wait, and... observe the situation, as it was.

"Do you really think that he's Phantom?" asked Sarah, watching Danny patch up Valerie out of the corner of her eye. They had settled on an unoccupied set of couches.

"Well, yeah, it makes sense, doesn't it?" said Hannah. "I mean, what else could explain him?"

"He has basically been the Casper High cryptid for a while," said Mia, scowling. The scowl was not due to her mood, although that wasn't great, either, but because she still hadn't managed to replace her glasses, and squinting was the only way she could see.

"That's different," said Sarah. "We can't just say that he's a ghost, or whatever, because he knows when ghost attacks are going to happen and moves quietly and shows up in weird spots and is really agile when you surprise him and... Uh. Look, we don't even know for sure that that guy is really Mayor Masters."

"It's definitely him," said Hannah. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"You thought that he was a vampire," pointed out Sarah.

"No, I thought that he was an immortal mutant psychic."

"What's the difference?"

"A vampire is way too obvious, and has, you know, supernatural weaknesses. Have you ever seen a mutant be repelled by a cross?"

"No, but I've never seen the mayor in a church, either," said Sarah, crossing her arms.

Hannah frowned. "Maybe he is a vampire... No! That's not what we should be talking about."

"I don't know," said Mia. "Danny's not going to attack us, but, I mean, I could be wrong, with, you know, not being able to see and all, but isn't that the Wisconsin Ghost? The one that shows up right before the town gets royally screwed?"

"Shoot, you're right," said Hannah. "How did I not see that before?"

Sarah groaned.

"Right, right, back on topic, is Danny Phantom?"
"He's nice enough," said Mia. "He's been... weirdly competent, too."

"We haven't really seen Phantom, either," added Hannah. "Then there's that he lives in the Ghost Zone in this reality. How could he do that, if he's not a ghost?"

"... The Fentons have a ghost portal in their basement, don't they?" said Sarah.

"Yeah," said Mia. "Putting all the Fentons together, isn't it way weirder that Danny hasn't fallen into the Ghost Zone yet?"

Hannah glared. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm not on any side," said Mia. "I'm just tired of not knowing what's going on."

"Okay, what about the amnesia thing?" tried Hannah.

"Well, I'm pretty sure the Lethe got mentioned, earlier?" said Sarah, voice tilting up at the end of the sentence, turning it into a question. "I'm pretty sure that's the river in Greek mythology that wipes your memory. He could have fallen into that."

"Ghosts probably have other ways of giving people amnesia, too," added Mia. "I mean, you don't remember what happens while you're overshadowed, right?"

"True," said Sarah.

"But him being Phantom explains everything."

"Not really," said Mia. "Remember what started this mess? That gun, what it was supposed to do? No matter how weird Danny is, or how weird... Ellie is, they're still alive, right?"

Star nervously fiddled with the edge of her sweater. For some reason, her friends, Mikey, Ricky, and the twins, had closed ranks without her. She licked her lips, which were more than a little chapped from the cold air of the Ghost Zone.

They usually waited for her, made room for her. They knew that she was, well, not assertive. Had she done something to offend them? Danny wasn't available, either. Usually he was at least good for a chat about physics, or whatever, even if they weren't very close.

"Star, what are you doing?"

Star's head snapped around so fast she almost gave herself whiplash. Was that Paulina talking to her? What did she want?

"Uh..."

"Stop staring at the nerds and get over here," said Tiffanie, one of the other A-listers. She was Dash's girlfriend, if Star remembered correctly. She had a hard time following all the A-list dramas.

Star's eyes flicked from Tiffanie, to Paulina, to Dash, to Dale, to Kwan (whom she might have had a crush on). Could it be that she was an A-list in most other universes? Could her life change that
much just from turning right instead of left, or vice-versa, once? It was nothing next to what had happened to Danny, but still. Wow. Yikes.

This could be her chance to be popular. But... If this wasn't how things really were, if she wasn't part of the so-called nerd-herd, then... Would she not remember what she knew, what she knew, deeply, entirely, genuinely, once she left this place, this floor? The idea disturbed her, though not quite as much as the idea that her friends didn't know her anymore. She glanced at them. Had, possibly, never known her.

She walked over to the A-listers. This could be fun, while it lasted, if she was unpopular, and if she was an A-lister, then she shouldn't screw up her reputation by... hanging out with her friends. Wow, she hadn't even been an A-lister for five minutes and she was already acting like a trash person. Whatever, this was for blackmail purposes.

Mr Lancer sighed. This never got any easier. Ever. He had known about Daniel's... extracurricular activities for about a year now, ever since he caught the young man transforming in an empty classroom. It was as if every time he turned around, things got weirder and weirder.

He had thought that the weirdness had peaked when Daniel showed up on his doorstep, dressed in Elizabethan clothes, arms wrapped around a signed First Folio. But then the actress ghost had shown up, and the two of them had begged him to put her in the school play, and, well... Things had never stopped escalating.

"I'm kind of surprised that you aren't hanging off of Valerie again," said Nathan into a lull in the conversation.

"Who?" said Lester.

"Valerie."

His twin stared blankly at him.

"Valerie Grey?"

"Why would I be hanging off of her?" asked Lester, wrinkling his nose.

"You know, I ask myself the same question all the time."

"Can you be serious for once, Lester?" said Mikey, pushing his glasses up.

"I am."
Phantom snorted.

"What?" said Valerie, voice tight.

"Nothing, I just heard something funny."
"Looks like you didn't sleep," said Tucker. Well, 'said' was a bit too generous, honestly. 'Mumbled' was closer. 'Slurred' could have been used, too.

"Yeah, yeah, you too," said Sam, glaring at her... She wasn't sure what this was, actually, just that it didn't have any meat in it.

"Uuhh," added Jazz, eloquently. She blinked sleepily at the table. "What, uh..."

"That's good," said Tucker, pointing at something down the table. The room was mostly empty. Not all ghosts ate every day. Some ghosts didn't eat at all. It varied. The ghosts were busy, too, with the aftermath of the battle. Sam's understanding was that the cleanup was going fast than it would have in a real world city, but that it would still take some time before everything was back to normal.

Jazz reached for the item, but it was, of course out of reach. Which was apparently the cue for a yellow ectoplasmic hand to materialize and bring it straight to Jazz. Great.

Sam buried her hands in her face and groaned. Wait. No. She buried her face in her hands. Much better. "I'm so useless."

"Nah, you're good," said Tucker. "Like, yeah. You know... stuff. Lots of stuff. Good stuff."

"Not enough," said Sam. She might have been close to tears, which made her really angry for some reason.

"Mhm," said Jazz blinking slowly. "Maybe you're trying too hard?"

"Hnn," said Sam, unable to express her frustration in words.

"What, um, what about, um. You've been trying to do plants? What if it's not plants? Or not just plants."


"You can be like Batwoman. Batgirl? Whatever."

"You need to read more comics," said Tucker.

"You need to sleep, that's what," Sam grumbled.

"Eh," said Jazz. "Like, Tucker is Egypt, sorta? I don't actually know what you managed to do, honestly."


"Just, you've got other interests? May you can do like, hypnotism, right? Because protests?" Jazz yawned. "Gonna sleep, now." She stood up, swaying a little. "Heh. Sleep. Does this make me like Danny, now?"
"Other interests..." said Sam. "Yeah, maybe."

Azalea came in without knocking, a sheaf of papers in her arms and a worried expression on her face. "Mr Wolfsbane," she said, "you need to see this." She handed him a paper that was covered with a number of diagrams and the illegible scrawl of some ghost language. It looked printed, strangely enough. Maddie had to wonder what ghosts had managed to master that skill. One of those technology oriented ones, like that 'Technus,' perhaps?

"Where did you get this?" asked Wolfsbane.

"Straight from the FF representative," said Azalea.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"A medical report from the Far Frozen."

Maddie began to examine the papers with a new eye. "A medical report- For Danny?"

"Yes." Wolfsbane frowned at the page he was looking at. "This is just a summary, but it isn't good news."

"What's wrong with Danny?" demanded Jack, immediately.

"Wh-? Oh, oh no. When this report was put together, at least, Mr Phantom was recovering quite well. It is several days old, if I am correctly converting the date."

"Converting the date?"

"The Far Frozen uses a different calendar," said Wolfsbane. "The bad news is for you." He stroked his beard. "On several fronts. Some of it we already knew about. The effects of that weapon of yours, for example. The damage done by those monsters in white, for another." He tapped the paper. "Those are problematic enough in and of themselves, especially because there will be those who will try to make out that you caused all of his injuries, which simply isn't true. No. The issue is..." Wolfsbane trailed off. "A moment. This is not exactly a human problem. Let me determine how to explain this." He stroked his beard again.

"It isn't that hard to explain, is it?" asked Azalea. "I mean, they've got it written pretty plainly here, and Mr and Mrs Fenton are scientists. I'm sure that they'll understand the implications." Azalea grinned toothily at the Fentons. "Right?"

"Perhaps you are right," said Wolfsbane. "At least in terms of the science, if not the cultural implications. I will try my best. This states that, on close inspection, Phantom's core has a slight inconsistency in its formation. A flaw, if you would, separate from the injuries he sustained recently. The author of this report is of the opinion that it was acquired when he first formed as a ghost, rather than being caused by a latter injury."

A ghost's core was roughly equivalent to a human's brain. Damage to Danny's, no matter how it came to be, was not something that filled Maddie with joy.
"What does that mean for Danny? Is he alright?"

"As I said, yes. He's fine. I am not a doctor, but I doubt that it will harm his health. It... Azalea, give me that next page. It, let's see here. Yes. According to this, the growth of the area of his core usually associated with the holding of grudges has been somewhat stunted." Wolfsbane looked up. "That might not mean much to you, but being able to hold a grudge is rather important for us ghosts. It keeps us sane, in some cases. It occasionally prevents our Obsessions from latching on to inappropriate targets. It also helps us remember our enemies. For Phantom, it really only means that he is unusually forgiving, which can be a virtue, even if it is something of a weakness. But for you... Ah, I have it. I do believe that some children are born with... Congenital defects? Is that the term?"

"That's the term," said Maddie, stiffly.

"Now, most of the opposition's argument is already that you have been abusing Phantom. Imagine the reaction in your world if the people there were to hear that you were abusing a child with a congenital brain defect." He shuffled the papers together, and laid them on the table. "The reaction will be similar here. The argument will be that he has no defenses against you," he said, quietly. "That he cannot be rational where you are concerned. That you should not even be allowed near him. I suppose that would have been the reaction in any case, but it will have much more weight now."

Maddie swallowed. Every time she thought she understood how badly she screwed up, there was something else. Maybe, if she couldn't even see that, see how much she had hurt Danny, she didn't deserve to be his mother. She didn't deserve to be anyone's mother.

"Mrs Fenton," said Wolfsbane. "Madeline. Please remember that Phantom does not feel that way. And," he paused slightly, "he still has the full array of human reason, such as it is. He is not incapable of making his own decisions, no matter what some minority might argue."

"But," said Jack, sounding lost, "is Danny... If he... Is this going to... hurt him?"

"Azalea, you've read this in more depth than I have."

The blonde girl shrugged. "No. From what I read, without a close examination of his actual core, it wouldn't have been noticed for a while. They have behavioral effect written as 'minor,' at the end there."

"A while? How long?" asked Maddie. "What else does it say?"

"I don't know. You would have to wait and see." Azalea shrugged, and gave them a small smile. "At least, that's what I think it means. I could go get it translated, but there are so many technical terms... I don't know who would be able to do this. I couldn't directly translate most of these." The buzzing that always accompanied Azalea intensified. She raised a hand to her lips. "Not nearby, anyway."

"The Library of Tongues would do it," said Wolfsbane.

"Do you want me to bring it to them?" asked Azalea. "It's pretty far. It'll take a while."

"Give it to one of our interns."

"Oh. Right. I forgot that I could do that," said Azalea. "I'll leave that copy with you." She bowed slightly. "I'll go take care of that."

She left.
Wolfsbane coughed slightly. "Now, we are going to have to revise our strategy somewhat..."

Ellie hummed as she sat down next to Danny. He had finished patching up the others, and was now sitting on the couch. He was watching people. Eyes flickering from one to another, lingering for a few minutes and then moving on.

"Hey," she said.

"Hello," said Danny.

"So," said Ellie. "Tell me about yourself."

Danny blinked. "I was under the impression that you already knew me fairly well?"

"Yeah, but not this you, and I'm curious, so spill."
Chapter 115: Story Time

Phantom did not miss how all of the humans, and many of the ghosts, grew quiet and drew closer. He would have had to have blind to miss it. He also did not miss how Valerie shifted away from the ghosts, a glare on her face, nor how her hands moved, to her to her leg, as if in search of a weapon. That could be problematic, Phantom decided. This place, where friends could become enemies and enemies, friends just by crossing a threshold, was not the place to start a fight.

That's when Phantom's stomach decided to remind him of another thing that could be problematic. He sighed, then cast an appraising eye at the ghosts. With the exception of Plasmius, these looked to be people seeking entertainment. Partiers. Here for mildly mind-altering experiences.

(The person in the back with the lab coat and clipboard might have been an exception, and bore further observation. Phantom had heard rumors that there were still some psychologists in the Digressed Tower, clinging to the hope that they would someday acquire enough data to create a coherent paper, regardless of the fact that what they thought they were researching, and therefore what they were recording, was different on every floor.)

Having made that assessment, he then addressed the ghosts, "I don't mind being the evening's entertainment, but we've traveled quite some distance, and we're rather hungry." He smiled up at the ghosts politely, hopefully. There was no guarantee that any of these ghosts had human-compatible food, but it wasn't a bad gamble, either, considering the eclectic tastes of ghosts and the number of them gathered here.

A few of the ghosts rolled their eyes and left. They had been hoping for a free show, Phantom gathered, had been expecting one ever since twenty-odd humans had walked in the door. Others muttered and hissed at their neighbors. Some patted their pockets, as if expecting to find human food there. A very small number actually produced food. Interestingly, they were mostly from the same group, and the food they produced consisted mostly of crackers, dry sausage, grapes, and cheese.

"We were originally going to a wine tasting a few floors up," one of them, a woman wearing a long, black dress, explained. "That's the floor where a famous but departed artist has a longer existence."

"Oh, alright," said Phantom, a little confused about how she knew what he was thinking.

"There wasn't much else for you to be that confused about, looking at us like that," said the woman. "I would be confused, too."

"Oh," said Phantom, glad to have that cleared up, but concerned that she could read him that well. "Thank you. Well," he began as the food was distributed, "I suppose that at this point you're all looking for a story, not my hobbies, or what have you? You," he said to the ghosts, "want to know why there are so many humans here, and you," he said to the humans, "want to know why I've changed so much from the," he hesitated for a split second, recalling the name he had in their reality, "Danny you know. I should tell you, I don't have the answer to either of those questions, but I hope that what I can tell you will be a good substitute."

Phantom drew his legs up onto the couch so that he was sitting cross-legged. He was a little nervous. He usually didn't have quite so many strangers interested in him, personally. But he supposed that
was going to change from now on, what with the aftermath of the invasion by those white-wearing weirdos and Judge Issitoq's irrational hatred of liminals. He swallowed.

"The first thing that I truly remember is waking up in the Barrens. That is a region of the Ghost Zone," he added, for the benefit of the humans. "I was alone in the green, just floating there. No idea where I was, no idea who I was. I had no memory beyond the moment. I think now that I must have fallen through a portal and floated the Lethe before I woke up. I was scared, of course. I think anyone would be. I wasn't even able to decide which direction to fall in. Then Walker showed up and took exception to the clothing I was wearing, which was, as you might have guessed, from the material plane.

"Walker, of course, threw me in prison. I didn't think so then, but Walker's prison was probably one of the better places for me to wind up. I was fed, clothed, and relatively safe. Walker's rules kept me from getting too badly injured. On the other hand, he and his guards enjoyed using pain as a... teaching tool." Phantom paused, bringing his hand up to touch his opposite shoulder, running his thumb over a particularly nasty scar. "I was not the fastest learner. I..." He trailed off again.

"As a human, I was disliked by a number of people," he said, changing track, "but ghosts tend to like children. Children are rare, here in the Infinite Realms. So there were a fair number of people willing to teach me, protect me from the more violent inmates.

"After a while, I became aware of some of the more interesting abilities humans can gain in the Infinite Realms. For example," he briefly pushed his hand through the couch. "I initially tried to use them to escape. I could walk through the walls of the prison. But, well, Walker always found me and brought me back. He started using material plane objects to keep me caged in, the hypocrite. That was three, maybe four months in? Perhaps a little longer? I'm not sure. Time can be uneven in the Realms. Most places don't have a steady day/night cycle, and even those that do often... warp, when compared to the material plane. An hour in one place may not be an hour in another.

"At that point, I had gained something of a reputation, so I was invited to join in the next jailbreak. It may surprise you, but it was all very civilized. Jailbreaks were and are a regular occurrence in Walker's prison. This one was moderately successful." Phantom sighed. He had left a lot out. He hoped that his avoidance of mentioning his liminality wasn't leaving him with too many plot holes.

"This was my first time being free. To be honest, I had no idea where I was going, or what I was doing. I had been separated from the other escapees. Luckily, I ran into another relatively benign environment. Have any of you heard of Sidney Poindexter?" Surprisingly, the humans nodded. "Well, he maintains an externalized lair that is a facsimile of a material plane school. He and I came to an arrangement that suited us both, and I began to live there.

"Unfortunately, Walker isn't the type to let things go, and, about a month later, he made a bargain with a high-security prisoner name Wulf-" The nearest door smashed open, interrupting Phantom. Well, maybe it wasn't the door so much as the person who had kicked it in.

"You! Whelp!"

"Skulker," said Phantom. The hunter wasn't going to go after his pelt here of all places, was he?
"What do you want?" Then Phantom took in the ghost's appearance. He looked, in a word, terrible. As if he had just gone through a firefight with a much stronger opponent. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine! What I want is-!" Skulker stepped over the threshold. The marks on his armor vanished. "I- Whelp? What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Lady Pandora to pick us up," said Ellie. "What are you doing here?"
"I thought I was- Ohhhh." The ghost wrenched open the door and stepped back outside. The burn marks and dents reappeared. He then turned around, still holding the door open. "Someone put a price on your head, boy. A high price. High enough to risk breaking a truce. They'll be coming here."

"What?" said Phantom. He strode to the door. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I'm the only one allowed to take your pelt, and I'm not so crass as to do it a truce zone." He puffed out his chest, and, in doing so, almost lost his grip on the door.

"Yes, yes. You're very honorable hunter, despite trying to murder me repeatedly. Do you know where they are? How far? Wait, how did you even know where I was?"

"I overheard it from them," said Skulker, "and they won't be too far behind me."

"Great," said Phantom. "I suppose I owe you one. Unless that thing we agreed not to talk about occurred in your history as well."

Skulker scowled. "We agreed not to talk about it!"

"Good to know." He turned. "Did we agree on a plan B before we came in?" He had discussed one with his original companions, but, well, they weren't here. His sister (he was still very excited about having a sister) and these humans were. And Plasmius too. He didn't really want to count Plasmius as part of his group, but there he was.

"Yeah," said Ellie, "there's a guy at the casino upstairs who owes me a boat."

"Old Fifty-Three Card Jake?"

"That's the one."

"Huh, okay."

He glanced out the door, past Skulker. He saw ghosts out there, flying towards the Tower, dozens of them. Phantom recognized some of them, though he wished he didn't. They were not people who Phantom wanted to be around with a dozen-plus humans in tow. Some of them, he had history with. Bad history. Not like with Skulker, where the whole thing was very nearly a joke.

It was unlikely that they would all forget what they were doing with just a left/right change.

"Time to go, then," he said. "You had better get out of here, too, Skulker, unless you want to become scrap metal."

"But the story-" protested one of the ghosts, over the sounds of the humans' panic.

"Another time, perhaps. Thank you for the food. You know, you could always come with us, if you want excitement. Or fight one of those people, if they break the truce."

"Please, children," said Plasmius. "No one is going to-"

"The oncoming horde disagrees," said Phantom. "If they don't come in, fine, but if they do, I want to be closer to plan B. What's the next floor? Anyone know?"

Ellie made a face. "It's the gender swap floor."
"Oh no!" said Dash, as Dale's face went slightly green. "No, I'm not going to be a girl!"

"It's temporary, but if you want," said Phantom, "you can stay here and be used as bait, or killed, because I know some of those thugs, and they will do that. Just so you know, there isn't any guarantee that any of us will want to save you when we're on another floor and experiencing an identity crisis. Where are the stairs?" The last statement was entirely rhetorical. He had already spotted the stairs, which were tucked into a corner along one wall. "Come on," he said. He had learned that, often, the way to get people to follow you was to just assume that they would. Confidence, as Pandora would say, was key.

By the time he got to the bottom of the stairs, his sharp ears could hear a small crowd moving behind him. Good. Good. He didn't exactly want to be responsible for these people, but circumstances told him that he already was, and he just knew that he would feel guilty if one of them died.

He jogged up the steps, reaching the top in a couple of seconds...

… Dani reached the top step and collapsed, hissing, around her injured ankle. Gosh, that had been weird. That had been really weird. That had been really, really weird. She could remember not remembering. She could remember living in the Ghost Zone, could remember not knowing Neil, who was... Who was a girl for some reason downstairs.

Wait... Dani had been a boy downstairs. This was the gender swap floor, ergo...

Crap. She was actually a boy. That was a pain that very nearly rivaled that of her foot which felt like it was going to fall off. This whole thing was a bad idea. Abort. She would rather go back down and fight that whole horde of ghosts, and-

She heard a door downstairs get kicked in, and revised that opinion.

It took a (painful) tap on her core to draw on her flight, and a helping hand from Neil, to get her upright and away from the top of the stairs.

Dani took a moment, once that happened, to look at the ghosts enjoying themselves on this floor. "Hi there," she said, forcing a smile on her face. "Don't mind us, we're just trying to avoid some people who are trying to kill us, you know how it is."

"What?" said one man, just before a door was opened and a mass of mid-sized, androgynous, red ghosts flew in.

"There!" screamed one of them. "In with the humans!"

"Get her!"

Vasilisa summoned a magenta shield between them and the attacking ghosts. "Get to the next floor!" she ordered.

"Hey!" yelled one of the ghosts who had been on the floor when Dani and the others got there, a man wearing a green party hat. "This is a truce zone! What do you think you're doing?"
"Back off, we're just here for Phantom!"

There was a beat where the only sounds were Dani, Neil, Mrs Lancer and Dani's classmates trying to get to the stairs, and the red ghosts trying to get past Lisa's shields. This was not an ideal situation. Actually it was very close to the opposite of ideal, seeing as Dani wasn't in condition to so much as act as a (half-) human shield for her classmates. Their only protections were Lisa's shield, and their finely honed ghost-dodging skills... Actually, that wasn't too bad. There were still a lot of red ghosts, and they weren't all weaklings, either.

Then the ghost in the green hat screamed, "Solidarity!" and the partiers attacked.

"Oh," said Dani, feeling a little lightheaded, "that's nice of them. Hope they don't get hurt."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," said Neil. "There are tons of them. This is a popular floor, I guess. You think I should help Lisa?"

"Nah, she'll be fine, little bro. And if we stop, we'll get trampled."

"We're the same size. Hey, I wonder, do I really look like you, and you look like me? When we're not here, I mean."

"We already look the same," said Dani. She was a little out of breath, which was troubling, because she really shouldn't be. Strictly speaking, even in human form she didn't really need to breathe. She should be able to carry on a conversation just as easily as Neil.

"True. Hey, does that mean that Yun, Destiny, and Dahlia are guys? I can't really see that. I mean, I did when we were downstairs, but, still."

"I can," said Dani. She yanked Neil down, having spotted a red ghost coming at them out of the corner of her eye. When she landed on her hurt ankle, she bit through her lower lip. Neil hauled her back up.

"Sorry," he said.

"Just," gasped Dani, "just pay more attention, please."

They were almost to the stairs, and Dani risked a glance backwards. All of her classmates (minus Sam and Tiffany, plus Ms Lancer) were there. Great. They hadn't lost anyone. She didn't know how she'd deal with herself if she'd lost someone. Not well, based on past evidence. She'd have to thank Vasilisa for the shield.

… Or maybe not. The woman owed her for Vortex and Undergrowth, among other things.

She and Neil ducked a blast of red ectoplasm. The red ghosts had gotten around Lisa.

Okay, time for the secret identity to be well and truly defenestrated. It probably had been time eyesterday, everything considered, but-

Dani gasped. Maybe not. Even that pathetic attempt to charge up an ectoblast had hurt. Neil, on the other hand, got a three ectoblasts off in the time it took Dani to realize this.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," said Dani, she looked over her shoulder. "Shoot. Valentine! Michelle! Are you guys okay?" It looked like Michelle had tripped and fallen, possibly jostled by Dahlia, and Valentine had
stopped to help her up.

"Fine," said Valentine, pulling up Michelle by one arm. "Keep going!" Valentine looked like he was trying to summon one of his guns, and it wasn't working. Bits of his suit kept materializing, then sparking and disappearing back into nothing.

Neil had to blast off two other red ghosts before they got to the stairs, although they were helped considerably by the party-goers. "I'm carrying you," he said.

"Fine," said Dani, hopping a little to give Neil a hand and hurry things along. She wound up in a weird, not-quite princess carry. Good enough for going up the stairs, provided that they didn't run into a doorjamb or shelf or something.

Then another ghost, much different, more brutal, more muscular than the red ones, bounded down the stairs, transforming from female to male as they did so. They raised a spear, a wicked smile on their face. Neil's hands were full with Dani. Neil pushed backwards off the stairs, flying, and Dani brought up her hands, a shield sparking between them. The spear shattered, and Dani went limp.

The wisps, who had been following along with Neil and Dani the whole time, swarmed the ghost. Apparently they could bite. Dani filed that away under 'useful information.' The bites didn't seem to do much damage, but it was still damage. The wisps weren't so harmless after all.

Then Dani found out why wisps typically didn't do that when the attacking ghost seized one of them and squeezed. The wisp screamed. So did Dani. Well, screeched, more like.

Surprisingly, the screech, which definitely wasn't a Wail, or anything supernatural, had an effect. The ghost seemed to have sensitive ears. He (she?) dropped the wisp and covered his ears, letting Neil kick him in the face. Then someone from upstairs tackled him, screaming ectoplasmic murder, and Neil took the opportunity to get by.

Then they got to the next floor.
Clockwork stood in his laboratory, his equipment focused on one, particular paradox. Fixing paradoxes was what Issitoq was letting him do, so he was going to do it. He was going to do it in the most flamboyant and fanciful way possible, and he was going to do it in front of people who knew who he was and where he lived.

Hopefully, before the day was up, his sister would show up to throw a shoe at him and tell him to knock it off.

The twenty-fourth floor of the Digressed Tower was a maze of rooms and hallways. Add panic, confusion, a Scooby-Doo-esque chase scene, and the disastrous inclusion of way too much cheese, and everyone had gotten separated and scattered. Whose idea was the cheese, anyway? Everyone knew how cheese affected people, especially humans!

Then, there was cheese, even more cheese, secreted all throughout this ridiculous maze. Who would do something like this?

Psychologists. Psychologists would do something like this.

Danny shifted from foot to foot and glared at the ghosts in the room, who were reclined on brocade silk lounges, indulging in the stuff. He couldn't understand people, sometimes. He'd tried cheese once. It wasn't that good, for all its attractive properties.

What he was really annoyed about, though, was that none of the ghosts could help them with directions. Danny and Ellie had been hoping that someone here could help them find the people they'd been separated from, but the ghosts here didn't even know where the exits to this floor were. They had laughed when Ellie had asked the question.

"Back or forward?" she asked, this time turning to Danny.

Danny licked his lips. "I don't know." He turned around, trying to get a sense of where they had come from, of where they had been. They had passed through a dozen doors to get here, leaving some of the rooms in shambles as they fought off various, oddly incompetent, bounty hunters.

It was really weird, actually. He had a sinking suspicion that the more dangerous bounty hunters were hanging back, waiting for a chance to strike. Or maybe just for the other thugs to drive out all the other ghosts hanging out in the Tower with their blatant truce violations.

"This way, I think," said Danny, pointing.

"That's a wall."

"Forget walls. We can beat walls to heck. We can walk through them."
Ellie blinked. "These walls?"

Danny stuck an arm through the wall. "Looks like it."

"I somehow forgot that we could do that here. Hey, do you think-?" She floated up to the ceiling and tapped on it. "I guess not."

"Can we hurry up?" asked Danny, once again dancing from foot to foot. His heart was hammering. "They're going to get killed. They're going to-" He inhaled deeply, and held his breath while counting to five. Having a panic attack would not be productive. Honestly, having a panic attack was never productive. They sucked. The cheese wasn't helping.

Ellie was back beside him. "I'm going first," she said.

"Fine," said Danny. Ellie, being healthy, would be faster to react to unexpected enemies on the other side of the wall. All the same, he would be ready to pull her back at the first indication of trouble, ready to shield her from any attackers who might mistake her for him. They did look almost identical, after all, even without the added confusion of the Tower. Someone might think that this was the gender swap floor, and well, thinking about that one floor down, he knew that if he and Ellie switched genders, they would look exactly like one another.

He followed Ellie through the wall. They were in an empty room without any doors.

"This wasn't what I expected," said Danny.

"Yeah," said Ellie. "So, should we keep going?"

"Yeah. I think, um. I'm pretty sure Amity is this way," he said, pointing. His 'homing sense' wasn't working perfectly right now, but it was working. "It was that way when we came up, and considering how we turned, I'm pretty sure that if we keep going this way, we'll wind up crossing our path... Or getting behind the stairs. I don't know how far into the center of the room the stairs let out... But that should help us pick up where everyone else went."

"Yeah, I can see that," said Ellie. "If they left a trail."

"Twenty teenagers? Trust me, they left a trail. Maybe Vlad didn't, but he can take care of himself. Usually."

"Yeah. He knows how to run when the going gets tough. I'm surprised that he hasn't already."

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Usually, Vlad would have already cut his losses and run. He was powerful, but many of the ghosts he had seen coming for Daniel were almost as powerful, and there were a great many more of them. Vlad hadn't survived as long as he had by picking his battles poorly. Pariah Dark and Vortex had been flukes.

(At least, he hoped so.)

But if he left, Daniel, and probably Danielle, would be killed. Then he would be alone. More alone. Again. Even if both Daniel and Danielle hated him, they were at least company. They, and no one
else, knew what it was like to be human-ghost hybrids. He couldn't do that. He couldn't be alone again. He couldn't bear it. The very thought left his mouth dry and his hands shaking, which was decidedly inconvenient in a fight like this one.

Of course, he wasn't quite prepared to die. No. He had never been prepared to die. He had never gotten over the scare he had gotten in the hospital twenty years ago.

But he would put up a fight. He would defend Daniel and Danielle. He wouldn't just let them be murdered. And perhaps- Perhaps they would be grateful. Yes. They would be grateful, and let him into their lives, offer him friendship. After all, wasn't that how it so often happened in cartoons, or whatever nonsense children were into nowadays?

(Peanut brittle, but his sounded old.)

William Lancer, meanwhile, was lamenting the fact that on the lower floor, when he had been a woman, he had also been a) in shape, b) a teacher, and c) not a cheese addict. He had no idea how b had come about, but he was willing to bet that it was related to the other two. He also didn't understand how it was possible that all of these random children still seemed to think that he was their teacher.

It couldn't possibly be the case that him being a teacher was likely throughout the multiverse? No. No way. He was an unhealthy, drug-addicted, depressed semi-successful author. Not a teacher. Children gave him a headache. He wouldn't have even been at the school except that the English teacher (who had managed to disappear without anyone noticing the second they stepped into this 'Tower') had wanted him to give a speech on his most successful novel after the Fentons' demonstration.

But here were these children, and some of them, bizarrely enough, seemed to... respect him? Look up to him? Words were his trade, and he still couldn't find the right ones.

It was probably at least partially because of the heavy odor of cheese hanging in the air. He had been trying to quit, but... But... You just couldn't get good dairy products in America anymore! Not since the international ban on all milk products! And he hadn't eaten any cheese since before he'd been spirited away.

It was hard to think, and William was pretty sure that he had lost some kids, especially back at the beginning when ghosts were shooting that... Stuff. Ectoplasm. Yeah, he had definitely lost kids. More than one. Maybe even half of what he had originally. It was hard to tell when they wouldn't stay still enough for him to count. The ones he still had were either crying or bouncing off the walls. It was like they had never smelled cheese before.

Well, maybe some of them hadn't. These were kids who had grown up during the dairy prohibition, after all.

"Look!" he shouted, finally. "J- Jane Eyre," he caught himself right before he started to get into his nice, comfortable blasphemy/vulgarity rut. "Will you all shut up and stop moving?"

"M-Mr Lancer?" asked Mikey, shocked. Scandalized, even.

"Shut up," he said. He rubbed his face with both hands, beard bristling against his palms. What had
he done to deserve this? "This is an awful place to hide," he said. "We need to leave."

"It's a dead end," said Lester.

"I know, that's why it's terrible. We have to go back, or else we'll get trapped here."

"But the ghosts are back there," protested Lester.

"Yeah," said Ricky, who was as much of a kindred spirit as William was going to get in this bunch. "But not for a few rooms. Right?"

"Right," said William. "So- So you-" what was that kid's name? - "Rebecca, get out from under that table, we need to go."
Chapter 117

Chapter 117: A Bargain

Sam rolled over again, aware that she was getting ever closer to the edge of the bed. She should be asleep. She was exhausted. She should have been asleep the very moment she dropped on the bed.

But she hadn't. She knew why.

It wasn't because of Danny. At least, it wasn't only because of Danny, although that was what had kept her awake the previous night. No, what was keeping her awake now was Tucker's comment. Or was it Jazz's? She couldn't remember who had said it, and that bothered her almost as much as anything else.

Other interests. She had other interests. She did. She was defined by her interests. Everyone who knew her defined her by her interests. She was a goth, vegan, plant-loving, animal-loving activist. She loved poetry and darkness. She loved violent movies with strong female characters. She was a feminist. She was this, she was that... And she was interested. She did like these things. She loved being these things. But...

So much of her 'personality' was a reaction. A rejection of her parents and their suffocating ideals. Most of the things she liked, most of the things she was into, she got into to spite her parents. She called Paulina shallow, but she spent so much time worrying about being deep, about being real, about not caring.

Her plants were the only interest that didn't fall under that header. She was such a fake. She liked things, but she didn't like them quite as much as she made out. She wasn't passionate.

She liked dark colors, the gothic style, but she'd be just as good with navy, dark green, or deep purple as she was with black, and she really wanted to experiment more with neon. Neon was cool. Ghostly. Danny's eyes were neon.

Violent movies were nice. Action was great. Loud action was great. Blood and gore were amazing. But... She liked romantic comedies, too. The good ones, anyway. The ones that weren't stupid and sexist.

Being dark and grim had it's good points. The aesthetic was great. But she couldn't handle being pessimistic all the time, couldn't keep that 'I hate everything' vibe going on. She could slot into the 'cheerful goth' box, but, ancients, she hated boxes. That was almost what she had been trying to get away from in the first place, and she hadn't managed it at all. She'd only managed to put herself in a box that her parents didn't like, which was a start, but not good enough.

Was she really so... Empty?

She didn't want to be empty.

What would her grandmother say? Her grandmother was always so helpful. She always understood, was always willing to listen to Sam's rants. Other adults couldn't measure up. Ghosts especially wouldn't get it. They were always so themselves. Even when they had identity issues, like Danny, they had purpose. Drive.
Maybe one of her causes? She did believe in her causes. Her arguments with Tucker about meat were real. She was invested in civil liberties and animal rights, in keeping the environment healthy, viable for life. She wanted the world to be good.

But that didn't feel right. Nothing felt right. Her plants were the closest, but she just couldn't recapture the feeling she had back when she'd been under Undergrowth's control.

She had to have something else. She had to have some other hobby.

She sat straight up in the bed when she realized that she did. She did have another hobby, but...

Her thoughts were full of 'buts' tonight. Her hands curled around the blankets, bunching them up in her fists.

Photography.

She used to carry a camera everywhere, all the time. She had wanted to be part of the yearbook staff. Now, well, ever since the Accident, there were weeks when she just couldn't bear to look at a camera. It reminded her of why, precisely, Danny had died. On the other hand, there were days when she was just as glued to it as ever, and she had been keeping up those scrapbooks (with Jazz's help, of course). Maybe her talent would lie with photography.

Which brought up other problems, because she didn't have a camera with her. Things could never just be easy for once, could they?

"Mia? Is that you?"

The girl, who had been wedged into the corner, crying, looked up. "Danny?" she said.

Danny and Ellie came closer, rounding a dusty table. "What happened?" asked Danny. "Why are you all alone?"

"I don't know," said Mia, miserably. "I thought I was following them, but then it turned out I was following a ghost, and they yelled at me for being a stalker and pushed me down, and then I was all alone, and I can't see anything, and I couldn't figure out where I was, and what is that smell? It's everywhere."

"It's cheese," said Danny.

"What, like dairy?"

"Yeah?"

"It's legal here?"

"Basically everything is legal here," said Danny, offering a hand, "let me help you up."

"Wasn't your leg all screwed up before?"

"You mean on the last floor?" asked Danny.
"No, before that. Before we came here."

Danny shook his head. "We must be using slightly different universes. I hurt my leg a while ago, but I got it treated. I'm still all beat up because of Spectra, though, so it isn't like I'm at one-hundred percent health or whatever."

"You hurt it when you fought that whale," said Mia.

"What whale?"

Mia sniffed. "I guess it doesn't matter," she said. "As long as you're you."

She finally took Danny's hand. "Do you know what happened to everyone else?"

"No," said Danny. "Ellie and I got into a fight, and once we managed to get away we realized that we had lost everyone else. Then we were chased for a while. Then we, you know, wandered around trying to find everyone. But you're the first person we ran into. Do you remember anything about how you got here?"

"No. I got all turned around."

"That's okay," said Danny. "I'm sure we'll find them all eventually."

They had to find them all. Gosh, he hoped that they weren't gorging themselves on cheese right now. People died from cheese-burst stomachs all the time!

More importantly, they could get killed by ghosts. That would be bad.

He looked around the room, trying to figure out where Mia must have come in. If they could figure that out, they might be able to trace her path back and figure out where it had diverged from the others.'

Vlad 'the Dairy King' Masters felt off balance. This floor always made him uncomfortable. He suspected that the change the Bends had attempted to apply to him didn't fit very well. He couldn't imagine why, but that was likely because he had yet to identify the change this floor made.

He slicked back his hair, and adjusted his suit. He might be uncomfortable, but he was loath to show it, especially as Daniel was up here somewhere.

That boy would become Vlad's apprentice. He would be his heir in all things ghostly and secular, no matter how he whined about the cheese trade being 'unethical.' Vlad would make sure of it. It was inevitable. It had to be. Daniel was the only other stable half-ghost in existence, and Vlad refused to accept a inferior successor.

The door to his right opened by a hair, and two sets of glowing eyes peered through the gap. Vlad got ready for another fight. But then the door opened, revealing Daniel, Danielle, and one of Daniel's insufferable classmates. The blind one.

"Hi, Vlad," said Daniel, giving a little unenthusiastic wave. "$\text{Thanks for, um, your help down there.}$"

Vlad raised an eyebrow. "$\text{I see you're missing some of your little friends, Daniel.}$"
"Most of them aren't really my friends," said Daniel. "You haven't seen them, either?"

"No," said Vlad. He suppressed a smile. "I don't suppose that you want my help now, do you? After you rejected it so vehemently outside?"

"Vlad, none of us actually know what happened outside," said Danielle, fixing him with a glare that could have melted steel. "That's kind of the point."

"Yes, my dear. I know. Remember who taught you. But we are all still the same people, are we not? There is no reason to restrain ourselves except the truce. Which, as you might have noticed, has been broken." Vlad examined his fingernails. "Do you want my help now, Daniel? I have been in this maze before. If anyone could find your classmates, I can."

"Yeah?" said Daniel, a touch of hostility rising to his surface like cream on some fresh, high-grade dairy product. "And what's the price tag on that help? Because I'm not getting involved in the drug trade."

Vlad sighed. Of course Daniel would balk at that.

"Drugs?" squeaked the blind girl.

"Not important right now," said Daniel. "What do you want?"

"What will you offer?" countered Vlad.

Daniel pursed his lips. "Help get us all up to the 77th floor and out of here, and I'll, I don't know, spend a weekend with you, and let you train me, or something."

Vlad smirked. "Make it a week," he said, "and Danielle has to come as well."

"What?" said Daniel and Danielle in harmony, clearly incensed. They looked at each other, and had one of their silent conversations.

"No drug things," said Daniel, after a moment, sounding reluctant. "Nothing else illegal, either."

"Very well," said Vlad.

Daniel and Danielle exchanged another glance, and then nodded. "We agree," they said.

Nephthys glared at the hole.

There should not be a hole there. In her lair. In the lake.

The ex-lake.

All the water had drained into the hole.

She bent down, and traced her fingers along the smoothed rim of the hole. This would take but moments to repair for a ghost of her power, age, and skill, but still. She did not like coming home to snag a moment of relaxation only to find that someone had drained her lake.
She straightened, the edges of her robe and veil heavy with mud, her eyes narrowed. She was not what she, personally, would call well versed in the art of paradox, but she could tell when one had been present, and she knew the taste of her brother's power.

He would pay for this. Preferably with cookies. And an apology. Yes, she couldn't forget that. Maybe throw a shoe at him, too. She knew that he could fix paradoxes without damage. Perhaps this was revenge for breaking his reverse-entropy stove? No, he wasn't that petty. Or was he? He could be. He loved that stove.

Well, Nephthys loved her lake.

Clockwork was getting the shoe.
Chapter 118

Chapter 118: And Even More Cheese

Danny couldn't help but stare at Mr Lancer. He did not quite look like himself. He didn't feel like himself. There was something wrong there. Danny tilted his head at the man. Of course, deep down, he would be the same person he had always been, but the Mr Lancer Danny knew might not be closely related to the real Mr Lancer.

Danny sighed. Traveling through here was definitely hurting his brain. Not to mention that he was being forced to work with Vlad. Vlad, who was a cheese lord, a drug dealer, a terrible person in general.

He glanced over at the unbearably smug, unquestionably terrible person in question. Vlad was standing to the side, arms crossed, suit immaculate, smirking.

It made his skin crawl.

On the other side of things, they had herded all the cats (aka students) back into one group, and Vlad knew the way to the next floor, so they would probably be... he wouldn't say safe. None of this was safe, not with a bounty on his head. Better protected, maybe. He bit his lip.

(Danny was used to stress, used to responsibility, but this long-term direct responsibility was getting to him, especially since some of his classmates seemed to have no survival skills whatsoever. He was going to chew through his lip at this rate.)

He counted his classmates one more time, double-checking that they were all there. They were.

"Okay," he said. "Since Vlad knows the way out, he's going to lead us to the next floor. Please, please try to stay together. Find a buddy or something."

"What's the next floor?" asked Mikey.

"Um," said Danny, looking to Ellie for answers.

"It makes everyone older, I think?" said Ellie, uncertainly.

"So you're not a midget anymore and Vlad's a corpse instead of just looking like one."

"We're the same height."

"I stand with what I said."

"I'm not that old," said Vlad, offended.

"Yeah, you are," said Ellie and Danny.

"I'm only forty-three."

"And I'm two," said Ellie, unimpressed.

"You're trusting him?" said Valerie. Her injury had transferred to her other arm, but, somehow, so
had the dressings Danny had applied.

Ellie snorted. "No. Not really. But the only person he's ever in the mood to murder is Danny's dad, and really, your dad kind of deserves it sometimes."

"He's working on the fudge thing, okay?" said Danny. "Fudge isn't as bad as cheese, anyway."

He saw Vlad roll his eyes, and his glare intensified.

"This way, children," said Vlad, sweeping through the crowd. Ellie followed close behind, keeping a suspicious eye on her creator. Danny sighed, and took up the rear. If a ghost snuck

A whispered conversation started up between Mia, Hannah, and Sarah about how oh my god, it really is Mayor Masters. Star was casting strange, sideways looks at Mikey and Ricky. The twins were glued to Mr Lancer, who looked like he was about to have some kind of breakdown. Danny didn't blame him. The A-listers had banded together into a knot. They were really too close together if they had to run.

There was so much fear on the air. It was making Danny nervous. Paranoid. Each door they passed was an object of intense scrutiny. It didn't help that sometimes ghosts would come out who didn't want to attack them. It was a haunted house, replete with jump scares. The dust and spider webs only added to the ambiance.

(Danny may have enjoyed it, except for everything else going on. He was a ghost, after all. He liked a good scare, now and again.)

And then a ghost dropped from the ceiling, right onto Danny. He fell and squeaked, undignified, and attempted to call ectoplasm into his hands. They sparkled green, and the green-skinned, bug-eyed ghost hissed. Danny kicked, catching the ghost's tail, and managed to flip the ghost over so that he was on top, not the ghost, and then drove his elbow into the ghost's nose. The ghost's face deformed around the blow, and Danny felt rows of small, sharp teeth latch onto his elbow. He concentrated his attention on his elbow, ignoring the sting in his core, and fired off a ghost ray from that joint.

Taking advantage of the ghost's need to reform it's head, Danny rolled off, clearing the way for Vlad and Ellie to blast it into submission.

Vlad was about to hit it one more time, when Danny said, "Don't end him, ancients, Vlad."

"You want him to follow us?" asked Vlad, raising an eyebrow.

"He won't," said Danny. He grabbed the flickering end of the ghost's tail, and phased it into the floor. "See? There. Happy?"

"Not exactly," said Vlad.

The stair to the next floor was spiral, cupped in a mural-covered well. There was a large pile of cheese a few meters to the left of it. Danny felt his eye twitch as several of his classmates, and Mr Lancer started towards it. Danny grabbed the back of Mr Lancer's shirt, and the back of Paulina's.
"Guys," he said, trying to get the attention of Dale and Rebecca, "the stairs. We're here for the stairs. Seriously. Please."

"Hey," said Ricky. "Maybe we should send one person up first? Just to test things out? In case there are, you know, more of those guys that are trying to kill us up there."

"Not a good idea," said Ellie. "If we go separately, we might not realize that we're together. I guess it's less likely for you, because you're all humans, and this is the Ghost Zone, but still."

After a bit more cajoling, they got everyone to go up.

Danny's world shifted again.

He rubbed his eyes. "Two questions," he said.

"Yeah?" said Ellie, voice equally strained.

"Did we just come from a floor where we were midgets and cheese was some kind of drug?"

"Yeah, but I think that we're actually midgets," said Ellie.

Danny looked up. "What?" Then he did a double take. "Why do you still look like you're a teenager?"

Ellie shrugged. "Different life histories, I guess?" She tilted her head. "You're fourteen in the universe I remember. I'm pretty sure that's how old you were on each of the lower floors, too, so..."

"So that's probably how old I actually am," finished Danny. He looked around. "Why are we surrounded by people from my old high school class?"

"What do you mean by why, Fenton?" demanded Dash, crossing his arms over his slight paunch. "It's your freakazoid parents who crashed the reunion and sent us all here."

"That's not what happened," said Mikey, pushing up his glasses. "There was an explosion in the ghost tech lab at Axion, and..." He trailed off. "Why are you even here?"

"I just told you."

"It was just me and the ghost boy!" said Paulina. Wailed Paulina. Well, she looked as pretty as ever. He wondered if she was just as soulless as she had been the time she'd dated him, played with his emotions, and humiliated him just so she could get back at Sam. "Where did all of you people come from?!"

Danny pinched the bridge of his nose. This was going to be a long day.
"We need to find somewhere to sleep," said Danny. They had traveled several floors by this point. Some of them had been really weird. On one floor, they had all been left handed. On another, everyone had done some kind of... race swap... thing. Paulina had been French. Everyone had a different name. They had gone through a floor where everyone had neon hair. Danny's leg had alternated between being fine and being screwed up on each one.

Right now, they were on the twenty-eighth floor. It, apparently, altered every coin flip you had ever done. Danny, being sane, had never staked any life-altering decisions on the outcome of a coin flip. Ellie, who had never flipped a coin in her (admittedly short) life for the express purpose of being able to be on this floor without experiencing changes, said that he hadn't changed very much.

The same could not be said for everyone else. Dash and Kwan especially had changed. From what Danny could tell, they had decided which sports to try out for based on coin flips, and they had wound up on the swim team and the track team rather than the football and basketball teams. They looked a lot different with swimmer's physiques. Star, too, had changed. She wasn't on the A-list anymore. Her position in the popular group had been filled by Sarah. Which was bizarre, to say the least.

This was all made worse by the fact that the floor plan of this particular level was a giant spiral, and his classmates couldn't manage to phase through the walls. Danny and Ellie could do it with little difficulty, and Vlad could sort of get it, but he was surprisingly bad at it. Everyone else was rubbish, and Danny and Ellie couldn't pull a whole chain of people through after them. Danny couldn't even force intangibility on a wall for all that long at this point. He was exhausted. So was everyone else.

"Unfortunately," said Vlad, "this floor suffers from a dearth of places to sleep."

"How about the next floor?" asked Danny. He rubbed one of his eyes in an attempt to make it feel less gritty. It didn't work.

Vlad paused to think. "I do believe that there are rest areas upstairs. Unfortunately, this next floor is typically also the most crowded," he said, "and the best-dressed."

"What?"

"You recall the people who gave us cheese a few floors down?"

"Yeah?" said Danny. It was telling that he was too tired to throw in a jab about not having Alzheimer's like Vlad did.

"They intended to go to this next floor. It is something of an art gallery. The alteration is that each individual's favorite deceased or ended artist becomes longer lived."

"Oh," said Danny. "Right. So?"

Vlad sighed. "So we'll stand out. You don't want to stand out, put a target on our backs, do you, my dear boy?"
"Okay," said Danny. "No. What about the next floor, then?"

Vlad actually stopped dead.

"Vlad?" asked Danny, disturbed. "Are you okay?"

"Perhaps it will be best to rest before we go to that floor," said Vlad. He started walking again. Danny heard him muttering something under his breath, but he was too tired to interpret it.

"What? Why?" he asked. "What does that floor do?"

Vlad was silent. "For someone like me?" said Vlad. "Very little. For children like you, on the other hand..."

"Vlad. What does it do?" The question unfortunately came out as something of a whine, but Danny didn't really care.

"It makes it so that your parents are dead, or otherwise departed," said Vlad. "As my parents are already dead, it doesn't affect me."

"I keep thinking that Vlad is dead," said Ellie. "It always sucks when I find out that he isn't."

"Does it now?" said Vlad.

"Yep," said Ellie.

Danny swallowed. His skin had already gone cold. He shuddered, trying to bring his thought process back to normal. His parents being dead was a literal nightmare, and the 'closest' universe where that had happened might very well be that one.

"You- you're sure that this, that changing... Um." He paused, trying to organize his thoughts.

"You're sure that the floors, they don't actually change who we are underneath, right? It won't change, like, you know?"

"Quite sure," said Vlad. "What are you afraid of, Daniel?"

Danny crossed his arms. "Nothing," he said.

Vlad raised an eyebrow, but did not further dispute Danny's claim.

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Clockwork had managed to find a gap in the Observants' interdiction of the Digressed Tower. It was much less difficult once he realized that Issitoq was using the hourglass. Not easy. It was never easy to worm his way around the Observants' restrictions, but the Digressed Tower was, in some ways, like Amity Park: a thin spot in reality. Though, it must be said that the Tower was more of a thin spot across time and probability rather than across dimensions, as Amity Park usually was.

The thing with the Digressed Tower could be viewed from a number of different angles, from a number of different time lines, and some of those time lines were not interdicted.

He could see Daniel. Daniel was injured. Horribly so. Much of the work he and Frostbite had done
on his core earlier had been undone, and the Digressed Tower was certainly not helping his mental state.

Not to mention the assassins Issitoq sent.

If Clockwork had been human, he probably would have chewed his nails to the quick, or picked up some other self-destructive nervous habit. Actually, he probably wouldn't have been chewing his nails. He was wearing gloves, after all.

Then, in the other time mirror, to his left, he was watching Dan. Issitoq had put the thermos in a triply sealed 'secure' container that he had then locked in a room in the Panopticon. It was ridiculous. Vlad Plasmius had waltzed into the Panopticon and stolen one of their prisoners. Perhaps Vlad was more powerful than the average ghost, but their citadel was anything but impenetrable.

And, to keep Dan in the thermos, Clockwork had had to rewind the thermos's time ever so often. That wasn't something the Observants could replicate. Not unless Issitoq stood over the thing with the hourglass, which was not, incidentally, infinitely re-usable. Clockwork couldn't see him doing that, not as a hypothetical and not as real future possibility.

Dan, however, had been quiescent thus far. Clockwork wondered if he had actually actually gotten through to Dan somewhat after all the time he spent talking to him, or if Dan was just biding his time, waiting to strike. Either option was possible at this point. If he'd another year or so to work with Dan, or clearer vision, then he'd been able to tell, but as it was...

He sighed, and ducked just in time to avoid being hit by Nephthys's slipper.

"Why did you drain my lake?" she demanded.

"I needed some way to divert that paradox," said Clockwork, turning around.

"Don't give me that. I know that you know how to fix paradoxes without damaging the environment, and I know that you know that I know you know that. You owe me one smack with this slipper, a dozen cookies and a new lake!"

"You already fixed your lake, though?"

"I don't care, I want a new one! I want change in my existence that isn't you draining my lake!"

Clockwork sighed again. Nephthys changed her lair on a regular basis. She could be called the Ancient Master of Change just as easily as she could be called the Ancient Master of Death. But then ghosts weren't always rational.

(Neither were humans, from what Clockwork had seen.)

"I can't give you a new lake," said Clockwork.

"Why not?"

"I can't tell you," said Clockwork.

Nephthys glared. "Oh? And what is the real reason you drained my lake?"

"I can't tell you that, either."

"Can't or won't?"
"Can't."

"Why?"

"Can't tell you."

"Hm," said Nephthys. "Was Issitoq here? Is that what this is about?"

"I can't tell you."

"Really," said Nephthys. "You still owe me some cookies, but I suppose that they can wait until after the initial committee. The recess is going to end soon."

"I can't go."

"Excuse me?"

"I can't go," repeated Clockwork.

"Is this related to all those other things you can't tell me?"

"Yes," said Clockwork.

"So this is more important than the trial that may decide your own child's fate?"

"More important? No." He adjusted his mirror, and Nephthys came closer, peering over his shoulder.

"Oh dear," she said. "Is that Daniel? Is he where I think he is?"

Clockwork nodded once.

"Why?" asked Nephthys. When Clockwork stayed silent, she answered herself, "Issitoq. Of course. Brother, I will get you an advocate, and I will... take care of this." The centers of her eyes sparkled purple, and obscure patterns crawled along her skin, touching her skin with pale blue pearls. "Things need to change."
Chapter 120

Chapter 120: Art and Introspection

Maddie looked up when Azalea made a groaning sound. If the girl was human, Maddie would have said that the sound originated from the back of her throat, but she wasn't human, so Maddie was at a loss as to why she would make the sound to begin with.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked.

Azalea (it was just Azalea, Wolfsbane was off in court) looked up from her papers. "A lot of things. Everything." She closed her eyes and rubbed the side of her nose. She looked more human than she had up until that point. It helped that her flowery hair was pulled back into a bun, and her bees were quiet. "There are so many problems. I don't know what to say." She leaned back in her chair, no longer floating over it. "Phantom was- Excuse me. Daniel was in a situation that most would consider untenable. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Maddie, quietly, "of course we do."

"I'm reading these statements of intent from our opponents," she paused, "basically propaganda to convince other persons with standing to align themselves," she explained, "and I'm actually starting to agree with some of them." She opened her eyes. "I will, of course, continue to advocate for your position to the best of my abilities. Just..." Her voice was low. "This is really bad. Even ignoring the ones that set you up as a villain, as being purposefully abusive or negligent," she set aside a few sheets of paper as she spoke, "there are still a lot of people who will be arguing that you simply can't properly provide for him. It will be difficult to argue against them," she added, tone repressive. "You haven't exactly done what anyone would consider a good job."

"But we-" Maddie cut herself off. "We didn't know. We do now. We'll do better."

"We'll do anything," said Jack.

"That will help a little," said Azalea, dubious. "But, well, it will open you up to accusations of racism, of not caring about hurting a ghost child, which are..." She trailed off, delicately.

"Which are true," said Jack, deflating.

Maddie looked at him with concern. He had always been the more optimistic, more energetic of the two of them, but now, well... They were both having trouble eating, sleeping, waking up, being interested... Even with so many ghosts here, even with ghosts who would at least pretend to answer their questions with honesty, Maddie and Jack couldn't bring themselves to ask those questions. Maddie knew the symptoms of depression. She couldn't bring herself to fight them.

She missed her children.
Azalea was back at the papers. "Part of the problem is, a lot of his indelible personality makes him... Vulnerable to victimization by people close to him. From his Obsessions to his frailties, it's just..." Azalea shook her head.

"He told us he had a frailty," said Jack, surprising Maddie. "He said that he had to always keep his promises. Or... That's what the shadow said."

Maddie bit her lip. She hadn't quite made the connection that the shadows, who were part of Phantom were part of Danny.

"Yes," said Azalea. "That's the standard Stygian frailty." She turned to another stack, and squinted at it. "I'm not sure if it's a native frailty, or if it's one he acquired after first forming... Some people think that matters, but it really doesn't, as far as I can tell..." She trailed off, muttering.

"How do frailties come to be?" asked Jack. "Mads and I theorized that they're related to traumas from their past, or trade offs for other powers and abilities that they picked up, but not being able to break a promise doesn't seem to fall into either of those for Danny."

"Um," said Azalea. "I... Don't really know? I'm an advocate. I know some psychology stuff, and I'd do anything to maximize chaos, but like, the science behind them isn't really... my thing. Then, um, a lot of ghosts don't have frailties, anyway, and the trauma thing could be applied to Obsessions, too, really. But, er, common wisdom is that there are five types of frailty, one for each of the five major rivers. If, um, you're interested?"

"Please," said Jack. "We want to- We need to understand."

"O-Okay," said Azalea. "There are five types of frailty. Stygian, Acheronic, Cocytian, Lethean and Phlegethonic. The Styx is the River of Oaths, and if you swear an oath on its waters, you have to keep it, and people with a Stygian frailty have that onus on each and every one of their promises. Then, an Acheronic frailty means that you can't cross marked borders without the proper permission. For example, a person with an Acheronic frailty might not be able to come into your house unless they were invited. Cocytian frailties... Actually, Cocytian frailties might be what you were thinking about before. They're kind of more... Specific, I guess?" She picked up a pencil, and started to chew on the eraser. "Like, they're all really weird things. Like not being able to be around birds without singing, or just seeing water being painful. They're... They're all stimuli that always have the same responses. Then there's the Lethean frailty, which is basically just amnesia. The Lethe is the River of Forgetfulness, after all." She had eaten the eraser, and was now gnawing on the pencil itself.

"Phlegethonic frailties are essentially the opposite of most Cocytian frailties. If you're away from something for too long you start getting weak." A bee landed on the pencil when she took it out of her mouth to gesture, and she waved it away. "Then there are a bunch of things that might be classed as a frailty but are actually because of Obsession, or the way a power works." She bit into the pencil again. "It isn't like it's really all that clear cut, and I'm sure that I'm missing stuff. I mean, if I understand correctly, your psychology and physiology isn't, either."

"No," said Maddie, "it isn't."

Danny sleepily tilted his head at one of the paintings, a work of bright green lines on a blue-black background. It was pretty, but he could understand why this room was more empty than the others
on this floor. Most ghosts, especially the Dead, tended towards the old-fashioned.

(Danny was sure that he had seen chunks of stone layered with cave paintings out in the main hall.)

This little room, though, was very modern. The pictures were bright, flat shapes layered onto one another, or lines, straight and curved, segmented and continuous. Minimalist. The furniture was minimalist, too. Black and white with clean lines. Low, close to the ground. Leathery padding. Subdued glow. Most of it had already been claimed, but between Ellie and Valerie, Danny had been reserved a whole bench. The strength of their combined glares was incredible.

He laid down, curling slightly, flipping over so that he could see the painting on the opposite side of the room. This one was more swirly, and blue, like Earth's sky.

Ellie settled down next to him, not quite touching. Vlad was standing by the door. Everyone else was lying down, except for Rebecca who was staring at one of the paintings like her life depended on it.

Danny sighed, and closed his eyes. It was reasonably safe here. Many of the ghosts outside enjoying the art were fairly high level, if Danny was any judge, and none of them would countenance a breech of the truce.

Wow, he must have picked up some speaking habits from the lower floors. He didn't usually use the word 'countenance.'

Even if an attacker got past them, they'd still have to deal with Vlad, who didn't look like he was going to sleep. Danny adjusted his hurt leg as well as he could, trying to keep it so that it wouldn't be stressed or strained while he was asleep. He had slept through injuries before, albeit none quite as persistent as this one.

Still, he was having trouble sleeping. He was hyper-aware of where everyone was and what they were doing. But he needed to sleep. He didn't think that he could face the next floor when he was this exhausted. He needed to be awake, rested, in control. Not overemotional, not overwrought. Calm.

He mumbled, brushing the very edges of his core, trying to soothe it, soothe his mind, center himself. He avoided the tender parts, the parts that hurt.

Very slowly, he fell asleep.

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Valerie sat up, eyes still on Danny. She had come to a conclusion.

She hated herself.

She had spent so long blaming everyone and anyone but herself for her problems. She blamed Phantom. She blamed the A-listers. She blamed ghosts. She blamed, blamed, blamed, blamed, and she got herself hurt, and she got other people hurt, especially Danny.

If he was so closely related to Phantom, then what the heck had she broke up with him for? He didn't need protection. From what she had seen, he was far more capable than she was, far more dangerous.
But... Danny also wasn't quite human. There was something else there. He wasn't a ghost, Valerie would know, she would know if he was a ghost.

He was linked to Phantom. Both the Phantoms. The other Fentons had said something about Phantom being an ectoplasmic copy of Danny. That had made sense. Coupling that with Ellie being a clone, a copy of both Phantom and Danny, and with what Ellie herself had said was easy. It all made sense together. It was believable.

So why didn't Valerie believe it?

Maybe it was just a question of why Danny was here, and not Phantom. Maybe the issue was that, well, she knew about two other half-ghosts... Or whatever Vlad and Ellie were.

But Danny couldn't be Phantom. He couldn't. Valerie couldn't... She couldn't accept that. She couldn't accept that she had been completely, completely wrong about everything. If Danny was Phantom, then she hadn't just hurt him by mistake, she had hurt him intentionally. She had hunted him down. She'd had him in chains.

Even if he wasn't... Even if Phantom was his own person, then...

She had seen the ghosts here. They were weird, Valerie didn't know them at all but they had defended Valerie and the others against the ghosts who had tried to kill Danny.

If Phantom was his own person, separate from Danny, and he... And Valerie... Valerie had done some horrible things to him, and...

The ghosts who were trying to kill Danny had called him Phantom. Or were they really trying to kill Ellie? Ellie had looked like Phantom on the second... No, twenty-third floor. She looked like Phantom anyway, actually. She was a Phantom, too.

"Hey," said Ellie, "if you keep staring at Danny like that, he's going to wake up."

"Is he Phantom?"

Ellie made a scoffing noise in the back of her throat. "He already told you he wasn't going to say either way, and this is between Danny and Phantom. What makes you think that I'm going to give you a different answer?" She grinned, showing fangs, but the expression was a bit strained. "You know me better than that, Val. Get some sleep, okay?"

"Look," said Valerie, "this isn't- This isn't about me hating Phantom, okay? I've, well, I'd be annoyed, definitely, but, like, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. I just... I've seen the ghosts here, and I was wrong. And I- I need to know. I hurt him, and I need to know how to apologize, and what for."

"So, it's about closure," said Ellie, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I guess."

Ellie shrugged. "So, you aren't going to want to hear this, but the thing is that you're not the victim here, so you're going to have to wait. If he doesn't, if either of them don't, want to make himself or themselves available to apologize to, that's their business."

"You're not helping," said Valerie.

"Yes, I am," said Ellie. "An apology isn't really going to do any good right now, anyway. Just, like,
take a step back, realize that ghosts are also people, and stop overreacting to stuff. Other than that..."
Ellie shrugged again. "I know that this place is kinda built for introspection, and that's definitely what I used it for, but this really isn't the time, you know? It's time to sleep. Which what I'm going to do, so please don't glare at Danny, okay? He'll definitely get the wrong idea if he sees you doing it. You know Danny."

Valerie nodded slowly. She knew Danny. Or, at least, she thought she did.
Smith had left the Digressed Tower when the boy started talking. Part of him was curious, another concerned... But the child's false life-story really wasn't Smith's business, the child had more than proven his survival skills, and, now that he had retrieved what he had come for, there was no reason for him to be here.

He patted the object in his pocket once again. He had not held it for years and years. He had not used it in longer. Far longer. Back in the Digressed Tower, it had looked broken. It had been broken. An odd decoration shoved in a corner that no one really bothered with or noticed. No one had so much as touched it.

Now, well, he could feel the mold through his pocket, feel the runes and symbols carved into its surface. He could feel the smooth edges, the weight of it. He could feel the power it exuded, the traces it left on his hands, on his clothing. This was one of his better works, and he was... not happy. He did not do 'happy.' Satisfied. Content. Soothed.

Why shouldn't he be?

He had everything he needed to reforge the Ring of Rage.

Danny twitched hard, coming out of sleep all at once. He had been dreaming, but he couldn't remember what he had been dreaming about. All he knew was that he was anxious. Incredibly so.

His heart was hammering so fast he could hardly separate it from the nervous, stuttering hum of his core.

He breathed in deeply. As far as he could see, there was no real reason to be so anxious. Everyone was here, everyone was sleeping... Almost everyone. Vlad was awake, and so was Hannah, oddly enough. Valerie looked like she had fallen asleep in a sitting position. His eyes flicked from person to person, examining them more closely. They all looked fine. Maybe it was just because of Vlad? But Danny had frequently been forced to sleep in Vlad's general vicinity, or in proximity to enemies.

Danny levered himself into a better position, avoiding leaning on or bumping into Ellie. She was sleeping peacefully, purring just a little, and he didn't want to disturb her.

"Go back to sleep, Daniel," said Vlad. "You've only been asleep for an hour."

Danny took another deep breath, and glanced at Hannah, who shrugged.

"Check- Check the outside?" asked Danny.

"None of those bounty hunters is here, Daniel. I just looked a few minutes ago."

"Check again, please."
Vlad rolled his eyes, but flicked into invisibility before opening the door. Danny waited, tense.

"There is no one out there but art enthusiasts," said Vlad, closing the door and returning to the visible spectrum.

Danny relaxed a little. Not entirely. Vlad was still right there, after all. "You're sure."

"Yes," said Vlad. "I'm sure. Either there aren't any more of them, or they all went to different floors." He adjusted his suit. "I couldn't say why they would avoid this floor, but perhaps they already swept it looking for you, and they've moved on."

"Swept it," said Danny. His blood pressure was still much higher than he liked it, and he felt flushed. "Looking for me. They're looking for me." He started to get up off the couch. "I've got to go."

"Where do you think you're going?" said Vlad, striding over.

"I've got to go," repeated Danny. "I'm putting everyone in danger."

Vlad pushed down on Danny's shoulders, forcing him to sit. Danny hissed at the unwanted contact, but couldn't really do anything about it.

"No," said Vlad. "You aren't in any condition to go anywhere by yourself. You can't even walk. Is it your intention to die?"

Danny shook his head.

"In any case, I'm not about to let you out of my sight. So if you left, I would leave too, leaving all your little friends to fumble through the Zone on their lonesome."

"Vlad-"

"Go back to sleep, Daniel."

"No," said Danny, querulously. (Part of him knew that he was being unreasonable, but this was Vlad.)

The corner of Vlad's mouth quirked up, amusement evident. It faltered after a moment. "You're almost as warm as I am," he said, very nearly sounding concerned. He shook off the concern. "You need to sleep, Daniel. Heal."

"I don't want to," said Danny, now acting more than a little childish.

A raised eyebrow joined Vlad's upturned mouth. "Did you have a nightmare?" he asked.

"No," said Danny, sulking.

"Don't be such a child," said Vlad.

"I am a child," said Danny. "Leave me alone." He batted Vlad away, little force behind his blows. Vlad stepped back, hands raised.

"At least lie down," said Vlad, still using that supercilious tone he loved so much. "Pretend to sleep. You're disturbing your cousin."

Danny looked down at Ellie. She didn't look disturbed, but then, she was a ghost. She might be picking up emotions from Danny. He sighed, and, though he was loathe to do anything Vlad said,
laid down. Vlad had some points. Not a lot, but some.

This time, when he closed his eyes he focused on the hum of Ellie's core.

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The next time he woke, he woke to chatter. He sat up, blearily rubbing his eyes.

Danny was not looking forward to the next floor. No, he was not. It didn't sound like anyone else was, either. Except for Ashley, who was adopted, Danny was pretty sure that everyone still had at least one living parent. Even if they weren't on the best terms with those parents, none of them wanted their parents dead.

Of course, none of the rest of them had direct evidence that one of the more likely results of the death of their parents was them turning into an incredibly destructive lunatic.

"Hey, Ellie?" he said after a moment.

"Yeah?" said Ellie, who was... Danny wasn't sure exactly what she was doing. Maybe going through a morning wake-up routine despite having no water, or anything else that would normally be used in such a routine. She was sort of scrubbing at her hair right now. Danny experimentally drew a hand through his own hair, and grimaced as he came up short with knots. "What is it?" asked Ellie, getting Danny's attention again.

"Earlier, you said something about bypasses? Could we maybe skip the next floor?"

"Um," said Ellie, frowning in thought. "I'm not sure. It's definitely one of the floors that people would avoid. But..."

"Never mind," said Danny, realizing at least one problem with his 'plan.' "There are probably more bounty hunters out there, anyway, waiting for us."


"Almost certainly," said Vlad, the long hours awake having done nothing to dampen his superior tone. "Come along then, children."

"Is there any food?" asked Star.

"I'm starving," said Paulina, dramatically.

"No," said Vlad, scornfully.

"Maybe," Ellie said, with an air of contemplation, "you should have thought about that before you ran away from a place that actually had food? And, you know, safety? Kinda rare things for humans in the Ghost Zone, after all."

"Hey!" protested Dash. "She made us."

"Uuh. Sure, keep telling yourselves that."

"Danielle," said Vlad, repressively. Ellie stuck out her tongue. The older ghost rolled his eyes,
opened the door, sweeping out. Danny and his classmates scrambled to follow, Mr Lancer herding them along.

Surprisingly, Danny's ankle felt a little better. He doubted that he could manage more than a few steps on it without Ellie as a crutch, but it was still better. Which was good.

Ellie and Danny hobbled along at the end of the group, just in front of a very frazzled, very worn, Mr Lancer.

The journey to the stairs was neither quiet nor uneventful. A stage had been set up on one side of the main room, and it was full of ghosts playing on unfamiliar instruments. At one point, Vlad was attacked by a ghost wielding a highly decorated sword. At another, someone tried to grab Tiffanie and use her as a hostage. There were a couple people who tried to attack Danny directly. But once the fighting started in earnest, and the other ghosts on the floor had realized what was going on, well, it turned out that the ghostly art scene, while not noticeably more obsessive than the human art scene, was full of people who were ready to throw down and had some really awesome powers. At least one would-be-assassin got trapped in a picture.

The band played on. Danny had to wonder if their instruments had made them deaf.

The fight ended before they reached the stairs, the bounty hunters taken care of. Of course, then all the ghosts who had helped them wanted to know what was going on, why people were trying to kill and kidnap them, and who their favorite artists were. There were a couple who had also decided that Danny and Ellie were 'so cute' (Which Danny really didn't understand. Both he and Ellie looked terrible, disheveled, sleep deprived and dirty.) and who wanted to either paint them, or treat them like very small children. Many of the others were fascinated with the other students, or the mere presence of humans. Apparently they hadn't realized that the others weren't ghosts the first time they'd gone through the floor's main room.

A few were very concerned about Danny's injuries. Danny found this somewhat cheering, but the fact was that none of them really knew much about medicine, and they didn't have the time to just hang around. They had to go up.

So they did, a few of the ghosts forming a kind of honor guard around them.

Danny gasped. Swallowed. Straightened and stepped away from Ellie. He pulled down the long sleeves of his black shirt. No need for anyone to see his scars.

Ellie, meanwhile, was glaring at Vlad. "You're alive," she said, tone thick with displeasure. Danny glanced over. Was that not usually the case? Vlad was the reason they were here, after all, trying to get a handle on the nuances of ghost culture. Or... Was he? The last several floors confused things significantly. Where did his former classmates come from? Mr Lancer? Mr Lancer was supposed to be dead. And why were people trying to kill him? Something about an Issitoq? Who was Issitoq?

Vlad rolled his eyes. "Yes, I am," he said, exasperated. "This is the floor that makes you think that your parents are dead."

"Right," breathed Danny. "Does that mean... Does that mean that Mom and Dad aren't- That they're not..?"
"Yes, Maddie and that buffoon you call a father are both still alive," said Vlad.

"You mean-" said Star (When had she cut her hair so short?), "That all our parents are alive?"

"I have no idea," said Vlad. "I don't know your parents."

"Your parents are fine, Star," said Mr Lancer, smiling at the girl, then shooting a withering glare at Vlad. "All of your parents are fine except, well, Ashley, you were adopted, so..."

"Yeah," said Ashley. "I know."

Vlad sighed. "It is more likely than not that your parents are fine, considering the properties of this floor."

"They're alive," said Danny, tasting the words in his mouth. He blinked back tears. They were alive. He didn't live with Vlad. Admittedly, Vlad had been surprisingly civil, and, well, nice, about the whole thing. This trip to the Bends had been meant to distract him from his grief. He hadn't tried to make Danny do anything evil the entire time.

When Danny thought of what could have happened... When he thought of Dan, and the idea of being so alone that he would willingly...

"Are- Are Sam and Tucker-?" he asked, shakily. "Jazz? They're alive, too?"

"Er, yes," said Mr Lancer.

Danny did start crying, then. He wiped at them ineffectually.

"But, Ellie, you... Not that I'm not glad you exist, but... How?"

"Uh," said Ellie, "that idiot made me." She jerked her head at Vlad, a very mixed expression on her face. "Because he wanted the 'perfect son' and you couldn't stand him, but I wasn't good enough because I was a girl, so he made another one, but that one turned out to be a crazy monster who killed him, so..." She shrugged.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," said Danny. His voice broke at the end of the sentence, and he choked a little, tears pouring down his face. "They're alive. They could be alive. I can't believe it."

Danny's classmates, save Ashley, were similarly weepy. Everyone was getting hit with the emotional weight of their parents being alive. Danny was being hit with everyone he cared about being alive. He was so happy he could hardly process it. He tottered unsteadily up to Mr Lancer.

"I'm glad you're not dead," he told the teacher.

"I am also glad not to be dead," said Mr Lancer, uncertainly.

Danny sniffed, and hugged Mr Lancer.

One of the ghosts who had come with them approached, then. Danny would say that the ghost was old, maybe even ancient, and definitely was not one that had ever been human. They took the form of a dense, vaguely humanoid, pale blue cloud that churned with eyes. When they had spoken on the lower floor, they had used only Old High Spirit, though they clearly understood English.

"Mimaalemiekikunu, imaale bu yiuwee ichuuwee, e ewi maale meuka u ehlsoo hu." A marbled blue hand emerged from the depths of the clouds to pat Danny on the shoulder, before withdrawing again. "Emi wewikewo i iuuhwisauhol ewi maale muu hii. U maale uuwihesheu." *Cherished one,
were they dead or gone, we would be pleased to take you. All wonderful things and soft places would be yours. As is proper.

"Um," said Danny, turning away from Mr Lancer to face the ghost better and parse the difficult language. "Muu noo wewooku," he said, finally, settling on politeness, "u muu u miikuehewelusehsu." My thanks for your kind words.

The ghost's clouds billowed in a kind of pleased way. "Iewuusiwu." Good child. The ghost extended two more hands (both left ones) to pat Danny again.

Danny blushed, and stepped away. He thought the ghost was being a bit patronizing, and overly familiar, but considering the obvious age difference, Danny couldn't really blame the ghost. He looked up at Vlad, half expecting the other hybrid to step in. Vlad had become somewhat... territorial about Danny, since Danny's parents had died. Danny had sort of come to expect it. But Vlad seemed to be distracted by something else.

Danny tried to find what it could be. This floor was largely empty, except for the people who had come in with them. This was, unsurprisingly, an unpopular floor.

"Vlad?" he said. "What's wrong?"

"There should be more people here," said Vlad. "Stay close, little badger."

Danny nodded, and followed Vlad's instruction, walking over to stand at Vlad's side. Vlad looked shocked. Danny, thinking on it, supposed that he would be, if he was from a universe where Danny's parents were still alive. Danny and Vlad were most likely still enemies in Vlad's continuity. Or maybe not, if they were all still together.

"Yeah..." said Ellie, agreeing with Vlad's statement. "A lot of people come here to take advantage of the truce."

"A lot of-? Oh. Yeah."

"Oh yeah' what?" demanded Valerie harshly. Danny glanced over at her. She looked awful. Her hair had been cut short, not unlike it had been in the averted future, but that wasn't what made her look so- Harsh. That was the word for it. Harsh and unforgiving. More so than usual, and Valerie was quite possibly one of the least forgiving people he had ever met.

"Not all ghosts have parents," said Danny, quietly, "and even for the ones who do, for the ones who were born human, anyway, a lot of them are so old that their parents are all long gone."

"Why would a ghost even care?" asked Valerie.

"Same reason you do," said Danny.


Danny watched Valerie with some trepidation. She had been even more intent on destroying Phantom since the... incident. She blamed Phantom for the deaths, and for the uptick in ghost attacks afterwards. There was truth behind both accusations, but it still hurt. Especially when she hit him with one of her weapons. He supposed he should be glad Vlad wasn't supporting her vendetta any more.

But that had been in his time line, with Damon Gray alive and well. Danny didn't know how this floor, the loss of both her parents, would affect her.
He licked his lips and swallowed.

"Should we-?" A will-o-the-wisp zoomed out of Danny's peripheral vision, into the center of the empty room. Where had it come from? Had it-? No, he remembered that these wisps had been with them through the rest of the Bends. But why?

The wisp chirped, and made a number of other orchestral sounds, but Danny couldn't make head or tail of what it was trying to say. He didn't speak, or more properly, sing, the wisp language.

"Does anyone speak wisp?" he asked.

"I thought you did," said Mikey.

"No? Not this version of me, anyway." The wisp trilled again. "No one? Really?"

The wisp made a disgusted noise which quickly morphed into a high-pitched scream. Then it fell to the ground, pulsing weakly. The other wisps made audible sounds of shock and dismay. The art ghosts gathered close, ready to fight.

Danny hadn't spent much time fighting alongside friendly, or even allied ghosts, so he was surprised at how willing, almost eager, the ghosts were to protect, to help. He wondered if the truce here was really so strong, so important, if it was just that most of those involved were children, if ghosts were far more social and generally decent than even he had been given to believe, or if something else entirely was going on.

It was heartening, anyway. Or would have been, if it wasn't for that poor wisp on the floor. After a few silent minutes, Danny couldn't stand leaving the poor thing out there, and took a step forward, as if to help. The other wisps immediately crowded around him, making scolding sounds. Vlad, too, put a hand up, stopping Danny.

"We can't just leave them there," said Danny. (His core ached, and he was trying to find a reason why.)

"It's a trap," said Vlad. The wisps chimed in agreement.

"Euwi maale uumee," whispered the old ghost. "Huumaale oowowowi."

Danny bit his lip, trying to find an argument. He didn't want to lose anyone else. But he didn't know the wisp. Why did it feel like the second bit was wrong? Was this what it was like when something important was covered up by the Bends?

There was a cold, echoing laughter. "Wise not to come farther," said an equally cold voice. "But we could destroy you, regardless. All of you. Give over the abominations, and you will be spared."

"What abominations?" said one of the art ghosts, a critic in square hipster glasses and a turtle-neck sweater. He looked like he could be Ghost Writer's cousin. It definitely wasn't Ghost Writer's half-brother, though. Danny had met Randy. Randy was much more... unsavory-looking, and had gray skin, not pale green. "The only abomination here is you, for breaking the truce!"

"And trying to kill children!" cried another.

"And for disrespecting art!"

"Are they disrespecting art, though?"
"Of course he is, look at those works of art! How could he possibly call them abominations?"

"I don't know if I'd call them art, either, though. They'd be great models, though."

"Say, do either of you do any-?"

"Enough!" cried the cold voice. Power sparked through the air. "Give us the abominations or all of you will perish!"

Danny was becoming suspicious. Defeating one wisp invisibly wasn't actually a very impressive display of power. It was rather strange, in fact, that such a powerful ghost that would choose bounty hunting as a lifestyle would be so hesitant to initiate a fight. On the other hand, remaining unseen, not just to the hybrids and humans, but to a large number of ghosts, all of whom had the visual arts either as an interest or an Obsession was no mean feat. At least, Danny didn't think that it could be. He didn't know these ghosts well. They might all be near-sighted, or short-spectrummed, or visibility-challenged.

He hissed lightly between his teeth. Vlad seemed to share the sentiment.

"Very grand words," he said. "But you haven't even given us a pretty show to go with them."

"We could destroy this one here," said the ghost. "We can snuff it out like a candle-flame."

"Yes, you could destroy a member of one of the weakest species of ghost in the Infinite Realms. That would show what, exactly?"

"Our conviction," hissed the ghost (or ghosts), "and that you cannot stop us."

"Can't we?" said Danny. The room froze. If the tone of the ghost speaking wouldn't be out of place in a refrigerator, Danny's was arctic, subzero, even. "You don't even know who you are facing."

"We do. We have been told what you are, what you can do. Do not try to bluff. It does not suit you."

Danny laughed. "That's a good one," he said, without humor. Honestly, he'd a lot less humor in general since his family had died. "You have no idea who you're facing here. Don't you know what this place does?" He ducked around Vlad's hand. "Don't you know what a small change can do to people to me, can you even begin to imagine what a large one might do?"

"Stay back!" The wisp on the ground squeaked.

"You're the one who shouldn't bluff."

"I said stay back!"

"It isn't 'we' anymore, hm?" said Danny. He smiled, making sure to show his teeth. "You do any more harm to that little one, and I will feed you your own entrails, whatever form they take." He took another step forward, smile broadening. "I can see you."

It wasn't a lie. Danny was now close enough to discern the outline of a large, three-headed ghost standing over the wisp, a foot pressing down on it. Impressive invisibility, yes, but with Danny's focus on his perception, he could pierce it.

"You wouldn't," said the ghost.

"I saw everyone I love die in fire. You think I could stand to see even more death without... snapping, just a little?" He took another careful step forward. "Did the one who sent you tell you
even a fraction of what I can do? No?"

The ghost flickered briefly into visibility, and then fled. Danny dropped the smile instantly, and ran up to the wisp who was still on the ground, crying. The other wisps flew quickly after him, reaching him just as he gathered the little wisp up into his hands. "Poor little thing," he murmured, holding it close to his chest, hoping that proximity to his core might help stabilize it, much as Ellie had been stabilized, even if his core was doing some odd things right now.

Danny would freely admit to not knowing a lot about full-ghost medicine. He wasn't even sure if the little ghost was destabilized, or just hurt. Maybe it was different for other versions of him. There was certainly a part of him who felt like he should know more.

"Daniel!" said Vlad, shaking off the aftereffects of Danny's power. "What was that?"

"What do you mean, what was that? You taught me how to do it. Or... Didn't you?" He tilted his head to the side as the wisps gathered close around him and the fallen wisp. They tickled with concern.

"No," said Vlad.

"Weird," said Danny. "We should go up," he continued, more loudly, looking at the ceiling. "I don't think I like this floor."

"So we're going to ignore the fact that Fenton just, just- I don't even know what to call it. Stared down a ghost?" said Star. "We're really going to ignore that? Really? And the fact that he froze us all with some kind of ghost power thing?"

"I froze you? Weird. I thought that you would have had built up a resistance to that sort of thing by now," said Danny, idly. He made a series of soft kissing noises at the wisp. "Little friend," he mumbled.

Ellie walked up to him. "If you still remember how to do that when we leave, you're going to have to teach me."

"Okay," said Danny. The wisp seemed to be doing better. It had floated up to curl (Could wisps curl? They were very round.) against the base of Danny's throat.

"You're right, Daniel," said Vlad, finally seeming to get over his shock. "We should move on."
Chapter 122: Photography

"Thank you for the camera," said Sam.

"It isn't a problem," said the ghost who ran the little junk shop, waving her off. "Plenty of stuff falls through from the human realm all the time, and I can't sell more than half of it."

"It still means a lot to me," said Sam, turning the boxy Polaroid over in her hands.

"Why don't you try it out?" asked the ghost. "Take a picture of me."

"Sure." Sam raised the camera, adjusted it slightly, and snapped a picture of the ghost. After a second, a rectangular photo popped out. The paper was acid green rather than the usual white, but a clear picture developed on it all the same. Sam handed the little picture to the ghost.

"Thank you," they said.

"No problem," said Sam. She glanced back up towards the acropolis. "I'm sorry, I've got to go."

The ghost smiled, showing too many teeth. "Happy hunting."

The first thing Sam took a picture of was a plant. It felt appropriate. Then she sat on a nearby bench, flicking the photo, waiting for it to develop. She knew it didn't really help the picture develop any faster, but it was a habit, a strong habit.

Sam sighed. She felt as if she was just distracting herself with all of this. She doubted that whatever power this might bring out in her would help her find Danny.

The picture became clear, slowly, and Sam stared at it, willing it to do something, anything. It would be pretty cool if she could change pictures... It would basically be photoshop, but with magic, but still. Or if she could control things that she photographed. Or, well, anything, really. She wouldn't describe herself as a nerd, but having what amounted to superpowers would be cool.

But nothing was happening. Nothing Sam could detect, anyway. She traced the outline of the shrub with her fingernail, looping around the ghostly flowers. It looked tropical. Almost like a hibiscus.

She licked her teeth. She hadn't brushed them properly in a while. She hadn't been taking care of herself properly at all, really. Danny would be ashamed of her. Well, probably not. Danny wasn't the kind of person to be ashamed of other people. Even when they acted stupid. Like Sam was.

The camera was sitting in her hands, begging to be used.

She raised it again, desultorily, and pressed the button, wishing that she could be taking a picture of Danny. Even the snap of the camera sounded depressed, and the flash was nearly nonexistent. She
lowered it back into her lap, frowning. The flash had worked fine for the first two pictures she had taken. Had she jostled the bulb loose? She tapped the yellowed covering with her fingernail. It looked fine, but maybe she should show it to Tucker.

… Or maybe not. His affinity for things made more than a decade ago was limited.

She pulled out the half-developed photo, stared at it for a moment, and then looked up. The picture wasn't clear yet, but it didn't really look like the garden. She knew she hadn't put her finger over the lens, so what-?

She stood up, almost dropping the camera in the process.

"Danny."

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Danny cried again when they got to the next floor, this time more from relief than anything else. His parents really were alive and, well, maybe not well, exactly, since they were in the custody of Libra, but well enough. They were alive and they loved him.

The wisps, his friends (and how could he have forgotten them?), gathered close to him, purring. He rubbed his eyes, and pulled his fire-red hair out of his eyes. He looked around the room and blinked. Had everyone but he and Ellie, whose hair was the same brilliant red as his, gotten dye jobs between this floor and the last or did this floor do something as ridiculous as changing hair color?

Based on everyone's confusion, he suspected the later.

He sniffled again, and rubbed his face.

"I guess we just keep going?" he said, after a moment.

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Danny looked around at all of his much, much taller classmates.

"I thought this floor was s'posed to make us younger."

"My hair was gone," whispered Mr Lancer, his tone that of utter horror.

"I think it did," said Ellie. "It's just made you younger-er." She shrugged.

"'More younger,' dear," said Vlad, who looked the same as he always did. Incomprehensibly old. "You should say, 'more younger.' Or, perhaps, 'even younger.'"

"Why did you turn into a five year old?" asked Dash.

"I'm eight," said Danny.
"I'm two," said Ellie, who looked like a teenager and was clearly lying. Danny gave her a look. "Okay, okay, one and a half. And I don't have superlatives down yet, so sue me."

"The real question's why you're so giant, Dash, and... Why do I even care?"

"Hey," said Mikey. "Shouldn't you two look the same age?"

"How am I supposed to know?" said Ellie, shrugging. "We're probably just from different universes."

"Age is different for ghosts," said Danny.

"Yes," said Vlad, "and we don't have time to examine that in depth right now."

"Hey," said Danny, "Vlad, how old are you right now? Cause you look the same as you did downstairs. Are you, like, secretly like Will Smith, or Captain Picard?"

"What?"

"Jazzy's friend said that they're immortal."

"No, they're just actors," said Ricky, who had apparently gotten the short end of the stick and wound up a middle schooler. "Duh."

"No one asked you, Ricky." Danny looked around. "Hey, Pauli, you were acting really weird on some of the other floors. Are you okay? You look more normal now."

"Um," said Paulina, tugging on the ends of her braids. "Thanks, I guess? And I'm fine except I'm hungry and tired and I'm lost in the Ghost Zone. So, not fine."

"Yeah, sorry," said Danny, blushing. "Where're Sam and Tucker."

"I don't know," said Paulina.

"They haven't been with us, Daniel," said Mr Lancer.

"What?" said Danny. "I... Why not? They were with us when we came in, weren't they?"

"I didn't have time to get them when we were escaping," said Valerie.

"Escaping from what?" asked Danny. He stuck out his lower lip. "Where are they?"

He wasn't pouting. He was eight. Eight was too old to pout. He wanted his friends. He didn't like it when they weren't with him, especially if he had to deal with Vlad.

"I think they're back in Elysium," said Ellie.

"Okay," said Danny. "I guess that makes sense. Oooh," he said catching sight of one of the floor's 'decorations,' a giant play structure on which a number of small ghosts were playing. "Hey, I think we should take a break. This is a good place to take a break."

"No," said Vlad.

"You're mean."

"You can come back later, when we aren't trying to avoid people who are trying to kill you."
"You're mean. Vlad's mean."

"I agree," said Ellie, a smug look on her face.

"Are you quite sure you're not five?"

"Mean," said Danny.

Vlad made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat, and walked over to pick Danny up and hold him under his arm. "We don't have time for this."

"I will bite you," said Danny.

"No you won't."

"Um," said Mr Lancer, "Mr Masters, have you ever held a child before?"

"Yes," said Vlad, already striding away.

"Strangling and kidnapping doesn't count, fruitloop!"

"That isn't how you hold a chil- Kidnapping?"

"It's how I hold this one."

"Amber alert everyone!"

"Vlad," sang Ellie, "he's gonna bite you."

"No, he isn't."

"Hey," said Hannah, "is no one going to talk about the invasion? I'd like to talk about the invasion, since it seems this place made us forget about it."

"What invasion?"

"The one with the spooky knight and the ghost king dude."

"That was years ago," said Nathan.

"No it wasn't," said Lester.

"Yes it was."

"No it wasn't. I know, because I asked Valerie out for the first time a week before it happened."

"You what? When?"

"Vlad is meeeeeeaaaaaaaaan."

"Stop gnawing on my jacket, you insufferable child!"
"Since when did Danny go through a goth phase?" asked Tucker, adjusting his glasses as he looked at the picture.

"Never," said Sam. "I think this must be from now. Look, Valerie and Ricky are in the background." She looked up at the assembled ghosts. "Do any of you know where this could be?"

Pandora raised a finger to her lips in thought. "Could you take another one?" she asked.

"I don't know. I haven't tried," Sam admitted. She brought the camera halfway up, stopped, then continued the motion. She looked through the viewer, squeezed her eyes shut and thought really hard about taking a picture of Danny, then pressed the button. There was was a snap, and that anemic flash of light, and then the camera spat out a picture.

Everyone hovered over it as they waited for it to develop.

"Are you sure you're not taking pictures of the past?" asked Tucker.

"Did he even know Vlad when he was this small?"

"No," said Jazz, "he didn't. And look, there's Ellie."

"You're right."

Pandora sighed. "I know where they are."
They were a few floors up from the floor where everyone was younger. The floor that they were on now made it so that everyone was an only child.

Everyone was shooting Danny strange looks, and he didn't like it. Did not having an older sister (apparently her name was Jazz?) really change him that much?

He could understand Dale getting weird and becoming... Well, honestly, it looked like he was on drugs. Dale usually lived for his younger siblings, and tried really hard to be a good example for them. Danny guessed that, without them, he didn't have the motivation to keep himself together.

Nathan and Lester being weird was also a given. Even now the twins were each arguing that the other one was a ghost impostor (and asking Valerie to 'take care' of the other one).

A couple other people were wearing different clothing than they had been on lower floors, but that could mean anything. For all they knew, they could be back to normal. In most other ways, everyone else was the same as ever.

Yet Danny was the only one being stared at. Why wouldn't Danny be normal, too?

He flattened his lips out, and drifted slightly away from the group, hugging himself.

Ellie pulled him back. "Ancients, Danny," she whispered, "is Jazz the only reason you eat?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, shrugging off Ellie's hand.

"You're, like, ten pounds lighter than you usually are, and you're usually only a hundred pounds, and that's with clothes. I can feel your bones through your shirt."

"It's a pj shirt. That's not exactly a miracle."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"Uh, same time everyone else did."

"Before that."

"In Elysium, so, like, a day ago? I don't know. I eat enough."

"You're also, like, half a foot shorter."

"That's ridiculous."

"We're usually the same height," pointed out Ellie.

"Yeah, you're the one that got taller."

"And you've got a white stripe in your hair."

"I've had that forever."
"No you haven't."

"Yes I have."

"Why, and what do you mean by forever?"

Danny shrugged. Much like on the first floor they had visited, everyone, including the remaining ghosts (many had been lost to the playground a few floors back), was hanging on his words, waiting for a story. He shivered. He didn't want to tell a story. He had to be very careful about what he said, otherwise his parents would find out, and then they'd learn his secret, and then he... Like Spectra said all that time ago, if his parents found out, they'd destroy him. This whole... This whole series of events had shown that they certainly had the ability, and that they hated ghosts with a passion.

"Danny?" asked Ellie.

"I'm fine."

"I don't think you are."

"Let's just get out of here," he said.

"Daniel-"

"What do you want, Vlad?" snapped Danny. "For me to tell you that you were right all along?" He bit down on his lip, aware that he was inching ever closer to his inevitable mental breakdown. This stupid Tower had been a stupid emotional roller-coaster and every time he thought about his stupid parents his hope that they would ever be reunited, that Libra would ever let them go free, what with all their anti-ghost rhetoric and beliefs, grew smaller and smaller.

He wanted to go home.

(Although he had to admit, his desire to go home to Amity Park and FentonWorks, rather than, say, go home to his lair, or Clockwork and Long Now, grew smaller every time he thought about it.)

"You don't need to tell me I'm right," said Vlad. His expression was somewhere between stricken and pleased, and Danny would never know how he managed to pull that off. It must be some weird millionaire thing. "But I would like to know what it is you think I'm right about."

Danny glared at him.

"Mimaalemiekikunu, iku elihwun hu?" asked the old ghost. "Eunti maale nyir oonuuwoosevoosiweeweewu. Uusuu heenz muu hii aunti?"

"Because I don't know how much is the same and how much is different," explained Danny, "and I don't want to mess everything up."

"Iwoo ib maale buuwu uumee iwu."

"You're just curious, too," accused Danny. "Why do you care so much? This isn't really real, and it's all going to go away once we go up the stairs."

"I think we're all pretty curious," said Ellie.

"Yes," said Vlad, "and I am concerned with what your home life must be like if the absence of Jasmine affects your health so much."
Danny made a hissing noise in the back of his throat. Vlad already knew what his home life was like. Everyone did, really, except for the half-ghost thing. His parents were very... *public* people.

You know what? Screw it.

He scrubbed his hands through his hair. "I knocked a vat of ectoplasm over onto myself when I was five. Everything got worked out with the hospital, and the school, and CPS, and everything is *fine* okay?"

"You know what?" said Ellie. "That doesn't really surprise me. What surprises me is that there's even a universe where you're alive without Jazz."

"Whatever," said Danny, sulking. "So I'm a little shorter than most other people, so what?"

"It looks like more than that, Daniel," said Mr Lancer, faintly horrified. "Your health is important. You can't just brush it off like that."

"Well, since it's all new to you, I don't see how it matters. It'll all go back to what you're used to as soon as we leave." He was aware that he was repeating himself, but he really didn't know why everyone was so *interested*. Danny, his Fenton half, anyway, wasn't interesting. He just a random, underweight, prematurely gray, sickly kid. Honestly, he hadn't realized that all of his classmates knew his first name. They knew he was a Fenton, yes, but, beyond that, beyond Sam and Tucker, none of them really *knew* him.

He crossed his arms and scowled.

"Danny," said Valerie.

Danny gave her a sidelong glance. Valerie didn't deign to speak to him, even after her fall from the A-list. She only really talked to Danny when Danny was Phantom. She never sounded... Worried? Was that worry he detected in her voice?

"What do you want?" he said. Well. That probably wasn't the best way to respond, but he was in defensive mode, socially speaking.

Valerie bit her lip. "I'm sorry for getting us into this mess," she said, "but, Danny, if Jazz is the only reason your parents haven't seriously screwed you up-"

"They haven't," hissed Danny. "Leave it alone." He jogged ahead, hoping to distance himself from the uncomfortable conversation.

Something ran straight into his side, sweeping him off his feet. Disoriented and in pain (was that a knife in his side?), he scrambled for purchase on his attacker's body. He found the eyes, at least four of them, and dug in. The ghost gargled, Danny growled. Danny heard shrieks and shouts from his classmates, and his heart rate accelerated to a painful degree. There must be someone else attacking them. They must be in danger. He had to get to them. He had to protect them. He had to-

He couldn't summon any power from his core. He and the ghost tumbled across the floor, rolling as Danny evaded the ghost's attempts to immobilize him and Danny tried to do the same to the ghost. They hissed, spat, and bit. Danny tried to phase himself through the floor, and failed.

This was bad, this was very bad. He couldn't even protect his people. He was so useless, so, so completely useless. What was even the point of him? He should just die.

The ghost was pulled off of him suddenly. Danny scrambled away, looking around wildly for his
people, fully prepared to keep fighting.

"Daniel," said Vlad.

Danny ignored him. Where did everyone go? Where were the attackers?

"Daniel," said Vlad again, and this time Danny saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

He flinched, hard.

"It's fine, Daniel. The attackers have been taken care of." Vlad frowned. "Daniel?"

"He's having a panic attack," said Ellie.

"Am... not," said Danny, breathing heavily. Maybe he was having a panic attack. Or something. This didn't feel like his normal panic attacks. There was conversation going on around him, but it was no longer registering. Why was everyone looking at him? He wanted to go back to when everyone ignored him. He didn't like this.

The ghosts were too close to him, too. If Vlad took one more step forward, Danny would bite him. Probably take off a finger. Yeah. That's what he would do.

"... shock to Obsession?" said one of the ghosts. That didn't sound good. That sounded pretty bad, actually.

"But why?" asked Vlad, quietly.

A wisp drifted along the curve of Danny's neck, and he shuddered. It was trying to be calming. But Danny was having a hard time responding. Or doing anything, really. Ellie was off to one side, emanating worry and confusion. She would be confused. The ghost hadn't managed to do more than bruise him. Danny didn't like this one bit.

But if he died, then these bounty hunters would go away, wouldn't they? They wouldn't have anything to hunt anymore. Vlad, Ellie, and the other ghosts could take care of the remaining humans. All Danny had to do was die. All he had to do was let the bounty hunters catch him.

The wisp had crept up to his ear. The tiny, fingernail-sized ghost was sitting in the curved hollow of his ear, singing very softly. It sang about the good things that Danny had done. It sang about the people that he had helped. Danny honestly didn't remember half of what the wisp said he did, but wisps weren't known as liars.

He had helped a lot of people, if he stopped to think about it, and a lot of people would be upset if he died. That would be bad. He couldn't let that happen.

Ever so slowly, with the wisps and other ghosts murmuring encouragement, Danny's sense of self-preservation jump-started itself, and the ugly, painful knot in his chest loosened. He was once again aware that everyone was too close and still looking at him.

"Can you," he started, voice cracking. "Can you guys give me some space?"
Translation of ghost speak:

Danny glared at him.

"Cherished one, what troubles you?" asked the old ghost. "This is a fictional world. Why not tell your tale?"

"Because I don't know how much is the same and how much is different," explained Danny, "and I don't want to mess everything up."

"Say that it is only true here."
Chapter 124

Chapter 124: And You're to Blame

The ship that sailed out of Elysium was definitely a warship. Many ghosts rode it, decked out as warriors and sailors, or just as their own sublimely threatening selves. Many others flew alongside it, escorting it, and guarding its less-protected flanks and underside.

That did not, in Sam's opinion, bode well for Danny. Pandora said that the place Danny was in was a truce zone, and therefore just as peaceful as Christmastide, but considering that Danny's first Christmas as a ghost had him fighting the GIW, and the second, the one where he had learned of the Christmas truce, had him fighting Ghost Writer... Well. Danny had always had bad luck. Even worse luck than Tucker, if she was being honest. It got ridiculous, sometimes.

Against the counsel of just about everyone, Jazz, Sam, and Tucker were on the ship. Perhaps it was a symptom of increasing liminality, of emerging pseudo-Obsessions, but they all agreed that they needed to get to Danny as quickly as possible. Danny looked fragile in Sam's pictures, ready to crack, ready to break.

The way Dr Iceclaw and Pandora's physician, Aglaea Aeclepiada, frowned over the pictures didn't inspire great confidence, either. The doctors had taken off to their own room to prepare as soon as the ship took off, and had brought along a frighteningly large amount of equipment.

At this point, Sam was so worried that she was stress eating. She hadn't done that since Paulina had called her fat in eighth grade (An eye twitched over that memory. She still hadn't forgiven Paulina for that fight, if she was being honest.). At least Elysium didn't have too many sugary things on hand. Everything sweet was flavored with honey or fruit. Ugh. And now she was worrying about her weight. She was as shallow as Paulina. Great. Just disgusting.

"You three should stay below deck," said Pandora. "This section of the Ghost Zone is even more dangerous than the wastes."

Danny was on his hands and knees, breathing hard, a hand pressed to his chest. Something was wrong. He couldn't take this. He couldn't do this.

Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw the other ghosts and half-ghosts in similar, but not quite so extreme, positions of pain. Usually, this floor was skipped. Bypassed. Avoided. But they couldn't take the risk that they'd be jumped by assassins as soon as they left. Thank the Ancients the cloud-and-eyes ghost had warned him about this floor.

Apparently this floor hadn't ever worked properly. Forcing a ghost core to change temperature was somehow more difficult than giving someone an entire false history, and the attempt had damaged the floors above as well.

It hurt. It hurt a lot. Danny's core could handle higher temperatures than the typical cold core, as it
needed to deal with his human body temperature, but it couldn't deal with anything much higher – and that was the ambient, surrounding temperature, not the temperature of the core itself. Not to mention the damage it had already suffered, and the internal temperature his human body was used to.

He could feel his blood run hot, his skin flush painfully, his organs burn.

"H-Hey!" said Valerie, clearly alarmed. "What's happening? What does this floor do?"

"No one knows," said Ellie, her voice wobbling. "It's broken." Danny wanted to reach out to her. Help her. She was clearly in pain, clearly suffering as much as he was. But he couldn't move.

He felt his core grow hotter as Vlad approached, warning him. He hissed, the only real response available, but Vlad picked him up anyway, and Vlad was nice and cool.

"We have to hurry," said Vlad, his deep voice strained. They were already walking forward. "We can't stay on this floor for long."

"But- Hey! What's wrong with him?" said Valerie, footfalls indicating that she (or maybe someone else?) was running after Vlad.

Danny moaned, and curled closer to the source of cold. He was fading in and out. He already couldn't see. He had read somewhere that high fevers could do that. Or had he seen it in a documentary? He couldn't remember.

Vlad was cursing. His 'swear words' were getting progressively more sugary, progressively more decadent. Danny would be laughing, but he was far too exhausted, and his lungs weren't working properly anyway.

Quite suddenly, Danny's core was cold again, and Vlad was hot, and Danny was pushing away, keening at a pitch that really shouldn't have been possible for humans. He curled up, trying to stay cold.

About half of the humans clapped their hands over their ears, and the ghosts, including those who had already been on this floor, whispered urgently among themselves. This, Mikey thought, was the most hesitant that he had ever seen ghosts. They approached almost gingerly.

(Except for the ghost dog, Cujo, who was standing guard over Danny, yipping.)

How was Danny making that sound? And why were the ghosts reacting like this? The ghosts who had already been on the floor almost seemed angry.

The two groups of ghosts spouted nonsense at each other, with Ellie and the Wisconsin ghost, (who had, unbelievably, wound up turning into Mayor Masters) refereeing. They seemed to come to an agreement and converged on Danny like a bunch of zombies on a downed apocalypse survivor.

"What is happening?" asked Mikey, horrified and bewildered. "And what color is that?" He asked, jabbing a finger at the brightly painted floor.
A ghost near Mikey, an art critic in a turtle neck sweater and cracked glasses, sniffed, and regarded him with his one eye.

"It's yllyemiboparuna," he said, somehow communicating the fact that he thought Mikey was an uneducated philistine. "As for what's going on, there are few reasonable people who would ignore a child's cry for help, hm?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Ricky, fingers jammed in his ears.

"A child," repeated the critic. He rolled his eyes. "This is the sound a child makes when they are... overwhelmed, completely. It is a call." The ghost's accent (French?) twanged unpleasantly against Mikey's eardrums. "Like when a human baby cries, or a kitten meows. It means that something is badly wrong." Then he scoffed, and moved away.

"Great," said Mikey. He was worried about Danny, but he was a little distracted by all the colors in the room, at least half of which had never been featured in any rainbow or on any color palette that Mikey had ever seen. They were making his brain itch.

"I think I'm going to be sick," announced Sarah.

"Same," said Star, hoarsely. "What is that?"

"I don't know," said Hannah. "Maybe this floor just has... Extra colors. I always knew there were extra colors. Frickin' shrimp..."

"Excuse me," said one of the ghosts. Danny could tell it was a ghost, probably a woman, by the way their voice echoed. "Excuse me! I'm a doctor! Let me through!"

"What kind of doctor?" asked Vlad, a sneer in his voice.

"The kind who built this place," sneered the ghost right back. "I've been keeping track of reactions to the floors for decades, and I've been trying to catch up with you lot for a dozen floors at least. Let me by."

"And let you cut him up for your experiments?" said Ellie.

"That's an uncalled for slur. No. I became a doctor to help people. Let me treat him."

"With outdated medicine?"

Silence, then babble as other ghosts protested Vlad's pronouncement on the first ghost's medicine, and his implication that being 'outdated' made something worthless. Vlad really should have chosen a different adjective to disparage the ghost with.

Sounds moved around him, and Danny found it within himself to stop keening in distress and breathe.

"I never caught your name," said the nurse, now much, much closer to Danny.

"His name is Danny," interjected Ellie.
"Mine is Prunella. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," said Danny. He gasped. "Hi," he said more quietly, feeling compelled to at least try to be polite. He groaned into the ground. He still couldn't see.

"Is it alright if I touch you?"

"Mhm," said Danny, supplementing the semi-verbal response with a tiny nod.

"Alright," said Prunella. She put a hand on his shoulder, and rubbed it in tiny circles. "Can you move?"

Danny made a sound that could be interpreted as a negative. Then, more clearly, "No."

"Alright. You," she said. "You're his sister, no?"

"Yeah," said Ellie.

"Come here, get his other side. We're going to try and flatten you out, alright?"

"Okay."

Directing Ellie, Prunella slowly flipped Danny over, and gently pushed him out of fetal position. It was difficult work, and Danny felt bad, but every time he remembered that he didn't know this person, that he was vulnerable, he seized up. But he had to remember, he forced himself to remember, that he was far from the only person who did things altruistically, who would help someone, who would help a stranger, without reward, without betrayal. He had to let himself trust.

He was laid out flat on his back, melting. He was starting to see again, though. That was a good sign. At least, Danny chose to interpret it as a good sign.

The woman put her hands on his forehead, and his body flushed with cold. He exhaled in relief, eyes fluttering.

"Thank you," he croaked.

"Don't thank me yet. I have to fix that ankle next."
Chapter 125: Timeshift

'This next floor," said Vlad, "changes the era one was born in, whilst keeping the other details of your life as similar as possible." He put one foot on the first stair and looked back.

He was somewhat peeved that none of the other ghosts were explaining the floors, forcing all the responsibility on him. He was somewhat more aggrieved that Daniel and Danielle had managed to amass such a following of ghosts with essentially no effort whatsoever. Daniel had said only a few, largely delirious, sentences to this latest group, and most of those were while he was being healed. Danielle, being more conscious, had said more, but nothing that should carry such weight with so many ghosts.

It couldn't just be the truce motivating them. Not all of them.

It was infuriating. Even with all his power and money, Vlad couldn't reliably get ghosts to work for him. Yes, he had his minions, he had his employees, but they had taken time, guile, planning, payments. To have Daniel accomplish this with nothing... And it wasn't the first time, either. Vlad could recall a number of circumstances where Daniel recruited enemies to his cause. Sometimes, and here Vlad's eyes flicked to Danielle, converting them to his side outright.

He paused before the final step to the next floor. He didn't like this floor. This floor could be tricky. It was always different. The other floors were only sometimes different. They chose from the nearest possible universe, and that tended to be fairly stable. On the other hand, that floor seemed to be on a randomizer. It was completely unpredictable.

Vlad had been a prince, a vizier, a councilman, a village elder, a scientist in the Great War, a magician, a scribe, even a man from the future whose passing thoughts had revealed the secrets of accelerating the aging of clones... So many things. So many remarkable things. None of them particularly satisfying. None of them things that he had properly prepared for. Although, he had to say, he had been unprepared for this entire journey. He was often unprepared for things that had to do with Daniel. He took the last step.

Without knowing why, he hissed, and then, as planned, took stock of who and when he was.

Vladimir Vasiliovitch Pavlov, born in the year 1920 in the proud USSR. Scientist. Spy. Defector to the US. The year was 1965.

Except it wasn't. Not if he thought it was.

He took a few steps into the room, then turned, watching the others come up the steps and change. He dismissed Daniel's classmates with hardly a second glance. A few wore modern, or even somewhat futuristic garb. The large boys that bullied Daniel acquired some kind of armor. One of the girls wore something he would identify as Native American. Miss Grey was in Egyptian robes. The annoying blonde girl was dressed in early American colonial gear. Most of the others looked much like they had before, clad in borrowed Greek clothing of various eras. It would be lovely to figure out how to communicate with everyone. Of course, there was no guarantee that the others spoke English, Russian, or any of the handful of other languages that Vlad spoke.

The ghosts, too, rippled and changed. The more human ones changed in much the same way as the
students. The less human ones underwent alterations that were more difficult to interpret.

In any case, Vlad didn't really care. All of them were, ultimately, irrelevant when compared to Daniel and Danielle. The changes that the two of them had undergone thus far had been enlightening, fascinating. He could only speculate as to what might be revealed on later floors, and he wished both that they had more time and that Daniel was more conscious, so as to give Vlad more information.

The ghost carrying Daniel flew the last few inches up over the end of the stairs.

The ghost's numerous eyes changed shape slightly, the vapor that shrouded its form grew darker, grayer in hue. It also grew another pair of arms. Daniel- The change Daniel suffered did not, at first, seem impressive. He was still dressed in a Greek nightgown, although it looked to be of a slightly different cut than before.

But there were subtle differences. The cut of his hair, for one. The ring on his finger for another. There was a seal on it. Vlad couldn't place it, but it looked familiar. Something ghostly, perhaps? Or, no, now that he looked more closely, it was a modified FentonWorks logo. Vlad rolled his eyes. Of course. Put Jack in the middle ages and he still managed to put that logo on everything.

Danny wasn't sure what woke him up, but something did. Probably changing floors and having his memory rewritten again. Probably. He shifted slightly in the arms of the cloud ghost, whose name, Danny had finally gathered, was lewumitwe. The name didn't mean anything, so far as Danny could determine, but it was good to know.

It wouldn't do to offend anyone. Ghosts sometimes took offence more easily than nobles, not that Danny dealt with them very much. Unless he counted Vlad. And his family. Sometimes he forgot to count his family.

He groaned. The ghosts around him hummed back, encouragingly, questions hidden in the notes. Ghost languages could be weird.

He forced his eyes open. "What's happening?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"We're on a new floor," said Ellie. She's acquired an odd accent. Not anything Danny couldn't hear through, but enough to throw him off a little.

"Ah," said Danny. He'd already guessed that, though. He freed an arm to rub an eye.

"How is your ankle feeling?" asked Prunella.

"Not well." He twitched it automatically, and instantly regretted it. Prunella had reached inside and put all the bones and fragments back in place, so the ankle didn't quite feel like there was a knife stuck through it anymore, but it wasn't happy. Still, he had been half expecting to lose the leg, or to have it heal into a club. He had seen something like that happen to a man his mother and father had treated.

Being the child of two science-obsessed minor nobles could be such 'fun' sometimes. Although, he should remember that it could be fun in the normal way as well.
He looked up at Prunella, and frowned. She was wearing something skintight and blue, her green hair slicked back. It wasn't what she had been wearing before, and it was certainly outlandish, something that would get her tossed in gaol back home, but compared to other ghosts... He shook his head, making a mental note not to stare.

Then he took a look around, checking on his... His relationship to the other young humans in the room momentarily slipped through his mind. Fellow villagers?

He blinked, hard, and the memories settled down into something manageable. Fellow villagers and neighbours. Yes.

Prunella was saying something. His head had been completely in the clouds while she said it.

"Can you repeat that, please?"

"Is there anything else bothering you? Any heat, or ache? Confusion?"

He settled back into Iewumitwe's many arms. "I have a headache, I suppose."

"I see," said Prunella, reaching out to touch Danny's forehead. Most of the pain vanished, leaving behind a gentle fuzziness.

Danny sighed.

"Daniel," said Vlad. His eastern accent was much more pronounced than it usually was.

"Mh?"

"Tell us, what era do you hail from?"

Was that what this floor did? Well, Vlad had lost his mind if he thought Danny would give him any more information than was strictly necessary. Especially since he apparently wanted to know so badly. Danny hadn't forgotten how Vlad had tried to get the Fentons convicted of witchcraft in an attempt to take over their estate. Among other, less forgivable things.

Danny smiled vaguely in Vlad's direction. "Hm?" he asked, as politely as possible. "Oh. My eyes aren't focusing." They weren't, as it turned out. "Is that bad?" He heard a whine. "Is that Cujo?"

"It's just a side effect," said Prunella.

At the same time, Ellie whispered, "Is he going to be alright?"

"I can hear you," said Danny, before sticking his tongue out at the simulacra. It was a serious breach in etiquette that Jazz would have scolded him for, but, considering the current circumstances, Danny thought he could be forgiven.

"Nothing wrong with your ears, then. Sleep. You'll heal faster."

Easier said than done. Everyone had started talking in the background, and the number of different languages being spoken was giving him a headache.

Iewumitwe held him closer. Danny made an involuntary noise of discomfort in his throat. He would much prefer someone else to carry him. He didn't know this ghost. But none of the people he would have liked carrying him (his parents, Clockwork, Frostbite, most of the Far Frozen, a few others) were available. If they were, this whole situation would never have happened.
If he thought about it, he would have been alright with Father Lancer carrying him, but he couldn’t ask the old priest to do that. Danny might have been lighter than most young men his age, thanks to his slightly inhuman nature, but he still weighed *something*.

Then Iewumitwe jerked sideways, and Danny gasped at the sudden acceleration. The others shouted. Were they under attack again? He would have thought that they had gone through all of the brash truce-breakers, with the more intelligent assassins lying in wait outside.

He opened his eyes, trying to get a glimpse of what was happening...

… And realized that he was hurtling towards a door.

*What?*

What was Iewumitwe doing?

That question was partially answered when the ghost wrenched open the door, and dove outside. Outside the Tower. Oh no, no, no, no, no. *Not* good. He had *known* he shouldn't just be all happy-go-lucky and trust *total strangers*. Why hadn't he considered the possibility that at least one of the so-helpful ghosts could be just biding their time, waiting for an opportunity to snatch him and run off?

He struggled. Between Iewumitwe's many arms and Danny's less than healthy state, this was largely ineffectual. But then another ghost- was that Aragon's former executioner?- dove at them, doubtless to try and claim Danny for himself, and Iewumitwe just sort of... absorbed Danny, pushing him into his cloudy body.

It was something like being submerged in murky water and caught in a storm. Everything was muffled, and Danny could barely see his shoulders. There was a fight going on out there, he could tell between the jerky movements and thunder-like sounds.

Danny resumed his struggles, now more urgent. There was no *air* inside Iewumitwe. Not really. The ghost, like most of Danny's acquaintance, was made of ectoplasm. Danny was currently in human form. His human form *could* 'survive' without breathing. Sort of. But that 'survival' included descending into a state of pained, semi-conscious, *helpless*, panic. That would spell death under his current circumstances.

One of Iewumitwe's eyes drifted over to him, staring intensely. In a fit of inspiration, Danny seized it in one hand, and bit it. Iewumitwe was apparently not expecting Danny to resort to cannibalism, and dropped Danny right out of his body.

Danny sucked in a deep breath of air as he tumbled head over heels through the air, before being able to stabilized himself on his downwards path with the ease of long practice. Only then could he take in his surroundings. Wow, that was a lot of people coming right at him. Where was the Tower? There! He had to fall towards that. He had to get back to the, admittedly dubious, safety of the truce.

He wrenched himself mentally sideways, and redirected himself again to avoid an attack. Thus distracted, his gravity realigned itself with that of the Tower, and he was going in the wrong direction again. Falling was not the best way to travel, not during a fight, not when his brain was too fuzzy to *focus*.

An ectoblast winged him, and he spun, shoulder burning. With difficulty, he righted himself again, and zoomed back towards the Tower. He hadn't the slightest idea which door he'd come out of.

Then a door burst open, and Ellie flew out, Cujo under one arm. She threw the small dog into the air.
Wow. Danny should see if there were any ghost baseball teams out there. Even for someone with super strength, that was quite a pitch.

"Sic those sickos, Cujo!"

Then again, Cujo was a ghost. He could have just been flying.

Speaking of flying, Ellie was doing that towards him. That was good. Less good was that people were attacking her now. But here was Vlad, and a bunch of the other ghosts. His core twinged with protectiveness. They were going to get hurt. But... They could be like Iewumitwe. They could be bounty hunters just waiting to strike. It hurt. IT HURT.

Danny curled inward in a vain attempt to protect his core, losing focus again, and fell.
Chapter 126

Chapter 126: Unstable

Ellie caught Danny by the back of his pajama shirt, and banked hard, zooming back up towards the Tower. This'd teach her to let other people take care of *her* brother. Why couldn't things be simple for once?

Danny moaned and curled in further, very committed to his fetal position. Ellie could, quite literally, feel his pain. Ellie's Obsessions were almost identical to Danny's, and her core was modeled on his, so she had to guess that he was freaking out over the betrayal, the danger to Ellie and the others, and the possibility that one of said others might be an assassin themselves, and he was having trouble processing the conflict. (Ellie's Obsession was, at the moment, telling her she really needed to put Danny in a nice, safe little box far away from anything difficult until his core healed. This wasn't particularly helpful.)

Luckily, Ellie knew the magic words to snap him out of it.

"Danny, I need your help here," she said, voice strained. It wasn't a lie. She could carry Danny without any trouble, but maneuverability was an issue when your load was as big as you were, and not cooperating.

The results were immediate. Danny's skin was paler than usual, his skin slick with ectoplasm and sweat, and his eyes weren't quite focusing on Ellie's face, but he was again present in the moment, Ellie's request for help overriding whatever logic loop he had been stuck in. If Danny's human half (or any part of him, really) had been working a little better, he probably would have been able to pull himself out on his own, but Ellie couldn't really blame him for his inability to do so.

"Keep an eye out and help me dodge!" said Ellie, narrowly avoiding a very medieval-looking spiky thing.

"R-Right," said Danny, barely audible over the whistling wind in Ellie's ears and the sounds of supernatural battle. It was a good thing the two of them were so similar, and so used to fighting together, that they didn't really need to communicate beyond that.

It was also a good thing that both Danny and Ellie had some control over their flight path. With the number of combatants, there was always *something* that one or the other of them hadn't seen. Danny yanked Ellie out of the way at least half as often as Ellie pulled him away.

There were a lot of people in between them and the Tower, now. This wasn't looking good. It would be really great if Ellie randomly developed some kind of teleportation power right about now.

Holy- Where did Vlad come from? Oh. Right. *Vlad* could teleport. Heck. She had forgotten about that in the heat of the moment. The older hybrid grabbed the shoulders of the other two, and with a sickening wrench, they were in front of one of the Tower doors. Ellie wasn't sure if this was the door they'd come out of, and she didn't really care.

She whistled sharply. "Cujo!"

The huge dog barked, then shrank, worming his way out of a knot of enemies like he was threading a needle. Ellie threw herself through the door, and dragged Danny, who had gone limp again, deeper
into the room.

Apparently, it was the same floor, because the nurse, Prunella, ran out to them. Ellie positioned herself protectively between her and Danny, hissing in warning. She didn't plan on letting anyone else near him, not after this.

"I can help," said Prunella.

"Yeah? Me too!" said Ellie. Ellie might not be good at healing, but she was more than acceptable. She had learned at the reflection of St Judith's Nursing School, the one that had been blown up in the real world. It was one of the most modern medicine establishments in the Zone, and they had made great advancements in core resonance healing in the last twenty years. According to Sister Judith, anyway.

In theory, Ellie and Danny should be particularly compatible in that regard, as they had nearly identical ectosignatures. But being this angry was not conducive to the technique, nor was being in combat, for that matter.

"I just want to help," said Prunella.

Those ghosts who were less combative, more hesitant, or less willing to risk their lives, milled around behind her. Many of the others, the ones more enraged by either the breaking of the Tower truce, or by the idea of bounty hunting, were outside, fighting. Some of whom were rushing in behind Ellie, Cujo, and Vlad, no longer interested in fighting now that Danny was back inside.

But Ellie couldn't tell if all of the ghosts coming in had actually been fighting for Danny, or if they had only been fighting their rivals. She couldn't tell if the ones who had stayed, like Prunella, weren't just biding their time, either, so under these circumstances, the best option would be to...

Run?

No, there were still Valerie and the rest of Danny's humans to think of (it was way too easy for Ellie to think of them as 'Danny's humans'), Ellie might not know anything about healing on a different floor, and Danny might even be more seriously injured on another floor.

Okay, so running was out unless someone made a move, then it would be right back in again.

But that left her with few options; none, really, that she could think of. She couldn't take her eyes off the crowd long enough to heal Danny.

(She would admit that the description 'heal Danny' sounded far more optimistic than the probable reality.)

She edged closer to Danny, a warning in the back of her throat. She was getting ready to fight, defend, carry out her Obsession.

(Behind her, Danny was mumbling something about faces and trust.)

"You're scaring the children," said Vlad, whose ghostly outfit now looked genuinely medieval, stepping between Ellie and the ghosts. "Some of you are hundreds of years old. You could act like it."

"It's my job to heal the sick," protested Prunella with the frenetic energy of someone whose Obsession was over-stressed. "Please, let me help."
Ellie relented. "F-Fine. But you make one wrong move..." She let the threat hang, because she didn't really know what she would do.

"Danielle, my dear, you won't have to do anything," said Vlad. "If anyone behaves improperly, I will make sure they are sorry."

Ellie relaxed marginally at Vlad's surprisingly supportive presence. Vlad was usually an enemy, but he was a known quantity, and he wanted Danny for himself. He wanted Danny alive and well. Vlad was an evil creep, but his evil was limited. He had lines he wouldn't cross, and those lines had, miraculously, become thicker with time, rather than thinner. Although, in Ellie's opinion, he couldn't get much more evil than trying to melt her.

Maybe she was being uncharitable with that. He had gotten better.

A bit.

She stepped back to Danny, keeping her eyes on the ghosts until she was able to crouch down next to him and run her hand up over his shoulder. He was shaking. But...

"Sorry for scaring you," he said, voice very uneven. "I think- I think I'm alright now, mostly. I think."

"You don't sound very sure of that," said Ellie.

"Well, I'm not." He laughed nervously. Wisps crowded into his hair, giving him a rainbow halo. "Couldn't be, really."

"I don't think you're alright."

Danny's core felt distressingly similar to how Ellie's had felt when she was destabilizing. Not exactly the same, but then Ellie obviously didn't have the same connection to Danny's core as she did to her own. Had he felt like this back then, watching her melt? Maybe. She couldn't say. She'd been more concerned with the melting bit.

But Danny felt like he was growing stronger, more stable again. His emotions, the ones Ellie could pick up beyond the wisps' calming mist, felt steadier, more even.

"You're probably right," he agreed after a moment. Then he flinched away from Prunella as she sat down, cautiously, next to him. "I don't want to go all... fuzzy, again," he said.

"No," said Prunella, voice very low, low enough that even nearby ghosts would be hard pressed to hear it. "That would not be wise at this point. If I had any idea-" She shook her head "You need your wits about you. Even if that does limit what I can do for you."

Danny folded his lips in and gave Prunella a frustrated, wary look. "Maybe you could say what, exactly that is and how you're doing it this time," he said, just as quietly.

Jazz, Sam, and Tucker, sat in a small room with a low ceiling, sharing the results of their training with one another as the ship creaked and moaned around them. Well, Jazz and Tucker were sharing.
Sam had already demonstrated her trick with the camera to, well, basically everyone.

Jazz had picked up a sort of telekinesis where she could make glowing yellow copies of her own hands. Tucker kept making jokes about 'Bigby's Hand.' Jazz kept muttering something about Danny being able to see the future.

Tucker had less to show. He wasn't sure what, if anything, had been happening with the Egyptian's machines, much less if he had caused it. On the other hand, his PDA was holding a 100% charge, and had been for several hours, and he claimed that it was running faster. He had also said that hieroglyphs kept flashing in the notification bar, but Sam hadn't seen one yet.

Sam, meanwhile, hadn't given up on being able to control plants. She had brought a tiny little African violet with her. Jazz was trying to coach her through her visualization process. It was a lot more meditative than what Sam had been trying to do before, but it still wasn't working. She glared at it and sighed.

"You know," said Jazz, "we won't be there for a while yet. It might be a good idea to go to sleep, get some rest. Giving ourselves eyestrain isn't going to help anything."

Sam sighed. "Yeah. You're right." She looked over at Tucker. "You'd better not be up playing with that the whole time."

"Uhhuh," said Tucker, entirely engrossed in his PDA.

Sam's lips twitched up, and she dumped the remainder of her cup of water into the flowerpot. It had been looking a bit dry. She stood, and followed Jazz to their bunks.

Walking away, she didn't see the plant shiver, glow, and grow.
Chapter 127: The Acts of Others

Oleander looked up at the imposing edifice of Long Now and swallowed. Her eyes darted sideways to the woman who had dragged her here. She swallowed again.

She was young for a ghost, newly Dead, still learning the laws of the Zone. Until a couple of weeks ago, she hadn't entirely believed that the Ancients even existed. Then this thing with Phantom (whom she did believe in, on account of spotting him during the scare with Pariah Dark) had blown up, and then she'd been drafted as an intern for a large firm (yay!) with lots of paperwork (less yay).

It was a good first step for someone who had died before they'd passed the bar. She had eternity to figure out the intricacies (and blunt simplicities) of ghost law. Or so she had thought.

But Lady Nephthys, Lady Death herself, had other plans.

As of this morning, Oleander had been one of the very few advocates registered with Libra (a very rough equivalent of passing the bar) who hadn't already been retained in the matter of the Fentons' trial. Oleander hadn't thought that she would be retained for this trial at all. She had no reputation to speak of, no great cases to her name. She had managed to serve as a kind of go-between for a small handful of ghosts, and a little community, a town that had been wiped out by the black plague, had once asked her to arbitrate a dispute for them.

Now, though, it seemed that she was going to be representing one of the most powerful, most important ghosts in the Infinite Realms. She was more than a little intimidated. Not to mention confused. She knew very well that Lord Clockwork had been at the initial committee meetings thus far, and that he clearly hadn't intended to need an advocate, otherwise he would have found a better one than Oleander.

… That raised another set of worries, considering what Lord Clockwork's powers were supposed to be.

She jumped as the doors swung open.

"Go on in," said Lady Nephthys.

The Unstoppable Mailman avoided the unseasonable mobs of angry ghosts with his customary adroitness, his faithful, reliable steed carrying him a hairsbreadth from the attacks of the more combative of the swarm. The horse cantered to a stop on the island that 'supported' the long, bent structure of the Diverging Tower. The Mailman swung off its back, shouldered his bag, and gave the animal a slap on the side. The horse took off, and the Mailman flew to the door.

He had tracked his quarry, one Daniel Janus James Fenton-Phantom, to the Tower, but he couldn't tell which floor the boy had entered on, much less which floor he was currently on. The large
numbers of ghosts, and the high activity, in the area had obscured and disturbed individual ectosignatures, and the nature of the Tower itself negated many of the other methods the Mailman used to locate recipients of his letters.

There was nothing for it. He would have to just have to go through the floors one by one and hope that Phantom didn't leave the Tower in the meantime.

With extreme reluctance, Danny let Vlad carry him. There wasn't another choice that wasn't, well, ridiculous, short-term, or entirely unsafe. Even Vlad was partially unsafe. Considering the history between him and Danny, there had to be universes out there where Danny and Vlad were mortal (immortal?) enemies.

Although, Danny had to admit that none of those had shown up so far. Yes, on the cheese level, Vlad had been a drug lord (sort of) and Danny had thoroughly despised him, but they hadn't been at the point of actually wanting to murder each other. Vlad had still wanted Danny as his evil son/apprentice. That had been a common thread throughout, actually.

Danny was beginning to wonder if Vlad was actually Obsessed with having Danny as a son. He'd always thought that Vlad was just Obsessed with revenge and having a family, with Danny and his parents being targets of convenience. But if he wasn't... If Vlad was Obsessed with Danny himself... That was more than a little creepy, and it was definitely something to be cautious of in the future, but it meant that Vlad was unlikely to suddenly want to murder him. He couldn't have Danny as a son if Danny wasn't around anymore.

With that arranged, they started upstairs again. There were some communication difficulties, many of Danny's classmates had wound up speaking different languages (Danny had been lucky enough for the floor to settle him in the nineteen-seventies), but Danny's facility with languages was the only area in which he matched the genius of the rest of his family. Admittedly, he couldn't quite decipher what Paulina was speaking. He didn't know many American Indian languages. Even for those he was familiar with, he only knew a handful of words. It was much the same with preliterate European and Asian languages. There were just so many of them, and he couldn't exactly find a bunch of books on them in the library.

But where Danny's language skills failed, Ellie's mime capabilities succeeded. Paulina's obvious desire to get out of the Tower helped.

The floor plan of this level, however, wasn't as straightforward as some of the others they had passed. It wasn't horribly convoluted. It looked like someone had tried to lay out a house on the level, complete with a kitchen (that everyone gorged themselves in), not like the cheese floor, which had been designed to be maze-like. The problem was that they couldn't find the stairs. They weren't out in the open, and everyone was, reasonably, somewhat wary of doors at the moment.

It was interesting, being on this floor, like flipping through pages in a history book. Danny would probably enjoy it more if he weren't so hurt. He resolved to come back here sometime, preferably with Sam, Tucker, and Jazz, and a map of which floors were fun, and which floors were... Less so.

They found the stairs hidden in what they had initially taken for a cupboard. Vlad let other ghosts go up first, only beginning to ascend when they called down that it was safe.
"We're going to have to make a plan for when we get to the casino," said Danny as they went up.

"Oh?"

"Hm. Just 'cause the guy owes Ellie a boat doesn't mean he has one, or that he'll just hand it over, and the casino isn't under truce, is it?"

"Ugh. No," said Ellie. "You're right. It isn't."

"Wait, are you saying that all this running around is pointless?" asked Rebecca.

"Only if you're not a fan of keeping your head attached to your body, or did you forget about how many times we've been attacked in here?" shot back Ellie.

"So... Maybe... Ellie, you and Vlad go out, get the ship, then park it next to a door for the floor below, and then we pile out, then we run?" Danny thought about that for a moment. "No, that's a stupid idea. They'd attack you as soon as they'd attack me, and moving the boat like that is way too transparent... Uhm."

"Danielle, do you even know what kind of boat you are owed?"

"Uh. A big one. Big enough to fit all of us."

"Do you know how to pilot it?" Vlad continued.

"No. Look, when we came up with this plan, we didn't think that we were going to be chased down by this many nutcases. Maybe one or two, but this? No. And you didn't complain about it until now either."

"Don't you take that tone with me, young lady."

"Ancients, do you even hear yourself? You have to be half expecting me to to shout 'you're not my real dad' and storm off."

Danny suppressed a snicker.

"Excuse me?" said Vlad, angrily.

This was when they crossed the threshold to the next floor. Danny stiffened in alarm.

"Dad?" he said, hand wrapped tightly around the lapel of his father's suit, eyes fixed on the girl who looked so much like him. "Who is that?"

The girl scowled, green fire building in her hands. "That's what I should be asking you!"
Chapter 128

Chapter 128: Fatherhood

Vlad didn't know what to make of the present situation.

Clearly, he had just entered a reality that was quite different from the 'true' one. What he remembered of events on the floor below this one tended to corroborate that. However, the memories this floor had given him, his memories from before entering the Bends, weren't at all enlightening.

He had come here alone.

Correction, he remembered coming to the Bends alone. Clearly, he had not.

He hoped that there was a very good explanation for why 1) he was carrying his seriously injured estranged godson in his arms, 2) he was with his godson (his very human godson) in the Bends, 3) his godson was calling him 'Dad,' and 4) why this second small child (who looked a lot like Daniel, but was a ghost) was calling him Dad.

He would also like to know why there were a bunch of other... assorted humans and ghosts with them. In Vlad's experience, people didn't typically travel through the Bends in such large groups. Vlad certainly wouldn't under ordinary circumstances. He didn't like most people. Most people were selfish, self-absorbed, intellectually-stunted gremlins.

"Children, please," he said, stopping the verbal argument between Daniel and his ghostly lookalike. "Clearly, we all know each other. There's no need to fight." He cast around the room. "There was a sitting room on this floor," he muttered.

"Er, shouldn't we be running?" asked one of the other human children.

"And who are you?" asked Vlad.

"Ricky," said the boy. "There were people trying to kill us before. Shouldn't we be trying to get to the next floor?"

Ah. That would explain why Daniel was injured. Or perhaps not. Daniel was almost certainly overlaid with a different universe than this boy.

"No one will break the truce," said Vlad.

"They already did," said a girl. "What's this floor supposed to do, anyway?" She hugged herself. "It feels weird."

"It changes a choice made by someone close to you," said Vlad. "If you are experiencing discomfort, it is likely because the 'you' resulting from the choices is too different from the real you."

"I think that the sitting room was over there," interjected Daniel before Vlad could say more. He pointed. "At least, I don't think that we should stand in front of the stairs like this. It's pretty exposed."

Vlad looked down at Daniel with some amazement. "You've been here before?"
"Yes, with you. Do you... Not remember me?" Daniel actually sounded somewhat concerned at that prospect. He glanced at the ghost girl. "Or her, either? Who are you, anyway?"

The girl scoffed and tilted her chin. "Danielle Masters," she said, proudly. "Who are you?"

"Daniel Masters," said Daniel slowly. His eyes were narrowed as he examined the girl. "Maybe... The person who chose differently for all three of us is Mom. That would make sense, wouldn't it? Dad?"

"Why, yes. Yes, that would make sense." Vlad couldn't imagine who the girl's mother could be if he really were her father, however, and he knew very well that Jack and Maddie were Daniel's parents. It followed that they were also this girl's parents, but that only made the fact that both of them insisted on calling him their father more confusing.

He would not, however, lie to himself and say that it wasn't gratifying. Vlad knew his Obsession with family, and being loved very well. He had wished for children many times.

Alas, his... condition made it difficult to get close to people. To this day, his only real friends were Jack and Maddie, and if they had been less insistent about coming to see him, less persistent in their harassment of the GIW agents and doctors assigned to monitor his case of ecto-acne after his accident, well, he wouldn't be surprised if he had no friends at all. Even so, Jack and Maddie still didn't know the full extent of the changes Vlad had suffered after the portal accident, of his need to fulfill his Obsessions, and the madness that threatened to consume him if he did not.

Being named godfather for Jasmine and Daniel had helped. It had helped a lot, actually.

Perhaps if he thought very hard about that, it would quell his growing fear concerning what might have happened to Jack and Maddie.

"I don't have a mom," said Danielle, breaking into Vlad's thoughts.

"Yeah, I know she's not around anymore," said Daniel (Vlad's heart seized at the idea of Maddie being 'not around'), "but-"

"No, I don't have a mother. Father made me all by himself."

"That's not possible. Everyone has a mother. Just because you don't know who yours is, doesn't mean you don't." Daniel paused. "Okay, that's only true for humans. You're a ghost, so I guess that doesn't really apply." Daniel put a very delicate emphasis on the words 'you're a ghost.'

Danielle apparently noticed this. She tilted her head very slightly to the left. "And you're a human. So what?" There was the same delicate emphasis in Danielle's words, albeit at different points. What could they be trying to communicate here? He'd had these children for all of ten minutes and already he didn't understand them.

"As human as anyone could be, anyway."

It suddenly struck Vlad that each of them were, subtly, trying to figure out whether or not the other one was a hybrid.

He felt his headache redouble. Yes, that would explain why Daniel was here in the first place. As for Danielle's resemblance to Daniel... Perhaps Danielle was Daniel's younger sister, and was experiencing a universe where Daniel had not been born, and they were both from universes where Jack and Maddie had suffered some disaster, necessitating that Vlad adopt them. Except that, if that were the case, there really wasn't any reason for her to insist that he, Vlad, had made her all by
himself.

It also didn't bode well for the real Jack and Maddie.

Daniel snuggled closer to Vlad, and sighed heavily. "I'm tired," he said. His tone was entirely void of petulance, unlike what Vlad might have envisioned from a child Daniel's age. The statement was a simple observation. "I think I was hurt worse than we thought." He rubbed his chest as he leaned his head against Vlad's shoulder.

(Vlad suppressed a shiver as one of the wisps fluttering around Daniel took a path through him.)

"Or, no," continued Daniel, "wrong way to say that. Worse than you thought in my universe when we were both still outside."

"Hurt by what?" asked Danielle, tilting her head. Her frown had changed into something more concerned.

"Is he going to be alright, Señor Masters?" asked a Latina girl with a pronounced accent. Her braid had come half-undone.

"Who're all of you guys, anyway?" asked Daniel before Vlad could formulate a proper answer.

"We're your classmates," said the black girl.

"You don't go to St. Agatha's," said Daniel.

"Yeah, no way are you one of my classmates," agreed Danielle.

The girl raised an eyebrow. "What, because I'm black? My dad is the founder of a security company, you know."

"Uh, no. St. Agatha's has like, a hundred people in it. I'd recognize you if you went there," said Daniel, reasonably. "Even if I didn't know your name, I'd know your face."

"Same," said Danielle. "But you don't go there, either, and she's from a different universe. So. Do you go to St. Agatha's?"

"No," said the girl after a moment. "I go to Casper High. And so do you, Danny."

"It's Daniel."

That got some odd looks.

Vlad sighed.

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Daniel glared weakly across Vlad at the girl who had called herself Danielle. There wasn't much force behind the glare, or emotion for that matter. Despite the irritation he felt at her presence initially, she was starting to grow on him, and Daniel knew that she was probably his little sister. Also, Daniel was tired. He probably would have drifted off by now, except for what appeared to be an extreme difference between true reality and the one his memories came from, and how strangely his father
was acting.

Vlad Masters was typically a sharp, decisive, confident, and above all, forceful man. Daniel had never, not once doubted that Vlad loved him, that Vlad would protect him, and keep him safe, but Vlad could be... hard, sometimes.

This version of Vlad was significantly softer, and also more distant. It scared Daniel. Vlad had always been the rock of stability in his life, the one constant as they moved around the country, the one person he was truly close to. Having him act like he barely knew Daniel unnerved Daniel greatly.

A second, but probably more immediately important, issue was the sheer number of people with them.

Daniel had always known that he and Vlad were special. Unique. At least, that's what Vlad had always taught Daniel, and once Daniel's hybrid nature had emerged over an exceptionally unsettling (and occasionally painful) August week, he had seen that it had been nothing but the truth. As special people, Vlad had taught Daniel, they would acquire followers, hangers-on, servants, vassals, minions.

Even so, Vlad had never attracted, or sought to attract, this kind of following. At least, not all at once. To Daniel, this looked like a small army.

Okay, a very small army. Still. He did have experiences (unpleasant ones) with armies. Particularly those of Pariah Dark and Fright Knight. He knew what he was talking about.

Danielle sighed, and leaned into Vlad. Daniel's eyes narrowed, and he, too, squirmed closer to his father. Vlad was becoming quite smushed in-between the two of them. Daniel knew that he was being petty, and that he should be more focused on why the Observants had ordered that he and Vlad be attacked, but... Well... He was a ghost, and between pain and exhaustion, he could think of little else.

He was very glad that it had been decided that they would take a rest in the sitting room after all. Being carried, even by his father, had a tendency to be uncomfortable and embarrassing.

At that point, a small green ghost dog jumped up onto the couch next to him. Danny regarded it with some curiosity. The other ghosts were giving him and Vlad a wide berth. Unless he counted Danielle and the wisps. He suspected Danielle, beyond possibly being his sister, was a hybrid, so she didn't count, and it was just like wisps to suck up to the most powerful ghost in the area, and Vlad definitely met that description.

The puppy was an outlier.

It licked his elbow and wagged its tail.

"Hello, puppy," he said. He patted its head, and traced down the back of the dog's head to get hold of the collar around its neck.

"Careful, Daniel," said Vlad. "You don't know where that's been."

"I know, but they're with us, so they can't be bad, right?" reasoned Daniel. He'd always wanted a dog, a cat, or some other pet, but Vlad had said that it wasn't practical, that it wouldn't be fair to the pet, considering the more unusual aspects of their life. The dog's tags jingled when he finally found them and brought them around into sight. "Cujo, huh? Your owner must have a wild sense of humor."
The dog wagged its tail enthusiastically, and curled up next to Daniel's hip. He petted it before settling down on Vlad's side again. Vlad sighed heavily, and put his arm around Daniel.

"I suppose it's unlikely to attack," said Vlad, with an air of resignation.

"Good puppy," murmured Daniel. His blinks were becoming longer. Ancients, he was tired.

His eyes slipped closed.
Chapter 129

Chapter 129: What We Have Done

Smith climbed out of the purifying bath, donned his clothing, and walked out into his forge. The sharp but cloying scent of smoke and hot metal floated on the air, drowning out the subtler odor of hot ectoplasm.

On a pedestal in the center of the room rested the mold, the Ring of Rage, and the sample of Phantom's ectoplasm. Smith paused to regard the first two. It had been so long. So long since he had seen these two prime exemplars of his handiwork. So long since he had been called upon to ply his trade at this level, with these tools and materials.

Few would have been able to tell, but he was excited. Terribly so.

He took a tiny silver spoon, purified, of course, from the table and dipped it into the bowl containing Phantom's green-blue ectoplasm. He removed a minuscule spoonful, that was all that was needed at the moment, moved it to hover over the mold with rock-steady hands, and then inverted it, letting the luminous substance drip onto the mold.

The mold's surface rippled, and absorbed the glowing drop. The patterns on the surface slowly began to change. It would take some time before it had thoroughly processed Phantom's ectoplasm, before it had completely assumed its new configuration, with its new instructions writ upon its surface.

In the meantime... He flicked his fingers, summoning a crucible from across the room. He put the Ring of Rage into the crucible, lip curling slightly. He had been so young when he had made it. Still incomprehensibly ancient, but so young. So easily impressed by Pariah Dark's majesty. The Ring of Rage looked crude now, much like Pariah Dark himself, the skull motif overdone and obvious, the color, garish. He would do better this time, he told himself, even if the mold would do most of the work.

Phantom, he had observed, had a tendency towards the understated... Understated from a ghostly perspective, in any case. The Ring of Rage was a bright, neon green. That, too, was an understated color from a ghostly perspective. It blended right into the typical background color of the Infinite Realms. But it was understated in the wrong direction.

After a moment of thought, Smith added a small, finger-sized, bar of white electrum to the crucible. Some metal was always lost to heat and other processes, not to mention the channels of the mold. The metal was less important than the power it contained, and that power had to be respected, had to be managed carefully.

Later, once the mold had finished in its analysis, he would add other items, other reagents. He would be very surprised to not add mithril, uumechifi, and other, even more fantastic, more rare, materials by the end.

Yes, this would be fun.
"Okay, so does anyone else think that it's weird that both of those two think that Mayor Masters is their Dad?" asked Sarah.

"I don't know," said Hannah, shrugging. "Who cares?"

"Uh, you do? Because it might be a clue to figure out their secret?"

Hannah gave Sarah a strange sort of half smile. "No..? It doesn't really matter to me what secrets they have, as long as we get home?"

"Who are you and what have you done with my friend?"

"Who are you and what have you done with my friend?" asked Star.

Paulina raised an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure we're not friends, Star, so..."). She ran a hand through her hair, and made a face. She might not care as much about appearances as some people she could name, but she really wanted a shower.

"Since when?"

"Uh, since forever? And since when do you wear glasses?"

"So, why are you guys here?" asked Nathan.

"What do you mean?" asked Ricky.

"We moved out of Amity Park ages ago," explained Lester. "We're only here because Phantom dropped through our living room in Dimsdale, and then the Guys in White zapped him with a weird gun thing. He'd been on the run from them for a while."

"Except," Nathan, "that can't be what really happened, because you're here."

Ricky and Mikey exchanged glances. Had the twins become smarter, too?

"Fentons with an experimental gun thing at a safety assembly," said Mikey.

"Safety,' huh?"
Daniel stirred. He didn't want to wake up, exactly, he was more comfortable here, on the couch, than he had been since he'd broken his ankle, but something had roused him, and he wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep until he figured out what it was. He eased his eyes open against the light, his other senses slowly coming back online.

He felt his heart jump as he realized that he was completely covered in ghosts. Buried might have been a better descriptor. He was something like two or three ghosts deep, as far as the wisps went, and Danielle, his probably-sister, had somehow migrated to his other side. Her face was tucked into the bend of his neck, and her spectral tail was wrapped securely around his good leg. The ghost dog, Cujo, seemed to still be by his hip, under his hand. Purring happily. It was strange to think of a dog purring, even though the phenomenon was common, ubiquitous, really, among ghosts.

All of the ghosts were purring.

The ghosts must have sensed his discomfort, because they, all of them, nuzzled closer to Daniel, and made soft, melodious sounds. He pushed himself desperately into the cushions of the couch, and cast about for Vlad.

The humans, and a number of ghosts, were draped over the various bits of furniture in the room. He didn't see Vlad. Maybe he was behind the couch somewhere? Yes, now that he focused, he could hear Vlad's voice from somewhere behind him.

He swallowed. "Dad?" he called, softly.

Vlad stopped talking, another voice, one Daniel hadn't really registered, trailed into silence. There came the sound of footsteps, closer and closer, and Vlad came into view. His suit looked like it had been newly-pressed, and the rest of him looked similarly immaculate. Daniel relaxed incrementally. Vlad was always like that, even when they had been traveling for days. Daniel didn't know how he did it, but it was comforting.

"Help," he squeaked. He blushed. He hadn't meant to get so high-pitched.

"You've made yourself some friends, I see," he said, corners of his mouth turned up, one eyebrow raised.

"Dad..."

"You'll be fine," said Vlad. "Wisps aren't known for being violent, and you need to stay still." His smile faded. "Daniel, there's something we should talk about, as long as everyone else is asleep."

Any residual sleepiness Daniel had was banished. The throb in his ankle became more urgent.

"What?"

Vlad licked his lips, hesitant. That was unlike him. He was never hesitant.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Daniel, are you a hybrid?"

Daniel tilted his head. "You mean half-ghost?" he asked, voice as low as he could make it. "Yes. Um. I am not in, um, your universe?" He hated himself for the 'ums.' He half-expected Vlad to scold him for it. Vlad always impressed on him the need for proper diction. Not to mention the inaccuracy of the term 'your universe.'

Instead, all Vlad said was, "No. You aren't."
"Is that a bad thing?" asked Daniel. He himself wasn't sure how he felt about that. It could be difficult, sometimes, being what he was, but it was what he was, and it was a connection to his father. It could be fun, sometimes, too.

"... No," said Vlad, after a pause. "I just need some time to adjust to the idea. Or perhaps not. Things will go back to normal once we leave."

Vlad didn't sound too sure of that.

"Dad?" asked Daniel. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm still trying to... understand the situation we find ourselves in." He grimaced, an unfamiliar expression. "I came here alone," he continued, "without being waylaid by any battle. Any significant battle, in any case." He sighed, and rubbed his nose.

Daniel was becoming increasingly unnerved by how much weakness Vlad was showing. He never acted like this. Never. Not even when they had been in the Bends before.

"Daniel, do you happen to know anyone named Jack or Madeline Fenton?"

Daniel blinked slowly. The names sounded familiar. "Aren't those the people you don't like? From when you were in college?"

Vlad's eyebrows went up. "Explain."

"They're the people who cause the lab accident that gave you ecto-acne," said Daniel, with a little more confidence. "I don't really know anything else about them. You don't like talking about it. I only know about them because you had that recurrence a couple years ago." He would have shrugged, but, well. He was still covered in ghosts.

Vlad had gone very still. "I see," he said, finally, face and voice both carefully blank.

"Dad?"

Vlad shook his head, and patted Daniel on the cheek. "Go back to sleep, Daniel."

"Like this?" said Daniel, aggrieved.

Vlad's smile was anemic, but present and genuine. "Why not, little badger? With all the energy will-o-the-wisps put off, they'll help you heal."

"I'm buried here," said Daniel.

"Go to sleep," said Vlad, more forcefully. "Please. You need the rest, and I need to figure out what's going on with all of... this, so we can make a plan."

Daniel exhaled slowly. "Fine."

Daniel didn't know how much what he'd said about Jack and Maddie affected Vlad. He couldn't have.
Vlad was on the edge of a breakdown.

What could possibly have happened in Daniel's timeline, to make him think that he was Vlad's son while Jack and Maddie were still alive and *estranged* from Vlad? What choices had been changed, to cause such a large ripple, such a large difference between his timeline and Vlad's? When had those choices occurred? And which had more resemblance to the true timeline?

Most importantly: What had Vlad *done*? He couldn't countenance a universe where he was a kidnapper, but that's what Daniel's timeline looked like. And how old would Daniel have been? Young enough for him not to remember Vlad at all. An infant, or near to it. Vlad had kidnapped an infant. And why? Why in the world would he do that? He might not be the richest man in the world, but he was wealthy enough that he could adopt without any trouble.

Revenge? Against Jack and Maddie?

No. Ridiculous. Except... He could be somewhat vindictive, on occasion. Not to Jack and Maddie, though! Except on April Fool's Day, then, well...

But that didn't hold a candle to stealing a baby!

Stealing a baby... And turning that baby into a half-ghost, a liminal spirit.

Bile rose in his throat. Vlad's counterpart was a *monster*. There was no doubt.

Valerie didn't know what a 'hybrid,' or a 'half-ghost' was. She barely knew Danny Fenton, and she hadn't ever had a significant interaction with Vlad Masters before walking into the Tower. She did, however, remember previous floors, ones where she had a suit like a superhero, and could summon guns to her hands with a thought, and she still nursed a grudge against the ghosts who had destroyed her life.

Between those ghosts, and the cruelty of the average high schooler, Valerie had learned to listen, to lie in wait, to plan.

She would file away this piece of information.
Chapter 130

Chapter 130: Orbits

Daniel did feel better after sleeping under the blanket of ghosts. Walking was still out of the question, and his core ached, but he was better.

The other humans in the room didn't share his optimism. They were hungry. Starving. According to them, they'd been getting by on just one ‘meal’ a day, and that wasn't agreeing with them. They weren't like Vlad, Daniel, or the other ghosts, who could live on air alone.

It wasn't like human-safe food was easy to come by in the Ghost Zone, outside of a rare few realms Vlad had taught him about. If the humans were right about how long they'd been in the Zone, and how long they'd been in the Bends, it was remarkable that they'd found so much food.

It put an extra impetus on getting out and getting to safety. Preferably somewhere in the human world. However, getting them out past the ghost bounty hunters would be a problem. One that they may or may not have solved beforehand, according to some of the humans.

Ugh. The only thing for it was to go up. At least the Bends’ truce seemed to be holding, for the moment, although the humans, from the adult, Mr Lancer, to the short boy named Mikey, said that it hadn't held on lower floors. Daniel didn't remember that. Apparently exiting (he didn't remember that, either) and then re-entering the Bends caused his memories of the journey to be reset, or scrambled.

Whatever, whichever. Daniel would be happy to done with this, to be out of the Tower and back home, wherever that may be.

"The committee has begun to eliminate possible trial methods," announced Wolfsbane as he came in.

Maddie paused mid push-up. Being confined, no matter that the rooms were nice, was wearing on her. It wasn't healthy to be so sedentary. She knew that she had already lost muscle tone.

"What?" she asked, very intelligently.

"The preliminary committee, or initial committee, if you prefer, has begun to eliminate possible trial methods."

"I thought you were working on punishments," said Jack, as Maddie peeled herself off the floor and wiped sweat off her face.

"We are," said Wolfsbane, serenely. "That is generating the most debate, however, other things do get accomplished. Thus far, the methods eliminated are trial by omen," he began to lay down sheets of paper, "trial by fire, trial by ritual combat."

"Specifically thirty-six of the one-hundred-and-eight types of ritual combat previously used in trials"
adjudicated by Libra," interjected Azalea cheerfully, coming in behind Wolfsbane and closing the door.

"- most kinds of bench trial, trial by water, trial by expert opinion-"

"Wait, isn't that a kind of bench trial?" asked

"No. The expert isn't a judge. Compurgation, cruentation, obviously. Compurgation is only acceptable in what you would consider civil cases, and you need a corpse for cruentation. Normally they wouldn't have even been considered, but this isn't precisely a normal trial. Trial by long needle, and trial by self, unfortunately..." Wolfsbane put down the last sheet of paper.

"Why are there so many kinds of trial by ritual combat?" asked Maddie.

"Because there are so many different kinds of ritual combat," said Wolfsbane. "I have always been surprised that there aren't more."

"You don't know boredom until you've seen trial by curling," said Azalea. She shook her head. "The Scottish are weird. I'm so glad that only happened once."

"Why is it bad that they got rid of trial by long needle?" asked Jack.

"What? Oh, no, it's good we got rid of that one. The pity is that trial by self was eliminated. In that trial, the accused would imbibe a truth potion, or Stygian waters and make an oath to tell the truth, and then say whether or not they thought themselves guilty."

Maddie frowned. "You didn't tell us about that option."

"It is essentially always eliminated in truly serious cases," said Wolfsbane. "In any case, do you think you could pass such a trial?"

"No, but that doesn't mean that you should have kept it from us," said Maddie.

Wolfsbane's eyebrows went up. "I apologize," he said. "I meant only to save time when I glossed over it. As you know, there are a great many kinds and categories of trial used by Libra, almost all of which were more likely to be used. I told you of the ones I thought you were most likely to encounter. That one has been eliminated."

Maddie pursed her lips, trying to determine whether or not she should take exception to any of that. On one hand, she was very upset, on the other... She was trying to be better about her reactions to ghosts. She was trying to understand more. Trying to overcome what she now knew to be prejudices, pretty extreme ones.

"But you could have fought harder for it," said Jack.

"I did fight hard for it," said Wolfsbane. "As did others. Doing that established a precedent, established our position. But it wasn't ever going to be the trial actually used, and its exclusion was minor compared to other events that occurred in this last session of the preliminary committee."

"Eliminating trial by fire is very important," said Azalea. "Melting isn't pleasant."

"Melting?"

"Yes," said Azalea. "It's a slow fire. Perfect for melting, if you don't have enough conviction."

"Humans don't melt," said Maddie.
"I didn't know you guys were fireproof," said Azalea.

"We aren't."

"Humans do not melt," said Wolfsbane, now distracted by his papers. "They burn. Not all ghosts melt, either."

Azalea flushed green. "Oh. Right."

Wolfsbane put down his last stack of paper, and straightened it carefully, so the edges were parallel to the edges of the table. "Most likely, the other forms of ritual combat will be eliminated over the course of the next few days. That has both advantages and disadvantages for us."

"What would the disadvantages be?" asked Maddie.

"It would eliminate an easy out," said Wolfsbane. "Let me explain: Trial by combat traditionally allows for a person to volunteer to be a champion, provided that the people being substituted agree to the substituted. Daniel would likely volunteer under those conditions, but I can't imagine that the prosecution would choose to fight him. On the other hand, that particular loophole would be easily closed in the initial committee, and even if it wasn't... Would you want Daniel to expose himself to that kind of risk?"

"No," said Maddie.

"No, of course not! We're Fentons! We fight our own battles."

"Yes, that being said, would you like me to maneuver to keep any of these on the table?" Wolfsbane retrieved another folder from his apparently bottomless bag, and spread out the contents. "I must caution you, it is unlikely for any of them to become the final choice, but it is possible, especially if we bring up and allow the closure of the loophole."

Maddie opened her mouth, then closed it. "No," she said.

"What? But, Mads, I'm sure we could beat some fil- Ah, um. We could beat some... Uh. We could definitely... win... at some of these."

"That's not the point," said Maddie. "The point is..." she trailed off.

She wasn't sure what the point was, here. Getting home intact was important, but... Her thoughts roiled. What was the point? Justice? No. They had to get back, for their children, but they were guilty. Guilty of hurting their children, of hurting Danny, in particular.

That was it. Their children. Their relationship with their children, and, as much as she hated to admit it, with these ghosts. This was about fixing that, about showing that they were sorry, that they wanted to do better, to be better.

"You said that it wouldn't work, anyway," said Maddie. "It would probably be a waste of time and effort."

"Yes, that's true," said Wolfsbane. He folded his hands in front of himself. "What kind of a trial would you prefer me to spend my time and effort on?"

"Is there any way we could have a trial like one we would have in the living world?"

"There are a number of trials on record with Libra that used methods currently employed on the
material plane. It is also possible to submit for consideration new methods, or to invent methods from whole cloth. That is part of what the initial committee is for."

"Of course," said Azalea, "whatever you submit will be twisted out of all recognition by the committee. That's just what happens."

"Why is this taking so long?" complained Sam. She was sprawled across the bunk in their berth in a way that her mother would probably call unladylike. But who cared? It wasn't like anyone could see her underwear.

Okay, maybe Tucker could see her underwear, but she didn't really care. He'd seen her with half her clothes burned off, not to mention what Aragon had forced her into that one time, and... Other things. Underwear alone was a non-issue.

"You know why," said Tucker, glancing tiredly in Sam's direction. He was lying down on one of the other beds, resting his eyes. He had definitely strained them staring at his PDA over the last few days.

This was true. Sam just felt like complaining. It was a stress reliever. Not a very good one, true, and one that she knew got on other people's nerves. It certainly got on her nerves when other people did it.

"Yeah, whatever," said Sam, running her hand along the boards that made up the closest wall of the ship. Somehow, she knew that they weren't wood. How did she know that?

"I don't know," said Jazz, looking up from her book, a trail of glowing yellow hands merging with her right as a faint glow as soon as she stopped moving it. "Why is it taking so long? This ship must be faster than whatever Danny and the others got there in."

Tucker and Sam exchanged glances. "I'll take it," said Sam, after a moment. She sat up, pulling her legs up into a crossed position. "Did Danny ever tell you how things in the Ghost Zone move?" It wasn't a given, Jazz hadn't been in the Zone as many times as Sam and Tucker, and Sam couldn't remember whether or not Jazz had been there for any specific navigational conversations.

"Yes," said Jazz. "He mentioned something about some of the islands and doors moving. He said it made the Zone hard to map."


"Yeah," agreed Sam. "Anyway, I don't have orbits memorized, but I'm pretty sure we left Elysium in
the direction opposite the one it orbits in."

"So we were moving away from Danny all this time?"

"Basically, yeah. And I have no idea how this 'Tower' place moves. We should have asked, but I kind of forgot about the orbits."

"Same," said Tucker. "Don't forget that time and space can just get weird, here, too. Just like back home."

Jazz made a sour face. She'd been stuck in space-time distortions in Amity Park before. More than once. But that gave way to confusion. "You didn't mention any of this on the ride from the Far Frozen. It seems like the kind of thing to bring up."

"It didn't really matter, then," said Sam, "and we were kind of trying to avoid, you know. Elysium doesn't really move that much, anyway. It's orbit is small."

Jazz nodded, tapping her fingers. "We didn't ask how long this would take, did we?"

"Nope."

"They might not have exact numbers, either," said Tucker. "The Wastes aren't well-charted, even by GZ standards, and I got the impression that where we're going is a mess. Time travel isn't the only reason the Infinimap is valuable."

Jazz rubbed the bridge of her nose. "How do ghosts even get around?"

"Ghost homing sense," said Tucker.

"We really need a better name for that," said Sam.

"The question was rhetorical," said Jazz. "I know ghosts can have all sorts of extra senses. Mom and Dad aren't completely useless scientists. But we should be getting there soon, shouldn't we?"

"Hope so," said Sam.
Chapter 131

Chapter 131: Unfettered

The Mailman was getting close. He could tell. He could practically smell his quarry. He could certainly see the destruction and chaos that seemed to spread in the wake of said quarry. However, he knew there were still floors between him and... it. Them. Him. Her. He couldn't quite recall who the letter was for, and had thus far resisted the temptation to take it out of his pouch. His pouch protected the mail from tampering, would protect it even from the Tower, but it had its limits. If he kept taking it out and putting it away, he would erode the protection, and then the letter be altered, useless unless taken outside the Tower to be read.

The reason the Mailman was now hesitating was that he now faced the 'broken' floors. They would be... unpleasant, to say the least.

There was nothing for it. He squared his shoulders, and started up the stairs.

Daniel was being carried again, this time by one of the humans, the large, blocky Asian boy named Kwan. It was a temporary, practical matter. Vlad needed both hands to properly protect the group from whatever might be on the next floor, and, after what they all said had happened on the previous floor, combined with Daniel's personal feelings, neither he nor Vlad trusted the ghosts to hold him.

Kwan, for his part, kept repeating that Daniel was *so light*. Daniel was half-tempted to just say *of course*, he was light. He was half-ghost. He could have floated, if he had been healthy. He had tried to do so, surreptitiously, during their rest. His core hadn't cooperated.

But he was only half-tempted to do that. It was a *stupid* idea, anyway, one that would eventually get him killed, or worse, if he followed through with it. Daniel had nothing if not good sense, drilled into him by his father. Of course, this next floor might render all his good sense moot.

"Be careful with this next floor," said Vlad. "It is what's known as a broken floor."

"Like those ones a couple floors down?" asked a boy named Mikey.

"Yep," said Ellie, popping the 'p.'

"It isn't really broken," said the doctor ghost, who had introduced (reintroduced?) herself as Prunella. "We designed that one this way on purpose. Not all of the floors are studies of alternate timelines."

"So... What does this one do?" asked Paulina, twirling the end of her braid around her finger.

"The original concept was to make it swap the id and the superego." Prunella made a face. "Unfortunately, not even human psychology is that simple in practice."

Some of the humans frowned at that. It was a bit of an insult.
Prunella continued, "That idea was scrapped, and, after some other... difficulties, we settled on removing inhibitions."

Daniel sighed heavily. He and Vlad usually avoided this floor. He could only hope that common sense and self-preservation instinct didn't count as 'inhibitions.'

"What," said Dash, whom Daniel had pegged as a bit of an idiot, "like, all inhibitions?" He didn't quite leer.

Daniel sighed again.

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Danny very nearly clawed his way out of Kwan's arms. Kwan, for his part, promptly dropped him, while the rest of his classmates scattered and Mr Lancer hid under a beanbag (the furniture on this floor appeared to consist mostly of beanbags and cushions). A large number of the ghosts fled as well, returning to the lower floor, simply running off, or hiding.

Danny, meanwhile, screeched, "Vlad, I'm gonna hit you in the face!"

Vlad had embraced Ellie from behind, and was swinging her around while, exclaiming, "Danielle, Danielle, my beautiful child, how I love you!"

Danny finally managed to distract him by throwing a smaller pillow at him, but then Vlad just went and swooped him up into the hug, the 'hug,' it was really more of an assault, as well. Then Vlad started to try to go back downstairs, only to be blocked by the ghosts still coming up.

None of the hiding places were very good, neither those of the humans nor those of the ghosts. This was partially because of the beanbag furniture, partially because several of them started shrieking at each other, and a couple started flirting. Badly.

Then Dash and Dale got into a fist fight, and Valerie started throwing things at Cujo, Vlad and the other two half-ghosts. Not just pillows, but the larger, heavier, beanbags. She was yelling something about revenge, and evil ghost dogs.

Well, Cujo got upset, and when Cujo got upset, he got big. Unfortunately, the ceiling was a bit too low for Cujo to fit, so he got wedged, stuck, in between the floor of the ceiling. This added to the general chaos and noise, which spooked those persons not already spooked, causing them to spread out even further.

Danny was unhappy about this, and attempted to lunge after them. He did not like that they were spreading out, that they were getting farther away from him, that they would be harder to protect, he did not like that Cujo was stuck ad scared. He hissed, and struggled, though he knew that he wouldn't be able to actually get anywhere except by crawling if Vlad did release him.

Then some of the ghosts began to approach Danny, Ellie, and Vlad. They had a look in their eyes that Danny couldn't identify. It wasn't hostile, it wasn't angry. It was... hungry, maybe. No. That was wrong. Longing? Yearning? In any case, they were getting closer, and they started to argue angrily with Vlad. At Vlad? Vlad wasn't really responding. Danny didn't really understand what they were saying, but they were all talking over each other.
The wisps had already squished themselves close to Danny, Ellie, and, presumably, Vlad. A number of them had slipped into his clothing, or were half-phased into his flesh. He hadn't really minded that before, but now, on top of everything else, it was uncomfortable and offsetting.

Then one of them brushed against his spinal cord, directly against his spinal cord, and that was just too much. Too much input, too much sensation. It didn't necessarily hurt, there wasn't really any pain, it was just overwhelming.

On top of everything else.

He stopped fighting Vlad. Vlad was something of a known quantity, and he was scared. It was the same logic that had led him into a truce with Vlad in the first place, but now it was much more visceral. He was still upset with Vlad, of course, but, if he thought about it, the alterations made to Danny's life on the last floor weren't Vlad's fault. Okay, they sort of were, but Danny's desire to blame him for them was fading, and in the here and now, that was all that counted.

The other ghosts were coming closer. Some of them were reaching towards him. Danny realized with some horror that he was about to be the rope and prize in a tug of war. He went limp, some instinct telling him that doing so would prevent at least some of the damage he was about to receive.

"Ellie," he said, certain that he wouldn't be heard over the noise, but also needing to warn his twin about the danger, "we're going to be pulled."

She looked sideways at him, fear in her eyes.

Then she vanished. Then she reappeared. She had made herself invisible, strongly invisible, invisible even to other ghosts, and she had taken Danny with her. Danny didn't really see how that mattered, Vlad was holding on to them both. It wasn't like they could slip away.

"Wait for it," muttered Ellie.

Danny did, hoping that this would make sense sooner rather than later. He thought he had pretty good endurance for... stuff. But he was getting to the point, had reached the point, where he was really hoping that someone else would come and fix things. He was reaching the end of his willpower. He wanted to be safe. He wanted everyone else to be safe. He wanted to not have to worry. And he worried. Ancients, even if this level was only beanbags from wall-to-wall, it would be dangerous for humans, Cujo was stuck, and he could feel the wisps throwing off energy indiscriminately, just like they shouldn't.

Vlad went ghost.

"Phase through," hissed Ellie.

Phase through? How? He- Oh. Right. Humans could phase through ghosts here in the Ghost Zone, if the ghosts in question weren't alert, and the human had sufficient force of will.

The two younger half-ghosts phased through the arms of the elder. Ellie then threw Danny over her shoulder and ran. Well, flew. Danny, acting on impulse (that seemed to be the only way he could act, here), put his fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply.

Cujo let off a deep, rumbling, bark, then shrunk and ran off after Danny and Ellie.

The wisps followed.

Danny couldn't stop the frustrated noise rising in the back of his throat. That hadn't been a result he
wanted. He liked the wisps, but he wanted a break, he wanted space. He wanted them not to fly through his skin and spine unexpectedly and without permission. They needed boundaries.

This wasn't the time or place to establish those boundaries, however, and Danny doubted that he would be able to communicate the need to the little ghosts in anything like a succinct manner. Danny wasn't eloquent in their language, and was still prone to misunderstandings.

He was upset. He wanted to cry, so he did. Then Cujo jumped into his arms, licked his face, and he was distracted. Ellie began to grumble as she ran, serpentine, through the beanbags, and finally threw all three of them into a particularly large, fluffy example. It hardly even crunched as the three ghosts collided with it.

"You're heavy," complained Ellie.

"Sorry," said Danny. "We've got to go get everyone."

"No, we don't."

"Yes, we do."

"No, we don't."

They glared at each other. For both of them, the effect was ruined by the wisps cuddling up to their faces.

Finally, Ellie said, "You can't go get them, anyway, and I'm definitely not. It isn't as if there's a lot of trouble they can get into here. There's just beanbags."

"You're kidding, right?"

"... Okay, I'm sure they can get into trouble, but they'd get into trouble anyway, and they're too annoying for me to care very much."

"Ellie, they're defenseless."

"No they aren't. Look, they're phasing through stuff. They'll be fine."

Danny peered up over the fluffed end of the beanbag. Some of them were phasing through things. "How come they're only figuring out how to do that now?" he complained. Both he and Ellie were full of complaints, it seemed.

"I don't know. Lack of inhibitions?"

"At least Mikey and Ricky look excited," said Danny, disgruntled. It would have been nice if they could do that before. His frustration bubbled up. "They aren't all stupid, you know. Why do they act like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a mob mentality thing."

"Did you get that from Jazz?"

"Dunno."

"Ellie, we can't leave them here."

"It's not really a 'we' thing. You can't walk on your own. Now, shh. I think we can start going
Danny did not want to 'shh,' but he turned out not to have a choice about where he was going, because he wasn't going to fight Ellie just to get back to that mess, so he couldn't really want to go back that badly. Otherwise he would do it. Somehow. His body didn't hurt that much anymore. It was more of an ache.

That was a lie. That was a big lie.

He hurt a lot, actually.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Up and out," said Ellie.

"Wh-We can't do that! We can't- can't leave."

"Yes, we can. We can come back and get them, or whatever, once I have my boat."

"But-"

"No."

"I don't want to!" wailed Danny. "Ellie, please!" This probably would have attracted more attention if not for the cacophony happening elsewhere.

"No."

"Please, please, please, please."

"No, Danny. I'm not gonna let you go get hurt. They'll probably follow us, anyway. You know, they know what the plan was. They'll get bored, or wise up or whatever. But we can't stay here. This is a bad floor. You'll wind up shouting your secret, or something."

"My secret's already shot. You know that."

"Then you'll wind up trying to fight someone, or trying to herd those jerks, or something even worse that I haven't thought of, and you'll forget that you're hurt."

"Ellieeeeeeeeee."

"Why am I even trying to have this argument. It isn't like logic is going to stop anyone here."
Chapter 132: Reasonable

After they got halfway across the room, Danny, thankfully, stopped struggling. He hadn't been hurting her, had been avoiding that scrupulously, but he had been annoying and difficult. And whiny. Ellie couldn't forget whiny.

But she was beginning to understand why the architects of the Tower were so fascinated by the different facets of a person's behavior, by all the different ways you could look at the same soul. She would have thought that Danny would have fought differently. As in, he would have done more than just squirm. He certainly could have started to try to actually fight, actually do damage to Ellie. But he hadn't, and on this floor with no inhibitions, that either meant that his Obsession vetoed the idea, or that it had never occurred to him in the first place.

Which was interesting.

Not, like, hugely surprising, but interesting.

Danny went limp across her back. "I'm sad," he said.

"Okay?" asked Ellie. "Why?"

"I wanna go home. I don't like this." He sniffed loudly. "I'm tired."

"I mean, that's reasonable?" said Ellie, trying to sound supportive.

"I don't wanna be scared or hurt anymore. I wanna sleep, an' I wanna eat ice cream. Ice cream for everyone."

"Are you crying?" This was asked a bit incredulously. Ellie always saw Danny as a... sort of... strong, not-crying person. That was irrational, of course, she had seen him cry before, and on more than one occasion.

"Yeah. I don't want them to get hurt, Ellie, and I can't get them out of danger at all. We just keep- We keep getting into danger, more and more and more and I can't do it. I can't help." He hiccuped. "It doesn't really matter if I'm there or not, does it? Because I can't do anything."

Heck. Ellie didn't know what to say to that. "H-Hey, Danny, it's going to be okay. You know that, right? They're going to be fine. And it's okay to need help. And like, there are tons of things you can do, just not right now. Because you're more than just, you know, physical. But this is a physical sorta situation." Wow, that was a bunch of stuff. Verbal diarrhea. The lack of inhibitions seemed to spread to speech, too.

"I know. It doesn't change how I feel," he said, miserably. "I'm so tired."

"We can rest once we get to the next floor."
Valerie was livid. There that absolute- That massive- That- That lying two-faced jerk half-ghost monster was- having used her, he was- and he was just- He was there, and that was more than Valerie could stand at the moment. He had used her. He had manipulated her. He had tried to get her to kill Danielle. Or, well. Not kill her, but deliver her to be killed, which was just as bad.

If not worse.

And now, and now, he had the nerve to stand (float?) there shouting about 'his children?' Who was he kidding? Da- Fenton and Ellie had hightailed it out of there ages (minutes) ago.

God, she was furious. She was furious, and she wasn't going to put up with it anymore. She'd dealt with him for hours. She'd let him lead her and everyone else around, but she just wasn't going to deal with it anymore.

(But she was furious with Da- with Fenton, too, of course, but he wasn't around.)

(And she wasn't sure if what she had learned on the other floors was even true.)

(It couldn't be, true.)

(Phantom?)

Unfortunately for her anger, throwing beanbags wasn't proving to be very effective. Not only were the beanbags fairly light, the floaty jerkface kept dodging. She hated him so much. What she wouldn't give to get her suit working again... What she wouldn't give for just one of her guns...

She ran out of beanbags. Well, she didn't really run out. There were plenty of other beanbags around, they were just out of her immediate reach, and this floor was total crap, she had enough trouble with impulse control and overreacting.

Speaking of impulse control...

She raised a finger to point at the floating monster. "I'm going to hur-" A blast of magenta erupted from her finger and, predictably, missed Plasmius by a meter. The ghost didn't even notice. He was looking in the wrong direction.

Valerie froze, staring.

"What the f-?"

"We have superpowers!" shouted Mikey.

"Superpowers!" his friends shouted back.
Kwan lifted Star up onto his shoulders.

"I'm taller than all of you now!" said Star, happily. "I can touch the ceiling." She paused for a moment. "We're smarter than all of you people, too!"

"That's right!" said Kwan. "Dash wouldn't be able to scrape Cs without me, and people think I'm the dumb one!"

"Screw them!" yelled Star. "Valerie's my friend!"

Paulina wasn't listening. She had passed out on a beanbag.

"Argh!" said Dale.

"Oof!" said Dash.

They kept fighting.

"Hey," said Sarah.

"Hey," said Mia.

"I think we should kiss."

"Yeah, that sounds nice."

Elliot was trying to talk to Hannah. Hannah was having none of it, and was wondering if Elliot was secretly an alien from Planet Annoyotron.

She wasn't being quiet about her wondering, either. It was easily the ninth theory she'd had about Elliot. Today.
He just made it so easy.

Rebecca and Tiffanie were frantically looking for the stairs. They just wanted to go home and get out of this nightmare. Of course, they weren't looking together. They had run off in opposite directions.

Ashley was hiding with Mr Lancer. Mr Lancer was just ranting about how he was a teacher, and not a green beret, with lots of book titles mixed in. That is to say, he wasn't helping her nerves any. She was considering biting him. She'd been a biter when she'd been in kindergarten. She didn't remember much about kindergarten, but biting always shut teachers up. At least for a little while.

"What will the next floor do?" asked Danny, resignation clear in his voice. The wisps brushed heavily through his hair and skin. He hadn't figured out how to talk to them about personal space.

"Nothing to us," said Ellie, as she flew up the stairs. "We don't have jobs."

"Huh?"

"It changes what your job is."

Danny frowned into Ellie's back. "We sort of have jobs, though. Roles we play. Things we do."

"We don't get paid for them," Ellie pointed out. "What we do, well, what you do, is more like, you know, a hobby."

"Stupid risky hobby."

"Some people skydive," offered Ellie. She fumbled at the door's handle, trying to get a grip on it while maintaining her hold on Danny. "That's dangerous, when you can't fly. I heard about some skiers dying, too. Or was it snowboarders?"

"Why do people do dangerous things, anyway?" said Danny. "It would be easier if people were sensible." He sighed, deeply. Cujo yipped in concern.

"Traveling can be dangerous, too," said Ellie. "You know I get jumped a lot."

"Yeah," said Danny. "Probably more often than you tell me, too."

"It makes me happy. Traveling. I guess skydiving makes some people happy. It's probably the
closest they can get to flying on their own."

"I know," said Danny. "I get it."

"So why did you say you didn't?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yes you did."

"No, I said it would be easier if people made sense. That's different."

"Not really."

"I'm just complaining, anyway," said Danny. "I just wanted to complain. I think I'm allowed to do that. Not all the time, because that would be annoying, but, I mean, once in a while."

Ellie finally got a good hold on the handle, and depressed the lever. She had to step back, down onto the previous step, because the door swung in, towards the stairs.

"Gosh, I hate this place," said Ellie, drawing her legs up to avoid hitting Cujo.

"Me too," said Danny. He couldn't actually see what she was referring to from his perspective, but he knew Ellie, and assumed that she had a good reason. Besides, he was beginning to hate the Tower just based on his own experiences.

"The doors are so stupid," continued Ellie.

"In my defense," said Prunella, reclined in a padded chair in front of the door, "I didn't have any input in their design."
Chapter 133: Overlap

Ellie set Danny down on a nearby couch, then turned to glare at Prunella. "How did you get here before us?"

Prunella steepled her hands. "I helped build this place. I know how to get from floor to floor."

"I don't suppose you're still a doctor?" asked Danny.

"A doctor?" repeated Prunella, surprised. "I was never-" She closed her eyes. "Right. Even I forget, sometimes, even after so long here. No, in this version of reality, I am a historian." She paused. "I did study medicine, however. I always regretted not continuing down that path. What troubles you? Something more than the ankle?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't think that you can fix it. You couldn't before," said Danny, leaning back. "I guess we're just going to wait until our people start showing up?" he asked Ellie.

Ellie turned from Prunella, and shrugged. "Yeah," she said. "That's the plan." She flew over to the couch, and perched on the back. "I've always wondered how these floors have so much furniture. Like, where does it come from? Who brings it?"

"Who brings things to lairs?" asked Prunella, eyebrows raised. "Some of the things we brought, others came later. It evolves that people like to lie on couches while they contemplate the inner workings of their psyche."

"Is that what people do here?" asked Danny. "Really?"

Prunella rolled her eyes. "That and party. I miss the days before the science wars. The golden age of Theory."

Danny blinked. "Hey, are there doors in here?" Prunella would know the Tower better than almost everyone else. If she knew about a doorway to somewhere... easier, somewhere he or Ellie knew better, then they could go, get away from the bounty hunters that were certainly surrounding Tower.

"Excuse me?"

"Like, door doors. Doors that go places. Other places? Doors that are portals. Shortcuts. To other, um, communities."

"In the Tower? No. That wasn't possible. It would have interfered with the mechanism that makes all this," she gestured broadly at their surroundings, "possible. We have safeguards that keep portals from forming in here."

"Oh," said Danny. "It was just a thought."

"I have a thought," said Ellie.

"Yeah?"

"How do you feel about-"
The door opened, and Danny tensed, ready to bolt as best he could. It was the Unstoppable Mailman.

The man, still dressed in his normal outfit, shuddered. "I hate this floor," he announced. "I can feel it reaching under my skin, trying to change me." He drew his teeth back, revealing sharp white teeth. "As if I would let it. As if I could be anything but a mailman." There was pride in his voice. "Now, I have letter for you, Mr Phantom." He held a crisp white rectangle out to Danny.

"Really?" asked Danny, eyes wide and hopeful. He took the envelope from the Mailman carefully, with two hands. There were a limited number of people who would be sending him mail at this time, and a smaller number who would do so via the Unstoppable Mailman. "From who?"

The Mailman adjusted his turban. "I was commissioned by Lady Pandora," he said. "If you want to know who wrote the letter, however, I suggest you read it."

Danny nodded, and found the edge of the envelope. Ellie leaned close over his shoulder as he pulled it open.

Danny sighed with relief. "It's from Sam and Tucker and Jazz. They want to know where we are and if we need help. Well. Not you or Vlad. They don't know you're with us."

"That's fair," said Ellie.

"There's a plan to come get us," said Danny. "But they don't know where we are, or what circumstances we're in. Um," he looked up at the Unstoppable Mailman. "Did Pandora pay for a return letter?"

"She did," said the Mailman.

"Okay," said Danny. "Does anyone have some paper and something to write with?"

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Danny wrote everything he thought was relevant on one side of the page, and then Ellie started to write what she knew on the other.

"Hey," said Danny. "What was it you were going to ask me before?" He leaned back onto the couch, injured leg stuck out awkwardly.

Ellie paused, glancing up at the Unstoppable Mailman.

The Mailman rolled his eyes. "I guarantee you, I am completely discrete. The very soul of discretion, as it were." He paused. "In other words, I won't be telling anyone about anything you say, unless you want me to. More specifically, unless you pay me to. That's my job, after all."


Danny nudged her elbow, bringing her attention back to the question at hand.

"Oh my gosh, don't use the puppy eyes. You're worse than Cujo."

Danny looked at Cujo, who was sitting on the couch next to him. The little dog wagged his tail
enthusiastically. He petted him. 

"Cujo is a good dog," he said before returning his gaze to Ellie. "What did you want to ask?"

Ellie shifted awkwardly, glanced at the other two ghosts again, and then returned her attention to Danny. "Do you remember when I was unstable? How being close to you helped stabilize me? Kind of gave me a pattern to go on. I was thinking, maybe I could do that for you?"

Danny leaned into her. He could hear the hum of her core, her ectosignature, a supernatural melody. "I'm already close to you."

"I mean, like, closer." She cleared her throat. "Like, if I overshadowed you. Then our cores would be right next to each other, and you could copy off of mine."

Danny regarded Ellie with sleepy alarm. "Half-ghosts are hard to overshadow. You could get stuck."

"I've tried to overshadow you before, and it was fine," said Ellie, now more confident.

"What do you think, Prunella?"

"It would certainly be interesting, and the theory is sound, based on my experiences. I do not have the extensive background that my other versions might, however, and I would have limited experience with that particular kind of healing regardless. Ghosts cannot overshadow one another, and liminal spirits are rare, both now and historically."

Danny didn't know if that was a comforting opinion or not. He could remember when Vlad had made Ellie overshadow him, though, back when she still went by Dani. He could remember the struggle. The fear. The love. The sense of being invaded by something just slightly off. Something so close to him, but so different. Could remember being attacked by someone he wanted to protect. He could remember all the other times he had been overshadowed, and all the side effects. He could remember Poindexter, and his lair, and being trapped in a body that wasn't his.

But... He was so tired. It would be so nice to just let someone else deal with everything, and hide, and sleep, within his own mind.

"At the least," said Ellie, "I could fix your ankle."

Danny's eyes went to the door. No one else had come up yet. "Are you guys sure they'll come?"

"Well. Probably?" said Ellie, correctly divining Danny's meaning.

"Based on my prior experiences of that floor," said Prunella, "your companions will eventually end up here, or two floors down. Considering the chaos that will be taking place near the entrance, they will most likely come here."

"They won't try to just, I don't know, go out? Leave the Tower?"

"There are few external doors on that level. They wouldn't want to leave, in any case. They can't fly. Can they?"

"No," said Danny. "Not unless they've learned in the last thirty minutes."

"Then they will not leave the Tower."

"So, what do you think?" said Ellie. "Yes, no, pistachio?"
Danny shifted so that he could look Ellie in the eye. "You promise that you'll try to make sure they're all safe?"

"I'll try," said Ellie, stressing the word.

"Okay," said Danny, trying not to brace himself. "Go ahead, then."

Vlad was frantic.

He had to get Daniel and Danielle. He had to get them, and go back. True, there was no guarantee that they would experience the same shift as last time, but he didn't care. Surely it would be better than this loveless existence.

If only he could find them. They were so good at hiding, and so angry at him. For good reason, he supposed, but they'd understand once they were back below. It would be so much better. As half-ghosts, they would be able to live there indefinitely, feeding off the ambient ectoplasm. If they needed human food, they could trade for it. That floor was popular. Vlad suspected that the only reason it wasn't full was that the news of the bounty hunters and fights had spread.

How ironic, that he was doing so much planning while he was running amok. He was stripped of self-control. He flew back and forth randomly. He couldn't even force himself into a regular search grid. He was just searching behind every beanbag large enough to hide a person. Indiscriminate, illogical, disordered.

Miss Grey had been quite annoying, but she was, like the rest of Daniel's insufferable classmates, ultimately insignificant. She was also quite far away at this point, and she had stopped chasing him for some reason.

There was other chaos happening near the first door. The ghosts who had stayed were giving in to their Obsessions. It was a good thing they were all relatively benign and well-managed ones, Vlad supposed. He didn't really care about the humans' safety, but he knew that (his) the children would be upset. So it was good. Less upset for the children would be better. They would come more easily.

Then Vlad could start to make things up to both of them. He could make things better, be a loving, careful father, start to heal the wounds caused by his stupidity.

But he couldn't find them.

It was so easy to slip into Danny's body that at first Ellie doubted she had even done it. It fit her like a glove. A nice glove, not one of those weird plastic foodservice ones. Usually, overshadowing someone felt like putting on a set of poorly fitting clothes.

But then Ellie could feel Danny guiding her, quiet, but there, showing her where the right places to
be were. She fit neatly between the layers of his existence, overlaying his ectoplasmic brain with her own, his core humming a welcome against hers. Gosh, his core was so messed up that it made her core hurt in sympathy.

… Which was just about the opposite of what they were hoping for, really. She pushed her mind in other directions.

Danny's ankle wasn't a pretty sight or feeling, either. It was a good thing that, even as well as she fit into Danny's body, she didn't have full sensation. She could probably go and get it, knit herself in, thread herself through, reach out to the surface of Danny's skin, inhabit him fully and completely, but... that would be a mistake. She didn't want to feel the full extent of Danny's pain. She could do what she was here to do without that.

She breathed in, breathed out. Danny's lungs felt different than hers. His mouth tasted salty and a bit sour, probably because they hadn't had any access to toothpaste. Or anything hygiene-related. Yeah. Ellie knew that she wasn't at her most clean, either. It was just that this was... someone else's un-clean-ness. Even though she'd been cuddling with Danny on-and-off for the past several hours, this was grosser. It just was. Somehow.

She was a half-ghost-half-human-hybrid. She scoffed at so-called 'logic.'

While she thought, and got used to Danny's body, Danny began to sink into a kind of sleepy semi-consciousness. His core was still very active, but also... Not. Ellie didn't know how describe it. If she focused, though, she could almost feel him thinking. Or... Not thinking? Doing whatever it was cores did below the conscious level.

"So," said Prunella, "what does it feel like?"

"And," said the Mailman, "are you going to finish that letter anytime soon?"
Mr Lancer dragged Mia, Hannah, and Sarah in through the door, sweating at the almost supernatural feat. Mia, the smallest, was flung over his shoulder, Hannah was caught in the crook of his arm, and he held onto the back of Sarah's shirt, keeping her from bolting. Ashley trailed after him, alternating between holding onto the back of his shirt and trying to bite him.

All at once, as he crossed the threshold onto the next floor, Mr Lancer's strength left him. He collapsed under the weight of four teenagers. A groan escaped his lips.

"Oh, hey," came Daniel's voice. "It's Danny's teacher. Sorry, I lost your name."

"What?" said Mr Lancer, as Mia, Sarah, Hannah, and Ashley, suddenly much quieter, scrambled off of him. He looked up. Daniel was sitting on a nearby couch. "Daniel?"

"Not exactly," said 'Daniel.' "He needed a break. I'm Ellie. Danielle."

"What?" repeated Mr Lancer.

"I'm overshadowing him," explained the... girl? Girl.

"I'm not paid enough for this," he said, moaning into the ground.

"Neither am I, yet here we are," said Ellie. *Twelfth Night*, Daniel used that same tone, sometimes. Sarcasm and mischief.

No, he was not paid enough for this.

Ellie hummed in Danny's voice. As expected, it did sound a lot different than hers, but it also sounded different than it normally did. It was interesting.

She surveyed the room. Everyone was staying far away from one another, especially the two girls who had been flirting earlier. Ellie could taste the embarrassment. That was an interesting wrinkle. Usually, overshadowing someone had the side effect of cutting off one's ability to absorb emotions from external sources. It must be because Danny had his own mechanism for absorbing emotional energy.

Or maybe it was because Danny as partially made out of ectoplasm. Who knew? Ghost stuff could be ultra weird.

Danny's teacher, Mr Lancer, kept looking at the door back to the previous floor.

"It's been a while," he said.
"Yep!" said Ellie, cheerfully.

She was enjoying the break, though she was becoming just a tiny bit concerned. She still believed that they would be fine, but she had thought that most of them would make their way up here. Rather than just five.

None of Danny's classmates were what she'd call geniuses (not counting Sam and Tucker), but they weren't idiots. This floor was a logical rendezvous point. It was an escape from the chaos, and from the lack of inhibition, the lack of control, that floor engendered, and it was safe. Safer than leaving the Tower, or trying to stay.

"Should we... go get them?" asked Mr Lancer.

"That would be unwise," said Prunella, "and likely impossible."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to go?" asked Prunella. "If not, then you'll likely turn right around and come back here. You should not worry so much about how long it's taking them to come. Logic will not be the first thing on their minds, only their desires in the moment."

"Okay," said Ashley, "but we have to eat soon, you know? I think I've lost ten pounds."

Ellie examined her. "I don't think so," she said. "But it has been a while since you've eaten, hasn't it?" Ellie pushed off the couch, compensating for Danny's slightly different frame. "We can go look while, um, Mr Lancer waits." She balanced with a touch of flight, keeping Danny's injured leg well clear of the floor.

"I can do that, love," said Prunella, standing. "You should rest."

Ellie made a face. Rather, she made Danny's face make a face. Right. Well, she had decided to do this, so she couldn't complain. She sat back down on the couch.

"That's probably a good idea," she said.

Prunella nodded. "You ought to be safe here, even without supervision. If any of those awful hooligans came here, their profession would change, and they would no longer be after you." She looked around at Danny's classmates. "Do you children want to come with me?"

"Yes," they all said at once. They stared at each other in horror. "No," they said.

"Gosh, and I thought Danny was joking about how awkward high school is."

They turned their frustrated glares on Ellie.

Ellie waved a hand. "You should all go. More eyes, better chance of finding something, right?"

"I'll go," said Mr Lancer, getting stiffly to his feet.

"No," said Prunella, "you should stay with those two," she nodded at Ellie (and Danny). "I feel that they should have some supervision, and seeing you might help any of your students who come up."

"Students?" said Mr Lancer, shaking his head. "I don't-" He blinked, then turned to Ellie. "Why did you call me Daniel's teacher?"

"Because you are?" said Ellie.
Mr Lancer opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then he said, "No. I'm not. I'm an EA."

"A what?"

"An educational assistant. I work with students in the SpEd program."

There was a lull in the conversation.

"What does this floor do, anyway?" asked Hannah.

"What's sped?" asked Ellie.

The Digressed Tower was now visible in the distance, shorter than a fingernail held at arm's length at this distance, and frequently obscured by floating debris, it was still quite recognizable. At least, it was recognizable to Pandora.

Pandora was not especially pleased with the periodic proximity of Missing Theory to Elysium. Once, when it had just been Theory, she had loved it. The Ancient Greece of Earth had been the home of many innovators and philosophers, after all. The presence of Theory had complemented that aspect of Elysium. Back then, the advance of science and technology had long been a driving force behind hopes for the future, something that Pandora, as the Ancient Master of Hope, encouraged.

But then had come those awful wars in the human world, driven in part by science, *bad* science, and Theory had disintegrated. The turmoil in the Infinite Realms had fed into that of the Earth, and vice versa, the connection between the two worlds causing a feedback loop that went on, escalating and escalating, until, finally, the source of the problem was eliminated. But by then, it was too late. Theory had devolved, most reputable scientists migrated to other communities, like Method. Those who didn't were either bound to the area by hard-to-move lairs or experiments, were insane, or were the very people who had caused the issue in the first place.

It was only recently that the Digressed Tower, one of the most ambitious philosophical projects ever undertaken, had become well-traveled again- And that was for recreation, not the original purpose.

Now they were sailing towards it.

Pandora had been there many times before, both before and after Theory's collapse, but this was the first time she had been here with an entourage like this. This was the first time she had come with humans in tow.

She was still unsure if it had been a good idea to bring them. Considering the intelligence that Sam had acquired with her pictures, and whatever had occurred to bring Daniel to the Tower, they were likely sailing into a war zone. Chaos, even by the standards of Missing Theory.

But what was she to do? The children needed their hope, and they most likely would have found a way, a *dangerous* way, to follow if she had tried to leave them behind.

"We will arrive in just a few hours, Lady Pandora," murmured the captain.

Pandora nodded, one hand tightening around a spear. "Make sure that everyone knows," she said,
Danny's leg was, in many ways, quite similar to Ellie's. At least, that was the case when Danny's leg wasn't broken, sprained, and otherwise messed up. Ellie's was a little more slender, her bones a little lighter, but otherwise, it was the same. That meant that Ellie's core had a pretty good idea of what Danny's leg should look like. That had been Ellie's intention.

Feeling another person's bones, muscles, and tendons knit themselves back together was a bit weird, though. It was also proceeding more slowly than it would if it was Ellie's own leg, even though she was focusing all her energy on it, and Danny's core was working on it as well.

Ellie sighed, and shifted Danny into a more comfortable position. Cujo yipped, and scrambled to snuggle up by her side.

She had thought this would be... faster... somehow.

Mr Lancer cleared his throat. "So..." he said.

"You're going to try small-talk?"

"There isn't much else to do, is there?"

"Mhm," said Ellie. "You could go to sleep. That's what Danny's doing."

"Is he?"

"Yep. That's how it usually works in overshadowing, although I have more, uh, contact with Danny than usually happens with overshadowing. I guess this is edging into possession. Just, you know, technically. I think. I'm not really good at the distinctions, and maybe it would be different since he's letting me do it? Uhh. Danny was paying more attention than I was when we had this explained to us."

"Who explained it to you?"

"Clockwork. He's sort of like our guardian, when it comes to ghost stuff."

"I think Daniel mentioned him."

"Probably."

Ellie looked down and flexed Danny's ankle. It still hurt, but it was getting mobility back.

"Do you stay with Clockwork, then?" asked Mr Lancer.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I stay with Pandora, or the Far Frozen, or, you know, other people. If I stay with anyone at all. I like to travel."

"Oh? Where to?"

"Anywhere, everywhere. I liked Japan."
"I've been to Japan, just the once."

"Yeah, where?"

"Tokyo. Danielle, have you ever had, er, any formal, ah, education. On Earth, that is."

"Does it matter?"

"I-" Mr Lancer faltered. "I'm honestly not sure. I suppose you plan to live here, in this world, and there isn't an easy way to get you into a school long-term, so..."

"Eh. It doesn't really matter to me. I can get just as good an education here as anywhere else. Clockwork gives us a lot of hands-on history, I drop in on Ghostwriter and the Library of Tongues for books, I know enough math to get by. I do what I want."

"Ghostwriter?"

"Yeah. I think you'd like him, actually."
Hey, there! You guys will be completely caught up tomorrow! After that, Mortified will start updating on this website at the same pace as on FFN. For reference, that is currently once a week on Fridays, though that is subject to change as I become more and less busy. Feel free to ask questions, especially if I haven't been clear. :)

Chapter 135: Stick Like Glue

Ellie flexed Danny's foot again. It felt a lot better, now. Then again, Ellie was only feeling a fraction of what Danny would feel if he was conscious.

The girls and Prunella had come back, the girls in a bad mood. They hadn't found much food on this floor. Ellie could understand that. She'd gone hungry before, while traveling on Earth.

The others hadn't come up from the other floor. It was getting to the point where Ellie was becoming anxious, and that, in turn, was affecting Danny. Ellie sighed.

"Okay," she announced. "I think we've waited long enough. Time for me to be me, and Danny to be Danny."

Prunella raised her eyebrows. "You'll turn around and come back as soon as you step down there."

"Nah, I think my Obsession will override that," said Ellie. She blinked as Danny stirred under her consciousness. "Okay." She stretched, popping Danny's shoulder blades. "Here we go." She began to ease herself out of Danny's body, only to be snapped back in. She blinked Danny's eyes. "Oops."

"Are you stuck like your brother supposedly was?" asked Hannah.

"No," said Ellie, defensive. "I'm not stuck."

She closed her- Danny's- eyes, and directed her attention inward. What was wrong? Why was she stuck? Because, yeah, she was stuck. Crap. This hadn't happened before.

Strand... silver... There was a series of images. Strings, wrapped around each other, tangled roots.

Oh. Hey, Danny. What's up?

Silver cord.

What?

Silver cord. Strands. Strand communication. Uh.

How do you even make that noise in your head?

Give me a break. Basically, ghostly nerves. Had a chance to see mine, but Mom and Dad talk about
them sometimes.

Okay. So?

So, I think, he showed Ellie a picture of tangled strings.

You think our wires are getting crossed?

Maybe? Maybe that's why overshadowing me is weird. Normal humans don't have silver cord, or anything like that. Danny settled into a state of confusion.

Okay. Yeah. So. Fixing that?

I don't know. Just. Focus. I guess.

How've you solved this before? I know that people have tried to overshadow you before.

Yeah, but it's always different. Like, with Poindexter I got him to overshadow me again.

Uuhh.

See? You made the sound.

No, mine is a different sound.

Whatever. Just try to focus. Like, on our arm. Arms? Something small, and we'll figure out how to untangle it. It's just body manipulation. Small scale.

Right.

Following Danny's advice, she very slowly peeled her left hand out of Danny's. It stung, pins and needles, like it had fallen asleep and was just waking up. It also itched. She continued the process, pulling out of Danny's body bit by bit. Finally, she flopped out, just her lower legs staying stuck.

Danny gasped.

"Careful," he said, voice strained.

"I'm trying. Are you trying?"

"I'm trying. You know I'm trying."

It took another couple of minutes to disentangle their feet. By the end of it, they were both breathing heavily.

"Wow," said Hannah. "Well, that was horrifying."

"Be nice," said Mia.

"C'mon, you didn't see it. It was horrifying."

"I'm nearsighted, not blind," protested Mia.

Ellie floated up, and stretched, getting used to her body again. "Okay, I'm going down to see if I can get everyone up here."

Danny tested his ankle slightly. His face brightened. "Ah. Wow, I didn't expect that to work so
well." He stood up, and bounced a little.

"If you screw that up again, I'll have to kill you."

"I'll try not to," said Danny. "I'm coming with you."

Ellie floated threateningly overhead. "No, you're not."

Danny smiled up at her. "Yes, I am."

"No."

"You can't stop me."

Ellie groaned. "You're an idiot."

Danny made heavy use of the banister, and the twist of mind that could lessen the force of 'gravity,' as he made his way back down the stairs. It would be a lie to say that his ankle didn't still hurt, but he felt much better. It was so liberating to be able to walk again. He was humming, both normally, with his lips and vocal cords, and with his core.

He was also happy, probably happier than he should be, to be useful again. He was still stressed about his people being in danger, but that had been the case for a while, and now he could do something about it. So he was, by comparison, happy.

So. Humming.

It also tuned out the faint sounds of shouts, ectoblasts, and various weird sounds, that even Danny couldn't interpret. Beanbags crashing into things, maybe?

Despite Ellie's initial objections, the two of them had decided to split up, as long as Cujo stayed with Danny. Danny would try and get people who were just confused and scared to move on, Ellie would try to take care of the more combative. Like Dash and Dale, who Danny suspected would still be punching each other, and Valerie.

(Mr Lancer had tried to come with them, but the floor's effect had defeated him.)

Yeah. Danny was glad that he would be allowed to avoid that. He was pretty sure that Valerie had begun to suspect the truth, and if she was, she'd probably attack him on impulse. But since Ellie was faster than he was, and flying, she'd get to them first.

Or so he thought.

He dodged a fist that came at him as soon as he stepped off the stairs and past the wall that enclosed them. He spun on his good foot, and came face-to-face with an ugly purple hamburger monster. Oh, no, wait, it was just Dash. Danny grimaced in sympathy, and hit him in the jaw. Dash fell straight backwards. Danny winced as he hit the floor, and shook out his hands.

He quickly checked Dash over, making sure he wasn't too hurt. No internal bleeding, no broken bones, no bleeding cuts, no giant dent in the back of his head... No, it looked like all of Dash's
injuries were pretty superficial, except for the possibly broken nose. Honestly, everything was too swollen for him to really tell. He rolled Dash onto his side. Recovery position.

Well. This would be hard to explain. Or maybe not. Dash was pretty beat up already... He could play it off like Dash had passed out from his wounds.

Ugh. Who was he trying to kid, here? His secret was as good as blown. He still couldn't just let go of it. His secret identity had been a big part of his identity for years.

So. Should he just sit here with Dash, or should he leave Dash, and look for other people? Unfortunately, he couldn't get Dash up the stairs. Danny might be operating at above normal human levels again, but only slightly. No matter what he said to Ellie, he was far from being even close to his normal.

He rubbed his eyes, and sat down on the bottom step. He couldn't leave Dash here, defenseless. He had much less faith in the safety of this place than Ellie. He'd wait until Dash woke up, and get him to go up the stairs.

In the meantime, he scanned the surrounding area, out to where his line of sight was obscured by large beanbags. Maybe someone would happen by, and he could direct them up the stairs. That would be nice. It would be good if it was someone like Mikey, or Star. They'd be easier to deal with. It occurred to him suddenly that, seeing as the last time he'd seen Dash he'd been fighting Dale, Dale might be lying unconscious somewhere, beat up far more than Dash was.

Danny made a small noise in the back of his throat. If only he could be in two places at once. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option at the moment. Maybe he'd just... walk around a bit. He'd stay in sight of Dash, keep an eye on him, and keep the other eye out for Dale, or anyone else that might be around.

He got up gingerly, keeping the weight off of his still-healing ankle. He started walking in a wide arc, Cujo at his heel. One eye on Dash and the stairs, one eye on the greater part of the room. He kept an ear out, too. Some of the beanbags were quite large, and provided numerous blind spots from which a person could jump out at him.

He peered around one, and saw a flash of fuchsia light. There was Valerie, crouched in the shadow of a beanbag, dripping with bright ectoplasm. What was Ellie doing? She was supposed to find Valerie, not him.

His brain caught up with him. Her hands were dripping with ectoplasm, surrounded by a neon glow. Okay. How was he going to deal with this? Could he deal with this? Should he just turn around and go back, let Ellie find Valerie, and take care of her? Would that be better, more helpful, for Valerie? Safer for both of them?

He took a careful step back, hesitated, and made up his mind. "Valerie?"

Her head turned so fast that Danny could hear her vertebrae crack. He was shocked she didn't break her own neck.

"You," she breathed. Her eyes sparked red-violet.

"Um, Valerie? Are you-"

"You lied to me!" She threw the ectoplasm in her hands at Danny, but, although he flinched, it came nowhere near hitting him.
He put his hands up in a placating gesture. "Val, please, don't."

"You and that dog!" She had built up enough ectoplasm for another bolt, and threw it in Cujo's direction. Danny yanked Cujo out of the way, and overbalanced as he tried to keep weight off his bad foot, falling. "You ruined my life!"

"Val, it was an accident, Cujo didn't know any better!" He held tightly onto the little puppy tightly as he whimpered and barked. "He's a puppy."

"He's your dog," ground out Valerie, "he's your dog, and he's always been your dog, Phantom." Ectoplasm was pooling in her hands again, which were held as fists at her sides. Her stance was wide, steady, her shoulders hunched.

Oh. This wasn't good. "I'm not possessed anymore," he said, cautious.

"I know," said Valerie. "I know. You- You're like Danielle. No. You're like Vlad. You're a manipulative slime, and you've both been laughing at me all this time. You're monsters."

"I'm not- I mean," Danny began to squirm away, "I am a half-ghost, but I'm not laughing at you. I never laughed at you. I just- I was- I'm scared. You saw the Guys in White. You know what my parents are like. You know- And you were working for Vlad, and I-"

"You dated me. You dated me. And you must have known. You aren't an idiot. You always- You always called me Val, and you said- You."

The energy pooling in her hands flared, and she stumbled backwards, crying out.

"Shoot," said Danny, putting Cujo to one side and getting slowly to his feet. "Valerie? Are you okay? You, um. Oh, jeez, your hands."

Valerie was crying. "What even is this? What's happening to me?"

"It's, uh, it's liminality," said Danny, getting closer to Valerie, and then sitting down. "Your body is learning how to process the ectoplasm, and stuff. Like I said before, remember? It's just, here, let me see your hands." He extended his hands to her, but didn't touch.

"What?" said Valerie, her hands curled defensively to her chest.

"I think I can help," said Danny. "You, um, let the ectoplasm build up too much, and you don't have the control structures that ghosts do, because, well, you're not a ghost. It happened to me a few times?" he offered, finally.

Valerie's mouth pressed into a flat line. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, keeping her hands close to her chest.

"You scared me, Valerie."

"Then why did you date me?"

"I guess I thought I could change your mind, a little," said Danny, "and I thought what you were doing was really cool. I had, you know, ghost powers, but you just had the suit and you were still managing, even with your job at the Nasty Burger. I barely manage, and, like, I have friends who help me. Please. I think I can help you with your hands. They must hurt." Danny licked his lips as Valerie stared at his outstretched hands.
"Fine," said Valerie, thrusting out her hands.

Danny took them carefully, turning them over so that he could see the palms. They were burnt in the stripy pattern that, as far as Danny knew, was unique to hot, energized ectoplasm. She had inherited her type of ectoplasm from the suit, it seemed, which had been patterned after Vlad's. Vlad had a hot core, therefore Valerie's ectoplasm tended to be hot.

"A lot of the times," said Danny, "ectoplasm burns aren't real burns. Sometimes, it winds up that it's more like a fast-acting sunburn, which isn't really a burn, you know. Did you know?" He was babbling. He wanted Valerie's mind far, far away from the idea of 'beat up Danny.' He slowly lowered the temperature of his hands, cooling Valerie's, and let some ectoplasm seep into them as well. Hopefully, a touch of friendly ectoplasm would help her heal.

"A sunburn isn't a burn," Valerie's voice was flat with incredulity. It was probably partially carryover from the generally unbelievable situation she found herself in.

"No, it's actually your skin cells killing themselves because of radiation damage to your DNA. But, like, ectoplasm can fix that, too. I put ice on these, for myself, but I heard that isn't good for normal people. It causes frostbite, or something."

"I'm not normal," said Valerie, voice breaking.

"Okay, bad adjective. You're still human. You have human temperature tolerance levels. I don't." He licked his lips. "I can't really get rid of the burns. I can't share my, um, fast healing. So." He pulled back. "How does that feel?"

Valerie took her hands back. "Cold," she said.

"Yeah, sorry. So, uh, I kinda left Dash back there, and he's... sort of unconscious."

"Why?" asked Valerie, harshly.

Danny debated whether or not he should tell Valerie what had really happened. His first impulse was to lie, but lies required creativity, which he was out of, so he just made meaningless mouth sounds for a couple seconds.

"He jumped me and I hit him," he admitted finally. "I can hit really hard."

Valerie groaned. "Of course you can."

"Maybe you can take him upstairs?" Danny suggested. "The next floor won't affect- Oh. It might affect you, but it changes what job you have, so it's not as bad as here." He offered up a shaky smile. "Right?"


"At this point, just try to stay calm," Danny said. "Don't get upset, and if you do feel the ectoplasm building up, try to focus on the image of it being pulled back, under your skin, into your chest. Um. I know you won't like to hear this, and I don't like saying this, but Vlad might be able to help you more. Your ectoplasm is more like his than mine."

"Great," said Valerie, but she stood. "Where is he, and where are the stairs?"

Danny beamed. "I'll show you."
136: Funhouse

Dash was in shock. Real, serious, shock. He couldn't believe what had happened. He couldn't believe that Fenton, of all people, had knocked him out cold with one punch. Sure, over the past several days, he'd come to realize that Fenton was a good deal tougher than he appeared, but this was different than that.

This was in-his-face real. This wasn't some general, random, fact, known like something read from a textbook (if Dash ever read anything from a textbook), this was something he had experienced.

Fenton had beaten him. Dash would use excuses, like Fenton taking him by surprise, or only managing to knock him out because he was already hurt from his fight with Dale, but Dash wasn't blind. Fenton had been beaten up pretty bad, too. Had been since before they even got to this place.

If that wasn't enough, he actually flinched, flinched, when Fenton showed up with Valerie. He really, really wished he could blame the flinch on Valerie, but he was just barely self-aware enough to know that it was Fenton.

If this ever got out... It was one thing to be wary of Fenton's freaky girlfriends, but to be freaked out by the freak himself? It would destroy his reputation, topple him from his spot at the top of the Casper High food chain, the one he had beaten Dale to a pulp for.

Why did he even care so much? Was this that dumb limin-limb-lumen- Was it that dumb thing Fenton had talked about? It had sounded like the kind of dumb thing a Fenton would come up with, but what if it was true? Because he should have been more concerned about not dying right now.

Valerie prodded him up the stairs.

Valerie felt sick. She was sick. Sick with some ghost thing, and-

That wasn't why she felt sick.

Danny was Phantom. Danny was Phantom, and she had hunted him. She had broken up with him to hunt him. She'd hurt him more than once.

She wanted to hit something. So she did. The stupid wall of this stupid ghost tower could take it. Stupid ghost tower that was probably going to give her an even worse job than the one she already had.

Why didn't Danny tell her the truth? Yes, she had blamed him for a lot of things, but did he really think that she'd kill him even if she knew he was human? She hadn't hurt Ellie, once she knew she was human.

Having to half-carry Dash up the stairs wasn't helping her mood.
Ellie found Dale, beaten into unconsciousness. She had worn the look, and seen it others, often enough to recognize it. She hefted him up, and flew towards the stairs.

That had been easy! Now to find Valerie and Dash. That couldn't be too hard. They were both sort of noticeable people, and Dash was probably the one who beat Dale up. She didn't even have to find Vlad. She could avoid Vlad. Vlad could take care of himself, and if he was stuck here, that might count as a violation of his side of the agreement he'd made with her and Danny, which would be great. She really didn't want to train with him, for any length of time.

Yeah, thought Ellie, happily, it would be easy, and keep Danny out of trouble.

Her thoughts soured. There was really no way Danny would stay out of trouble.

Danny padded through the beanbags, looking for his classmates, Cujo bouncing along at his heel. He was feeling pretty happy. He was mobile. He was useful. He was helpful. Cujo was with him. He knew that a rescue attempt was underway, and would soon know where they were.

These were all good things.

He was growing closer to the stairs back down. He could make out individual voices. It sounded like Mikey, Ricky, and the twins were having fun. Star and Kwan were shouting. There were ghosts making noises, too. For creatures traditionally portrayed as silent, ghosts could be loud.

One of his classmates came into sight. He had to do a double-take when he realized who it was. Paulina was laying face down on a beanbag, hair and limbs splayed. Danny approached cautiously, concerned. Paulina was always concerned about her appearance. Even in the Tower, in all this chaos, she had been trying to keep it up. Not very well, no, but she'd been trying, and a lot of appearance, Danny had learned, was attitude.

"Paulina?" he called. He leaned to one side, trying to get a look at her face. "Paulina? Are you okay?" He would never forgive himself if she was hurt. Never, never, never. No. She was still breathing. He touched the beanbag she was lying on, and tugged on it slightly. "Paulina?"

The girl groaned, and muttered in Spanish.

"Paulina," prompted Danny again.

"Go away."

"I know how to get to the next floor," said Danny, getting the important stuff out there before she fell back asleep.

"Whaaa?"
"I can get you to the next floor," he said, "where things are less, um, loud. There are couches up there."

Paulina buried her face back into the beanbag. This was really uncharacteristic behavior.

"Paulina, are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"Just go away!"

Danny blinked. "Why do you want me to go away? Don't you want to go on ahead, so we can get back where it's safe?" he cajoled. He tugged on the beanbag again.

"I said, go away!" Paulina lifted her head again, glaring at Danny. Her accent was more pronounced than it usually was. "Why are you like this?"

"Like what?" asked Danny, confused.

"So persistent. It's annoying. Go away."

"I can't leave you here," said Danny. "Come on, you'll get hurt." He tried a different tack, one he knew would work for him. "Your friends will be there. I mean, maybe not right now, but soon! You want to see them right?"

The scream of frustration was entirely unexpected. "I don't want to see them?"

"What? Why not?"

"You wouldn't understand."

While there were a lot of things Danny didn't understand, a huge amount, actually. There was a reason he was called 'clueless.' However, he usually had a better chance of understanding when the thing was explained to him. As it stood, he had no idea what was going on here. Paulina wasn't giving him a lot of clues.

"Well, why don't you try to explain it? I'll listen, and Jazz always says that it's good to talk about stuff that's bothering you."

"I'm not going to talk to a nerd like you. Go away."

Danny sat down, cross-legged. "I'm not going to go away. I won't tell anyone, either. You know how good I am at keeping secrets. You've seen it while we've been here. I can keep yours. Promise." Danny usually didn't make promises, because he always kept them, he had to keep them. It felt right, though. Proper.

Paulina didn't respond. Danny fidgeted.

It only took a couple seconds for Danny to break. His patience was non-existent, especially with everything else going on in the background. "Is it about the other floors? Because those are just- I don't know if they're real options. If they're things that would really exist. They're just, I don't know. Shadows, I guess. Funhouse mirrors. It isn't as if they show who you really are, or anything. It's only what could have happened, if things were different."

"That's easy for you to say."

"Why?" asked Danny.

"You're always the same," said Paulina. "No matter where we go, or what happens to me, you're the
same and it's annoying."

"Um, no, I'm not," said Danny, offended. Some of those floors had changed him a lot.

"Yeah, you are, 'cause you have a crappy reputation, and it doesn't matter for you what happens. Your weirdo friends aren't here to see it, anyway."

"Ellie's here. She's my friend."

That earned him a look. A disgusted look, but still a look. Then Paulina dropped her head down onto the beanbag again, exhausted.

Maybe that was the problem. "I can carry you, if you want."

"Gross."

"I'm not gross!"

"Whatever. Go away."

Danny felt the muscles of his jaw clench. "No." He thought back to what Paulina had said before. "What do you mean about reputation, anyway?"

"I mean, unlike you, I have a reputation. You're a loser, I'm not. You continuing to be a loser doesn't matter. Get it? Now, go away, like a good little loser."

"You..." Danny tried to process that. "Are you saying, that you think your friends will stop being friends with you, because of something they saw on one of the other floors?" He shook his head. "I don't think anyone is going to care about anything like that. They've got other things to worry about, and they were changed, too." He paused. "Paulina?"

"That's easy to say now," Paulina said, grudgingly. "But they aren't going to forget. It's all going to come back up the second we're someplace safe, and I don't want to deal with it, so go away. Loser."

The last was said as an afterthought, and Danny rolled his eyes. "No one's going to stop being your friend because you looked different for a half an hour."

"I look different now."

"We all do."

"I look more different. You wouldn't know, but it takes effort to keep up appearances. I've been wearing these clothes, for like, forever."

"I do know, actually," said Danny, thinking of all the appearances he had to keep up while keeping Phantom a secret. Appearances he still had to keep up. He probably shouldn't have said that, but this floor being what it was, the rebuttal had just slipped out. He rushed to continue. "Everyone's really tired, and gross, and we all need a shower, I'm sure. Nobody's going to dump you just because you couldn't keep up appearances in the middle of all of this. Nobody could keep up appearances in all of this." Not that Danny wouldn't try his very hardest.

"It's what we did to Valerie."

Danny winced. "Oh. Yeah. That was pretty of mean of you. But it isn't really the same? I mean, you're all on a level playing field, not like with Valerie." He paused. "I can't believe I'm trying to justify that." He winced again. He hadn't meant to let that slip out. The sentences immediately before
that hadn't been great, either.

"What? Run out of stupid ideas already?"

"I'm never out of stupid ideas." Wait. That wasn't quite right. "Look, I lied. None of your friends are up there right now, and they won't be for a while." Unless he counted Dash, he supposed. "So you can, I don't know. Freshen up? I think they found a bathroom..." He actually had no idea if they had or hadn't, but this was getting ridiculous and he was tired.

Surprisingly, he understood where Paulina was coming from. It wasn't quite the same as reputation, but he had been intensely concerned with acceptance in the year following the Accident. He looked for it everywhere and anywhere, including among his peers, in the form of popularity. The search, coupled with a no-longer-entirely-human psychology, had lead him to do some questionable things. Such as the garage sale that had released Technus, and stealing Soul Shredder. Probably, as Jazz had explained to him later, because he didn't think he would get that acceptance from the people who mattered the most, his parents.

He could understand that need. He could understand wearing a mask.

But that wasn't going to help him get Paulina to get up. "You know, the faster we get out of here, the faster we can find a shower." He paused. "I think Star and Kwan are getting closer."

Paulina was up.
Tucker tested the bowstring, pulling it back carefully, arms held steady. While Pandora didn't want him, or Jazz and Sam, on deck or fighting, *unarmed* was a different matter.

"Yeah," said Tucker, "I can use this."

"I can only hope you won't need to," said Pandora, who was sporting several weapons herself.

"Well," said Sam, putting a knife in her boot, "if we do, we did train with these for a reason."

Tucker glanced back at the two girls. Jazz was sporting most of the Fenton tech they still had, and had also gotten a spear. No, not a spear, a halberd. Sam, meanwhile, was going with a crossbow and the 'huge amount of small weapons' route. The crossbow wasn't quite as useful as a bow like the one Tucker had, but a bow required a different skill set, and Tucker had been taking archery lessons for a while.

A long while.

How long?

(Tucker's brow furrowed, a memory of sandstone and sun beating down on him. Targets had been set up on the other side of the courtyard, and his father-)

He shook his head, coming back to reality. He had taken archery classes in middle school, and started to practice again when Sam was kidnapped by Aragon. It was a good idea, they'd learned, to have secondary weapons when possible. Sadly, bringing a bow and arrow to school, or even just carrying one around openly, was frowned upon by the establishment.

Sam looked over at his chuckle. "What?"

"Just thinking," said Tucker, "are you down with overthrowing the establishment later?"

"Pft. Sure. Just say when."

Pandora shook her head, a faint smile on her face. "Just remember, keep the door barred."

"Will do."

There was a knock on the door above. "Enter," said Pandora.

A ghost stuck their head in. "Lady Pandora," he said, "the Unstoppable Mailman is returning!"

Danny eyed the stairs speculatively. He had gotten Paulina to go up them after much cajoling, and he
wanted to go look for the rest of his classmates. Star and Kwan should be easy to find. However, between Paulina and Valerie, he'd had a lot taken out of him. He was tired. Because he was tired, he wanted to rest. The best place to rest was upstairs. Therefore, for the last several minutes he had been climbing a few steps, then turning around and going back down again when he changed his mind. He was now tired enough that he didn't want to climb the stairs again. Ever. Also, the twinge in his ankle was growing.

Giving in to reason, Danny sat down. Deciding reason was a wimp, he stood back up, and walked out to the beanbags, fully intending to search for Star and Kwan. However, he was distracted by a particularly inviting beanbag, and laid down on it. Cujo, being a dog, promptly laid down on Danny. That was it. It was over. Only a heartless monster could push a puppy off their lap.

Danny fell asleep.

Annoyingly, Ellie hadn't found Dash, or Valerie. She'd been hoping to take care of them fast, so there was less of a chance of them encountering Danny. Every minute that went by without her seeing them saw her mood souring. There wasn't much she could do about it except keep looking.

She spotted movement out of the corner of her eye, a flash of red. Was that Valerie? She flew over to see, no, it was not Valerie. It was one of those curly-haired red-headed twins. Lester? Nathan? She couldn't remember which one was which. As she watched him, he ran into a beanbag, and phased through it.

That was going to make things difficult. If he turned this into a chase, she would have to catch him while she was in human form. Well, that wasn't strictly true. She could probably hold onto him in ghost form, she had decent control over her own ectoplasm now that she was stable, but if he was sufficiently determined and she was sufficiently distracted...

She would never hear the end of it if she dropped one of Danny's classmates, but dragging them to the stairs on foot sounded like, well, a drag. A real drag.

"A real drag," she said, out loud. She smirked. She just wouldn't fly very high, that's all.

Vlad was in a state of panic. He couldn't find Daniel and Danielle! He couldn't find his children! One of them was seriously injured! Any parent would panic under those circumstances. True, strictly speaking, they weren't his children, not in a biological sense, but that didn't matter for ghosts. What mattered was love and care, which he had plenty of.

His children would see that soon. If only he could find them.

In his anxiety over the situation, he had separated himself from Daniel's classmates, and destroyed three- no, five- seven?- He looked back over his shoulder at the trail of stuffing, beans, and beads stretching out behind him. Several. He had destroyed several beanbags.
He had to calm down. Being this wound up was counterproductive. He didn't become one of the richest men in the world by being impulsive. It didn't work. Except for that one time... and that other time... and... Hm. He would have to revisit that thought later.

He closed his eyes and massaged his temples. To find Daniel and Danielle, he would have to think like them. Yes, excellent plan. He, a business man in his forties, was going to think like a pair of hormonal teenagers. Very good.

No, that wasn't the way to think of it at all. He, a powerful half-ghost, was going to think like two other powerful half-ghosts, one of whom he had raised personally. Yes. That was better.

Considering Daniel's injuries, Danielle was probably the one doing all the moving, anyway. So what would Danielle do? He pursed his lips. That would depend on where she was. He would have to start back at the beginning, where they had all split up. So. Which way was that again?

He spun slowly, disgusted with himself. He had no idea. His hands curled in on themselves, sharp nails leaving crescent moon cuts. He looked down, spreading his hands. Blood showed through the cuts, sparkling pink. He put his hands down forcefully, a growl forming in the back of his throat.

Vlad wasn't used to indecision. He always knew what he wanted, knew what to do, the best path to victory, the way to win the game. Like a game of chess, he always knew what moves to make.

He didn't like not knowing what to do. He didn't like not being in control. He played at one of his cuts. He switched to ghost form, covering his hands with gloves, and picked a direction to fly. It was random, but it was better than just standing there. It was better to be active. He might spot something he recognized.

Something he recognized, something he recognized... All he could see were those infuriating beanbags. He shot an ectoblast at one of them, and it exploded. They all looked the same. Everything looked the same. How could he find his children like this?

He scanned the ground as he flew, head turning back and forth, and back and forth, hoping to spot something or someone that would lead him to Daniel and Danielle. To his children.

Even if they weren't really his children. He just couldn't stop himself from thinking of them that way. They should have been his children. He had made Danielle, and he was the only adult half-ghost in existence. Full-ghosts and full-humans couldn't possibly give them the understanding, the care, that he could. It didn't make sense-

He saw Daniel, and he lost track of that train of thought. There he was, laying on one of those beanbags, that dog, Cujo, laying on him. Vlad flew to him immediately. He looked so sweet and peaceful sleeping there, his head tilted to one side, mouth open slightly, chest rising and falling, slowly, evenly.

The dog stirred. Looked up at Vlad. Grumbled slightly.

Vlad growled back. Before he knew it, he was in a growling contest with a dog. He, a powerful half-ghost billionaire, was having a growling contest with a dog. A ghost dog, sure, but it was an animal. Incidentally, the dog was winning. It was winning the staring contest, too.

Daniel stirred. "Cujo, what're you doing?" he asked. He blinked down at the dog, then turned to look at Vlad. His sleepy scowl deepened. "Oh," he said, without a trace of enthusiasm.

Vlad, no longer distracted by the dog, or Daniel's sleeping face, fell on him.
Chapter 138: In the Real World

Danny had to wonder why these things happened to him. Was he just unlucky, or did he make bad decisions? Was it a result of chance, or was some higher power punishing him?

Whichever it was, he was tired of continually finding himself in these situations. He elbowed Vlad in the face, and rolled off the beanbag, grabbing Cujo as he did so.

"Back off!" he shouted at Vlad. "Or- Or- Or I'll throw Cujo at you!" He lifted the small dog in front of him, like he was holding a weapon. Jeez, why had he said something like that? That was stupid. He couldn't throw Cujo. What if he got hurt? What if his feelings got hurt?

"Daniel, son-"

"I'm not your son, don't touch me!" said Danny, taking a stumbling few steps backwards. Usually, he reacted to Vlad better than this, but the man had surprised him, he was still half-asleep, and, honestly, it took him a lot of self-control not to react to Vlad with violence and fear all the time. Well, maybe not so much since their most recent truce, but his initial reaction towards Vlad was always suspicion and hostility.

Vlad's face twisted as if he had been stabbed. Then it darkened. He floated forward, over the beanbag. Then, as Danny scrambled backwards again, this time running into a beanbag and falling, Vlad stopped. He lowered his hand.

"I love you, Daniel, truly I do," he said. "But why won't you see?" He took another step forward, and Cujo growled again. "I truly want what's best for you, and Danielle. Surely, this whole incident has taught you Jack, and Maddie, too, I suppose, aren't capable of caring for, for providing for you. They can't even begin to understand you. Not like I can. Not like you can understand me."

Vlad looked taken aback at the last, as if he hadn't meant to say that.

"I-" said Danny, his voice cracking. "You're saying that you can care for me better? After everything you've done to me? You- You- You tortured me, Vlad. You tried to melt Danielle. How is that caring?"

"That-" said Vlad. "I wasn't in my right mind. I was sick. I've seen- And I can change. That's the beauty of this place, Daniel. Don't you see? It shows all the ways we can change, all the ways we can be better. You must have felt it, downstairs. It wasn't for long, but you, Danielle- We were a family. You must have felt that. Don't you want that again?"

Danny bit down hard on his lip. He had felt something. He didn't want to admit it.

"You know," said Danny, "when you first showed yourself to me, I was really happy for like, half a second. Then I remembered that you tried to kill my dad and you had me in a box." Danny shook his head. "I wanted you to be nice," he said, "but you were always so awful." Danny hiccuped. "And-" his brain finally processed the other implication of what Vlad had said. "Are you talking about staying here? We can't do that."

"You wouldn't even remember anything else," begged Vlad. "Please."
Danny shook his head harder. Cujo wasn't ever a threat to Vlad. Danny wasn't currently a threat to Vlad. Vlad could jump him and drag him downstairs. Vlad losing his mind hadn't been something he and Ellie had considered when they decided to come down here. "No. That's not- You don't want to do that. Not really. You- I-" What could he say? "I do want to fix this, between us. Between the three of us."

That was true. That was painfully true. Danny didn't want to keep up the conflict with Vlad, had never wanted it in the first place, but once it started, Danny had to fight back, he had to stay alert, wary, vigilant. Vlad always had some scheme going on, and Danny couldn't just let them happen.

"I want to fix it," continued Danny, keeping hold on Cujo, who was practically vibrating, "and for things to be better, but I want it to be real, for it to happen in the real world. Not in some fantasy, where we're stuck in a few rooms forever. That would- We wouldn't be able to handle that, Danielle and I, I mean. We couldn't handle being trapped like that. You know that."

"But it's the only way," said Vlad. "We can erase the past, rewrite it." He came closer again.

"I'll remember this," said Danny, trying a different tack. "I'll know something's wrong." He took a deep breath. "But we can go upstairs, and move on. We can do real things. Do this for real."

Vlad was shaking, too. Was Danny shaking? Yes. He was shaking. This wasn't as bad as talking to his parents, but there were so many different emotions were tied to Vlad and his relationship with Vlad. He'd been hopeful again, and again, and again.

"We can go upstairs, and think this through rationally," said Danny. "I know, I know you like having a plan, and everything in order, and we can do that up there. Where we can think straight. Please, Vlad." He blinked rapidly, trying to banish tears. "I don't want to go down there. I don't want to forget everyone."

Vlad opened his mouth as if to say something, then snapped it closed, turned and fled. Danny watched him go. He inhaled, then breathed out slowly. That had been- He didn't know what that had been. He didn't want to be here anymore. He set Cujo carefully on the ground, and started going back to the stairs, moving as quickly as possible. Ellie would be able to get everyone else, but if Vlad changed his mind, and decided to drag Danny down to the previous floor, Danny wouldn't be able to stop him.

But-

He couldn't leave. He turned around. Crap. This was going to be like the stairs all over again.

Vlad might hurt Ellie. Ellie might hurt Vlad. Vlad might do something stupid, like holding one of his classmates hostage. His classmates might do something stupid. His classmates would do something stupid. His classmates were already doing stupid things. Not that he was much better, Ancients preserve him.

He sat down.

"Cujo, what should I do?"

The dog yipped and wagged its tail. Helpful. Danny patted his head, then eyed him speculatively.


Cujo barked and bounced, then flew off a short distance, landed, and barked again.
Danny sighed, and got up. "Good boy," he said.

Star and Kwan were easy. All they had wanted to do was talk. Get things off their chests. Rant. Vent. Danny hadn't realized how much they kept in, how much they repressed and hid in order to stay in the A-list. He had known both of them had hidden sides. Star got all As, without cheating or forcing nerds to do it for her. Kwan wrote poetry, and wanted to be a doctor.

But there was an awful lot of resentment there, too. Resentment for the other A-listers, resentment towards people who didn't have anything to hide. Resentment towards people who had expectations from them, who forced them into roles. He hoped that it wouldn't become a problem, later. He thought it probably wouldn't. Danny had been prodded into joining the venting session on the way to the stairs, and he certainly had some resentment, especially towards Vlad. Also, they hadn't acted on anything, despite the effects of the floor, which meant that they didn't really want to. They were just blowing off steam, and being really affectionate with each other.

Anyway, they really did want to leave, so Danny just had to keep their attention, keep them from running off. Distractions were rarer once they got farther from where they had entered the floor, and all the ghosts, but still present.

It was a relief when he finally got them to go up the stairs. He sat down on the bottom one with a sigh. Should he go up? Or try to get some more people up there? Vlad was always a concern.

As if thinking about it summoned him, Vlad appeared from the beanbag forest.

"Wait!" he shouted, as Danny made to run up the stairs. "I won't fight!"

Danny didn't know what made him stop. Poor impulse control didn't translate to an inability to lie, didn't mean that Vlad couldn't still be duplicitous.

"I want to fix this," said Vlad, tearfully. "I want to fix this, just, tell me how, Daniel."

Danny shook his head. "I don't know. I don't- Maybe- Maybe during our week of training, once we get out? We can talk about it?" The suggestions sounded weak to Danny, and, man, was that week going to be awkward. Heck, it was going to be awkward once they got to the next floor.

"We can talk about it?" asked Vlad, hopefully.

"Y-yeah. So why don't we go upstairs? We- We can go together?"

That suggestion had more power over Vlad, and Danny climbed the first few steps. If Vlad charged him, Danny could run up to the next floor, and Vlad would probably follow and snap out of it. Probably. Danny hoped. Gosh, he wished Jazz was here. She was the psychologist. She was the one who would be able to understand, interpret, not him. She'd probably even enjoy some of this.

Everyone was going to need a therapist at the end of this.
Chapter 139

Chapter Notes

With this chapter (139), this is now caught up to the version on FFN. The next chapter will be posted on Friday. Hope you're all looking forward to it. :)

Chapter 139: And Other Bad Days

Danny decided not to go back down. Ellie had gotten a lot of his other classmates, including Dale, the nerds, and the remainder of the A-list, up already. There were very few still down there, and with (crazy) Vlad out of the picture, Danny felt comfortable leaving her to it. Mostly. He was having a hard time sitting still, a hard time not pacing.

"Danny," cajoled Mr Lancer, "sit down, please. You're wearing yourself out."

Wow. He hadn't tried that before. He should totally do that. Yikes. Wisdom.

Vlad had stalked off soon after coming up, either out of anger or embarrassment. Danny was glad. He didn't really want to talk to Vlad right now, didn't want to unpack... everything.

Emotionally, Danny was shot. He really should sit down. His ankle hurt. He should sit down. He rubbed his eyes, and the wisps who had made their way up here cuddled up to him. He hummed at them, reminding them that he needed space, had boundaries. He rubbed the back of his neck. No more spinal cord cuddles. That had been unpleasant. They had to stay on the outside of the skin unless they asked and he said yes. That was fair.

Eventually, after several more of his classmates, and a few friendly ghosts, came through the door, Danny did manage to sit down. Not still, exactly, but down. He tucked himself between Mr Lancer and the arm of the couch and worried. He wasn't sure what floor they were on anymore. It had to be at least fifty, right? Or was it more like forty? Had Ellie said what the seventy-seventh floor was supposed to do? How would they know when they got there?

He moaned, and buried his face in his hands.

Mr Lancer patted his back awkwardly. "I'm sure everything will turn out fine, Danny," he said. "We must be at least halfway there, right, Ms, ah, I forgot your name?"

"Prunella. I'm not certain where you came in, or where you're going, but this is the fifty-fourth floor." The ghost woman shrugged. "Usually it's the fifty-fourth floor. I've never been entirely sure if one of my colleagues didn't add a feature to scramble the floors every now and again. None of them are sure, either. As you might imagine, the construction of the Tower had its... hiccups. Even I can't be sure if I didn't do that."

"Great," said Tiffanie (Danny wasn't sure if Ellie had brought her up, or if she had found her own way). She was trying to work knots out of her curly hair with her fingers. "All of that and no food, brilliant. No wonder you guys are all dead."
Danny winced. Hunger was making everyone moody, and the fear was wearing off. Familiarity breeds contempt, as they say.

Prunella cleared her throat. "We aren't actually. All Dead, that is. In some circles, it is considered rather rude to assume things like that. As for human food..." Prunella rolled her eyes. "You'll forgive us for not expecting any humans."

Tiffany grumbled. Danny scanned the room nervously. No one was happy. Dash and Valerie were both staring holes into him. He looked away in a hurry. He'd been avoiding their gazes.

The door burst open, revealing Ellie and the last of Danny's classmates, Elliot. Ellie had a bruise on her cheekbone, a new one, and Danny was up instantly, fussing over her.

"It isn't anything," said Ellie, waving him off. "I just had to fight for this guy." She indicated Elliot, whom she was holding by the back of his shirt. "I'm not sure why."

"Can you let me go, now?" asked Elliot, a whine in his voice.

"Sure," said Ellie, removing her hand.

Elliot stumbled forward and glared at her. "I was doing just fine on my own, anyway."

"No, you weren't," chorused the class.

Ellie raised an eyebrow.

"Compulsive liar," explained Danny.

"Ah. Be careful with that, kid."

"I don't want to be called kid by someone who looks fourteen."

"Tough. So, next floor?" asked Ellie, clapping her hands together.

"What about that letter?" asked Mia. "Shouldn't we stay put so that your friends can find us?"

"No," said Prunella, a bit too eagerly, leaping in before either Ellie or Danny could say anything. "You should keep moving, else you might be overrun. There isn't much difference between a bounty hunter and a hitman, for all that they are different professions."

Danny looked at her askance. That wasn't wrong, it had been his and Ellie's reasoning, too, when they wrote in their letter that they would be continuing up, but that was too much enthusiasm. She was probably curious about how the upper floors were going to affect them. That was why she was in the Tower, why she had helped build it in the first place, to see it working. Danny couldn't be too surprised. He could still be disgruntled.

"Speaking of," said Ellie, "Val, what job do you have?"

"I- What?" said Valerie, who had evidently been too focused on staring holes in Danny to notice much else.

"What job do you have?"

"I'm a cashier at the grocery store," said Valerie.

"Cool. Hey, Vlad's not up here. Is he?"
"He is," said Danny. "He's off sulking somewhere. We'll probably run into him before we get to the next floor. I've got to talk to you about that, later. Privately."

Ellie made a face. "That sounds wonderful."

"What's the next floor?" asked Danny.

"It isn't bad. Erases the worst day of your life."

Danny's eyes went narrow. "Uh. That's kind of problematic, isn't it?"

"How?" said Ellie, walking to the far door.

"Isn't this the worst day for, well, a lot of you guys? It'll probably get really weird if a lot of you forget what's going on."

"This isn't my worst day," said Mikey. There was a surprisingly large amount of agreement from the class.

"How are they defining day, anyway?" asked Ricky. "Any twenty-four hours? Midnight to midnight? Dusk to dusk? Dawn to dawn?"

"Don't look at me," said Prunella, "I wasn't in charge of that floor. It doesn't matter, anyway. All options must lead to the Tower, or the Tower cannot generate them."

Danny was worried. Danny was always worried, lately, but he was especially worried right now. He hadn't brought it up, but his worst day had been... character forming. Foundational. He wouldn't mind forgetting it for a little while, but... he wasn't exactly sure where forgetting it would leave him.

But, according to Ellie, the floors couldn't change him too much, they weren't able to. If they tried, it wouldn't work. The floor where his parents were dead hadn't turned out as poorly as he had feared, so that helped... And he was fairly certain that the whole... Dan... ordeal had lasted for more than a day. Actually, it had been several days, even just from his perspective, without time-travel shenanigans. There was just... one particular day in there that was especially bad. But he had a suspicion that was the important day, when it came to the development of his character.

He would just have to deal with it, though. There wasn't anything he could do.

He would just have to... He lost his train of thought as he went through the door. He was sure it wasn't important. He was here for a reason, and he certainly hadn't forgotten that, even if this floor was supposed to erase his worst day ever. To be honest, upon taking inventory, he couldn't imagine having a day worse than the ones he could remember. So.

This was... He counted in his head. This was the fifty-fifth floor. He was more than halfway up. If he got to the top, then the Iris would see him.

If the Iris saw him, he could plead his case. It was said that the ruler of the Universe Tower could open doors to other possibilities, to the past, to the future. Unable to find Clockwork's lair, get that cursed medallion out of his chest, or even find Vlad, that was his only hope, the only chance he had
of getting back to his own time, and defeating that thing.

Danny had lied, tricked, and stolen his way here. If anyone here knew who he was, they would probably try to kill him, and he couldn't blame them for that. But they didn't understand. None of them did. He had tried that. It didn't work. It never worked. It just hurt, and-

Wait.

Wait. No. He couldn't be remembering the last few floors properly. He couldn't be- He couldn't be seeing what he was seeing. This had to be some kind of lie, some kind of trick. A mind game. Dan did that, occasionally. He would come, mock Danny for not making his way back yet, point out all his ruthless choices, his petty cruelties, say that Danny was becoming just like him, and then taunt Danny with illusions, with memories shown with a touch of a core. But the Universe Tower was supposed to be safe from that monster, one of the few places he wouldn't go.

Therefore, it was full of refugees, petitioners, applicants, hopefuls come to see the Iris. If Dan was here, he'd tear through them like an addict through a pack of cigarettes. He'd destroy them for his pleasure, not even savoring them, leaving their remains scattered across the floor. Danny had seen it before.

Danny shrunk in on himself, clutching his tattered cloak. There wasn't any point in fighting. He had tried to do that so, so, so, many times. Between his many defeats, and the- the suicide attempts (even now, he didn't like to think of them that way), he was weak and broken. People were going to die because of him, and he was just going to let it happen. Let all of this happen. If he tried to fight back, Dan would make it worse. Dan always made it worse.

He'd been so hopeful this time.

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"He's catatonic," proclaimed Prunella. She shook her head. "Completely unresponsive."

"Why?" asked Ellie, stepping closer. She was in human form, because she really didn't want to melt, and any ghost powers at all would set off that mess.

"I'm not sure. If I were to guess, however, I would say that something he saw in here shocked him and set him off. He's not in good shape." The ghost doctor put her hands inside the hood Danny was wearing, as if to cup his face. "I think he's been tortured."

"Tortured?" interjected Mr Lancer, horrified. "I thought this floor was supposed to get rid of bad days."

"It does. A lot of people don't realize it, but sometimes a bad day averts much worse ones." She looked at Ellie. "You aren't in good shape, either. Perhaps if you did what you did before, and overshadow him?"

Ellie shook her head. "I don't think that'll work," she said. When Prunella raised an eyebrow, she added, "It's just a feeling."

"Alright then."
In truth, it was more than *just* a feeling. At its root was a feeling. The feeling that Danny didn't recognize her. If he didn't recognize her, he would reacted violently to being overshadowed. If he reacted violently enough, no more Ellie. She'd seen what happened to her 'siblings.' She had no desire to repeat that, and she was afraid.

"Let's hurry up and get off this floor."
Chapter 140: Unchanged

Valerie was confused once again. That was becoming a theme with this place. She apparently had super powers, and so did Danny Fenton. Which was beyond bizarre. Also, Paulina was ignoring her, like she had suddenly become a social pariah.

But judging from the way she was changing, and the 'rules' she kept hearing about, there was some event in her past that might or might not happen. An event that was part of her 'worst day ever.' She couldn't even begin to imagine what it could be. Some kind of horrific... embarrassing... status destroying... super power... thing. Yeah. Maybe once she had actually eaten something, and could think straight, she'd be able to figure it out.

Star couldn't figure out what she was supposed to have forgotten. She didn't feel any different. A few quick questions confirmed that a good number of her classmates felt the same way. A survey of bad days she did remember, showed her that a lot of people were missing memories of ghost attacks, or of Ms Spectra. Others, like Star, couldn't figure out what had been removed.

The only real exceptions among the normal students were Ashley, who was acting like she didn't know them, and Valerie, who was trying to talk to Paulina like she was in the A-list again. Star kept trying to communicate to her that that wasn't going to work, but Valerie wasn't paying attention.

As for the distinctly not normal student, well, Kwan had been roped into carrying Danny, who'd managed to have some kind of nervous breakdown, despite the floor erasing his worst day. Star doubted that she'd ever be able to understand that kid.

Luckily, this room didn't have a lot of obstructions, so they got to the stairs relatively quickly.

The ghost girl, Ellie, sniffed, and rubbed something bright and green away from her nose. “What's this next one do? Anyone remember?”

Behind them, someone cleared their throat. Star squeaked and jumped. Vlad Masters had managed to sneak up behind them. Star was initially confused about how, but then remembered that he was some weird ghost thing, so he'd probably gone invisible to hide from them, and then waited for a dramatic moment. He'd been rather frazzled before, but now he once again looked as smooth and slick as ever.

“It alters your history to make you either royalty or nobility,” said Vlad. “It takes the shortest path to that, as usual. Most of the ghosts who visit believe that they became ruler of a Realm, and are visiting the Tower as part of a peace conference. I'm not sure what scenario humans would experience to
explain their presence."
That sounded pretty cool, actually. Too bad she wouldn't be able to enjoy it.
“It is also one of the floors most likely to have human food on it,” said Vlad.
Well. Star was in.

Danny uncurled from the little ball he was in. After the last floor, after believing he had been stuck in the bad future, at the mercy of Dan, this one, whatever it did, left him feeling blessedly normal. Not that he really had any right to be using that word.

He shivered, remembering remembering. Had Dan really done all that? Had he killed or destroyed everyone Danny had even a slightly positive interaction with? Danny had thought that Dan had limited himself to the area of the Ghost Zone nearest the Fenton Portal, but apparently not.

But it was okay. It hadn't happened. It wasn't going to happen.

Hopefully, on the next floor, he would take time to remember the prior floors more clearly, and reason out what was real and what wasn't, before descending into anxiety and despair. Hopefully, he would remember this lesson. Hope was good. Yeah. No more angst comas.

He was very abruptly dropped.

Danny was pretty sure (though not entirely, due to the above-mentioned angst coma) that Kwan had been carrying him. Kwan wasn't the type to drop someone on purpose, not usually. He was more of a 'drop someone by accident' kind of guy. So, something must have surprised him. Danny moving, maybe?

Or maybe it was how sparkly everything was. Everything here was covered in gold, silver, jewels, or fabrics even Danny could tell were expensive, including Danny's classmates. He stood up slowly, keeping himself small and inoffensive, and went to the one spot that didn't look like it would cost a million dollars if he even so much as thought about getting dirt on it. That spot being Ellie. His classmates stared down their noses at him.

“What's going on?” he whispered.

“I don't know. We should be different, too,” Ellie whispered back. “Last time, I was changed, too. Vlad became ghost king, and I was a princess.”

“What?”

“This floor turns people into royalty.”

“Oh.”

“Turns us into royalty? As if,” said Paulina. “It's the other floors that turned me into a commoner.” She brushed her long, silky hair back, tucking it behind her ear. Unlike before, she was very nearly immaculate. She frowned. “Where's that ghost that kidnapped me, and what are all of you doing here?”
“That's what I should be asking,” said Valerie, crossing her arms. What she was wearing was much more muted and damaged than the others, but still clearly expensive.

“Guys,” said Ricky, “we've been over this before on every other floor. We've been changed. We're together, we're going up. Can we not rehash this, and just do what we need to?”

Mikey nodded in agreement. “Like, eat, for example?”

Okay, that was different. Mikey rarely voiced his opinion like that. Danny allowed himself a small smile. That was good. It wasn't Mikey's fault that he got bullied, but Danny always wondered if he wouldn't have an easier time if he was more assertive, and greater confidence was, in his case, a good thing. Maybe this would carry over, after all this was done.

Danny frowned as he thought about what else might carry over. Danny would like to think that he was the only one to have picked up scars from this journey, but he knew he wasn't. He would like to think that only positives would be brought out, but that was unlikely.

There was general murmur of agreement. The floor, styled much like a ballroom, had tables of food lined along each wall. Some of the food was glowing and ghostly, but a lot of it was human.

The humans spread out through the room, not waiting for permission, or to see if anyone was with them, or watching. Maybe extra confidence wasn't always such a good thing after all.

The only one who wasn't acting like that was Mr Lancer. Danny paused to look at Mr Lancer, no longer distracted by the others. Mr Lancer wasn't dressed like the others, either.

“Hey, why are you dressed normally?”

Mr Lancer sighed. “I don't know what I'm like where you're from, but in my universe, kings are allowed to dress casually now and again, and it isn't as if we can schedule kidnappings. Though I do understand that may not be quite what happened in reality, Daniel.”

“Right,” said Danny.

Mr Lancer moved off as well. Danny looked back to Ellie.

“So... why aren't we affected?” asked Danny, tone rhetorical. He didn't think that being nobility or royalty would be such a change for him that it would 'break' the floor for him, and Ellie said that she'd been affected last time she was here.

As Danny expected, Ellie just shrugged. Danny looked around the room, hugging himself around the elbows. “Do you think we should go eat, too?”

“I think we should take care of that, first,” said Ellie, nodding towards Vlad.

Vlad was floating to the side in all his ghostly glory. He was wearing a real tunic, and his cape was much longer, flaming at the ends. A dark and fiery crown floated over his head, and his skin and eyes were darker than usual. He was watching Danny and Ellie with a speculative expression.

Danny frowned. “Can we... Not?” But it looked like he wasn't going to have a choice, because Vlad was coming closer.

“There is,” said Vlad, hands clasped behind his back, shoulders squared, “a very simple explanation for your present situation.”
“Okay?” said Ellie. “Great. You going to tell us, or what?”

“Patience, daughter,” said Vlad, smirking. “Think, for what reason might a floor not change someone?”

“Because it tries to change them too much,” said Ellie, resentfully.

“Oh?” prompted Vlad.

“Oh... Or...” Ellie's face drained of blood. “No. No, that can't be. This floor must just not be working. It happens, doesn't it?”

“You could ask Prunella,” said Vlad, indicating the ghost, who was wearing a crown and mingling with other dressed-up ghosts.


“Um. As much as I don't want to deal with Vlad, what was that? What was he trying to say?”

“Nothing important,” said Ellie. “We'll talk about it later.”

“That doesn't sound like 'nothing important.'”

“Here is the plan,” said Pandora. “First, we will attempt to reach the Tower without engaging. If we are forced to engage, the crew and group Gamma will fight them, protecting the ship and groups Alpha and Beta. Group Alpha will attempt to enter the Tower on or around the fifty-fourth floor. Judging by the Phantoms' description in the letter, that is their most likely location. However, as circumstances,” or nerves, Pandora did not add, “may force them to move on, group Alpha will ascend the Tower until they encounter them, or until they reach the seventy-seventh floor, where they will exit. Meanwhile, group Beta will enter floor seventy-seven via the casino. They will descend until they encounter the Phantoms, or reach the fifty-fourth floor, where they will exit. Once the Phantoms and their group are located, the group which located them will adopt a protective formation and escort them out of the Tower, and back to the ship. Questions?”

A hand, a very human hand, went up in the back.

“Yes?” said Pandora, knowing what was about to happen, but hoping it wouldn't.

“What group are we in?” asked Sam.

“Sam, we discussed this. You aren't in a group. You're staying here, out of danger.”

Sam sighed heavily. “I know, I know. We'll be good, we'll stay.”

Pandora gave Sam a tight smile, not at all trusting her to do that. She knew that she shouldn't simply dismiss those three children, they were more than half the reason Danny had survived for so long, but she felt that the current situation was a bit beyond their present abilities and equipment. Hopefully, Jasmine would be the voice of reason, and convince them to stay on the ship, where it would be safe.
“If we all understand,” finished Pandora, firmly, “let us begin.”
FYI for all of you guys, I have improved my buffer to the point where I will now update twice a week, on Friday and Sunday. Look forward to a chapter on Sunday. :)  

Chapter 141: Princes and Kings  

Issitoq would have sneered, if he had anything approaching human facial structure. He couldn't see into the Tower, not in any way that mattered, but he could see both what was currently happening on that ship, and what would happen.  
The little abominations shouldn't have sent that letter. Issitoq was now more eager than ever to destroy all three of them. Now he knew where they were. At least, he knew where they had been, and where they should be soon.  
Contingencies like this were the reason he had kept a few trump cards in reserve. Although, he would have to remember to refrain from calling them such. The person he would be using this time was ludicrously sensitive.  
His next back-up was significantly less so, but, well, she was in the process of learning a lesson about playing with her food. He looked down at the crystal in his hand. It had taken some time, some expenditure of the hourglass's power, to retrieve it from the depths of the Grinder, but it had better be worth it. Or else.  

It was difficult to get all of the 'nobles' and 'royals' to move along. Danny was more than a little tempted to stay, himself, if only to take advantage of the food. But some of the ghosts were watching them too closely, and there were ghosts coming in through the doors. Ghosts that were probably bounty hunters or mercenaries on the outside. It was only a matter of time before one of them was able to remember what they had come in for, only a matter of time before one with a real claim to a noble title or an Obsession that would allow them to ignore the effects of the floor came in.  
At least that's what Danny's paranoia and anxiety were telling him.  
“Come on,” said Danny, tugging on the edge of Mia's long, embroidered sleeve. “Please, we can’t
stay here.”

Mia swept her sleeve away from him. “I don't see why we can't.” Her accent had changed, as well as her clothes, and she had her glasses back. “Didn't you say before, that your friends were coming to get us?”

“Yes, but that could be a long time. Please. I got Mr Lancer to say he'll come.”

Mia frowned. “How do you even know Mr Lancer?”

Danny blinked. “He's... our English teacher? At Casper High. Which you probably don't go to. How do you know Mr Lancer?”

“He's my tutor.” She sighed, and put a hand to the side of her face. “It's unbelievable isn't it, how well this thing fakes memories. I can even remember summers in Lan Liore, winters in Cape Gustin...”

Danny didn't know what either of those places were, but he supposed that a universe where Mia was... Well, whatever. A princess, or a queen, or a duchess, or a countess, or something... would have to be different.

It was really weird that Mr Lancer was still a teacher in her universe, though. It made Danny wonder...

“Hey, how do you know me?”

Mia gave Danny a look. “Your parents work for the government. Your mother is the king's Ghost Affairs adviser.”

“Right. Okay,” said Danny. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “But we really have to go, and if you go, I think Sarah will to, and-”

“Who is Sarah?”

Danny groaned, and was about to renew his line of argument, when the opening of an outside door distracted him. He looked over his shoulder, and suppressed the urge to curse.

It was Aragon.

The Dragon Prince of Mattingly strode into the room, chin raised, black cloak and gray hair fluttering. His deep-set red eyes scanned the room, flicking from face to face. His eyes landed on Danny, and he barred his teeth in a snarl.

“PHANTOM!” he howled.

The room went silent. From all the way on the other side, Danny heard Ellie whisper, “Oh, no.”

Danny was mentally echoing that sentiment, especially when his eyes found Aragon's amulet hanging around his neck. How in the world had he gotten it? Was Dora okay?

No time for those questions now.

“Run!” Danny shouted.

Aragon's body twisted and bulged. His eyes bulged yellow, and his skin became scaly. Danny, meanwhile, tried to get as far away from everyone as possible, so as to limit their exposure to
Aragon's wrath. However, Ellie, Valerie, and, surprisingly, Mr Lancer were having none of that. Mr Lancer had even acquired a sword. From where, Danny had no idea. Why was it that everyone he knew was completely insane?

“Go upstairs!” he shouted at them, narrowly dodging a stream of pale, ghostly dragon-fire.

“You go upstairs,” Ellie shouted back. “Hey! You! Ever hear of breath mints?” She threw a volley of icicles at Aragon. “Mine are winter fresh!”

“Pun later! Run now!”

“Do you even hear yourself?” asked Valerie, who was attempting to use the ghost powers she had exactly no control over to attack Aragon.

“The scales aren't exactly in our favor right now!” said Danny, diving behind a table. “If you haven't noticed,” he gestured wildly at the dragon, “they're all over him.” Danny looked up in surprise as Ellie echoed his words perfectly.

“Don't worry, cuz, I think he's just winging it!”

Danny scoffed. “We're all winging it!”

Aragon turned to snap at Valerie, who had managed to get off a shot. Danny dove at her, pushing her away. Valerie glared at him and ran back into the fight.

“Hey! No need to fang me!”

Overhead, Ellie giggled. Oh, Ancients, they were addicts.

“Much Ado About Nothing,” cursed Mr Lancer, who hadn't managed to get close enough to use the sword. It was good to know he still did the title thing, even when he was king.

Cujo was off on the other side of the room, fighting animal ghosts unfamiliar to Danny. They looked about evenly matched, so Danny returned his attention to the elephant (more accurately the dragon) in the room.

Most of Danny's classmates, not to mention most of the ghosts that had been on the floor, had vanished. Valerie and Mr Lancer already knew. Did Danny dare?

He tried to trigger his transformation, and was rewarded with a wave of pain. He doubled over, and Ellie swept him out of the way of a blast.

“Thanks,” gasped Danny.

“Yeah, you should probably try to get out of here yourself.”

“Can't leave you,” said Danny.

“Might have to.” Ellie called up a shield. “Keep an eye on the others?” she suggested.

Vlad slammed into the side of Aragon's head, and the dragon roared.

“Look, I think we've got this—”

An arrow slammed into Ellie's shoulder. She spun head over heels in the air. Danny whirled to see one of the remaining nobles drawing back a bow, another arrow notched. Danny raised his hands,
and pulled on his core, not enough to transform, but enough to call a ray to the tip of his finger. It
drew a line of light straight to the other ghost's arrow, exploding it. He shot another one at the ghost's
eye, grabbed Ellie by the ankle, and pulled her down, out of the line of fire.

She was hissing, and clutching her shoulder as it dripped with ectoplasm. “I can't move my arm,” she
informed Danny.

“Can you warp it out?” asked Danny, referring to their ability to manipulate their bodies, even to the
point of temporarily tearing themselves in half. “Or phase it?”

Ellie shook her head. “Don't think so.”

Another arrow whizzed overhead, and both Phantoms ducked. Ellie called up a shield that arched
over their heads.

“How am I supposed to know? Should I just pull-?” She grabbed the shaft of the arrow.

“No! No, no, no. Turn around,” said Danny.

Ellie turned carefully. Danny grimaced as he saw the wicked, serrated barbs on the arrow and the
shaft. “Okay,” he said. “See if you can break off the fletching, and I'll pull it out the back.”

“I don't know if I can-”

Danny darted around to the front, taking the opportunity to glance at the fight. Mr Lancer had gotten
into a duel with an ax-wielding ghost- Aragon's executioner?- and Vlad was holding his own fairly
well against Aragon, using the limited dimensions of the room to his advantage. It looked like
Valerie had realized that she wouldn't be able to fight as she usually did, with the advantage of sheer
volume of fire, and she was hiding, giving Vlad and Mr Lancer periodic support with ectoblasts.

He knelt down in front of Ellie, and started snapping off the feathers on the end. Ellie squeaked each
time he jostled the shaft.

“Usually,” said Ellie, “I'm much better about being hurt.”

“Usually you aren't literally skewered. I think this might have gone through a joint, too.” He went
back around Ellie. “Ready?” he asked.

“Do it,” said Ellie.

Danny wrapped his hands around the shaft, ignoring the barbs digging through his skin. With one,
smooth motion, he pulled the arrow out. Ellie shrieked.

A moment passed, with Ellie's hand pressed firmly over the hole. The bleeding slowed, then stopped.
She took her hand away, and rotated her shoulder.

“Okay,” said Ellie. “I'm going to try and take care of the archer. You don't happen to have your
thermos, do you?”

“Is that a joke?”

“Had to ask. Stay out of sight. I think they're mostly after you.”

“Ellie-!”
Ellie had already flown off, towards the archer. Danny peeked hesitantly at the battle, and fired off a few more shots in support of Ellie, ignoring the pain in his chest. He could do at least as much as Valerie.

What he really wanted to do, though, was get Mr Lancer out of there. The teacher (King?) was definitely the most vulnerable out of all of them. He didn't have any powers, and, despite his surprising facility with a sword (Danny still wasn't sure where he had gotten it from), Mr Lancer's strength was clearly already waning. The executioner, being a ghost and (probably) well-rested, did not have that problem.

But getting to Mr Lancer, and getting away, would be problematic. There wasn't a lot of cover, and Danny doubted that Aragon, the archer, and the executioner were the only three combatants. Aragon could have ennobled any number of ghosts for the purpose of infiltrating this floor. True, Aragon didn't strike Danny as a mercenary type, or the type to ennoble mercenaries, he was too proud, but he was in a tight situation, and despised Danny.

Danny didn't know why they hadn't attacked right away, as soon as Danny and the others got to the floor. Maybe Aragon didn't want to wait among 'fake' nobles, and one of his cronies had to leave to fetch him.

He gritted his teeth. Any of the remaining ghosts—No, not any of them. The wisps were innocent. Any of the ghosts that Danny didn't know could be a threat, and he was scared. Scared that he would be hurt, scared that he would distract Mr Lancer, and Mr Lancer would get hurt, scared for Ellie, and Valerie, and all his classmates who had run upstairs and into the unknown, scared for Vlad, even.

His fears proved to be justified as a pair of wolf-headed ghosts fell on him from above. He felt his shoulder dislocate as they pulled up into the air, and he shrieked.

… Which had the predictable effect of distracting everyone.

Danny twisted, ignoring new, pains, and kicked one wolf (was it wearing a crown?) in the jaw. It dropped him, but its companion didn't. He called ectoenergy to the surface of his skin, frigid and burning. The ghost snarled, but didn't drop him. Then Valerie hit it in the eye with a blast, and the ghost dropped him onto a table, which snapped in two.

Plates and cutlery dug painfully into Danny's back. He rolled off, and pushed himself painfully into invisibility. He knew he was flickering, but hopefully it would confuse anyone aiming at him.

Wait. Cutlery? Danny picked up a knife as he ran by. It was better than nothing. Unless he tripped and stabbed himself with it, then it would be worse than nothing.

The wolves came for him again, and Danny stabbed the closer one in the chest. Lacking vital organs, the ghost found the wound less than debilitating. They had the advantage. He was driven to the floor.

“Wait!” bellowed Aragon, knocking Vlad to one side with a sweep of his wings. “Cease your struggle, or I will order my men to destroy him.”

Ellie raised her hands in surrender at once. It took Mr Lancer and Vlad a little longer, though that probably had less to do with willingness, and more to do with getting into a position where it would be safe (relatively speaking) to stop fighting.

Aragon's long, scaly lips curled, and his body began to shrink. Once again humanoid, the deposed prince glided to where Danny was being held. He drew his sword, and pointed it at Danny.
“I challenge you, Phantom, to single combat. For the crown.”
Chapter 142: Duel

“For the- Wait, what?”

Aragon snarled, showing fangs. “Do not play the fool with me, boy. You know what you have attained, all undeserving. In this cursed place it is as clear to the eye as the dawn. I challenge you, and you must accept. Or else.”

“I, uh.” Danny's mind spun. He didn't know what Aragon thought he was challenging him for, Danny didn't have a crown, but the prince might have given Danny a way out, if he was sufficiently clever. “I accept. I pick ice.”

Aragon, who had just opened his mouth, paused, and scowled down at Danny. “What?” he asked, rudely.

“I pick ice. Ice is the weapon. I get to pick the weapon, since you challenged me. That's how this works, right? Then, uh. Ellie, you want to be my first second, right?”

“Your first second right? Are you trying to give out directions, or. . . ?”

“Basically, will you be my back up? I get three seconds. That's traditional,” Danny said the last two sentences as firmly and confidently as it was possible to do with his face pressed into the ground.

“Daniel is correct,” said Vlad, smoothly. “Each party must also provide a doctor.”

“Yep. So then, I want, lets see here, I want Dora and-”

“Neither Dorathea nor that filthy brat you call a sister can be your seconds,” spat Aragon. “They are women. Incapable.”

“Wow. Uh. You realize you've gotten your butt handed to you by girls? More than once? Anyway, my third second is going to be-” who was both sufficiently intimidating and unavailable? “- Clockwork. And my doctor is Frostbite. I'll have to ask them first, of course. So that'll take some time. Where's the field of honor going to be?”

Aragon stared at him. Danny owed Ghostwriter an apology. He had no idea medieval and renaissance dueling customs would come in handy.

“We are going to fight here,” hissed Aragon. “Now.”

“No, no, no. That's not how this works. Now, you have to pick a field of honor, and I get to say yes or no, then you have to pick seconds, and they and my seconds will go and make arrangements, like time and stuff. Now, you've got to remember that my guys and I have a court date coming up, so we won't be able to-”

Aragon roared in frustration. “No! You will fight me NOW!”

“Dude, I thought you were a prince or something.” Danny squirmed under the wolves' arms, curling his legs beneath him, getting into position. “Haven't you ever heard of the code duello?” He saw Ellie drifting slightly away from the archer. They were on the same page, then. Good. “I mean,
seriously, this is pretty basic stuff. Did you have your tutor hanged or something, because wow. I don't think we can do this challenge thing if you don't even know this much.”

Aragon loomed upward. “You dare-

Aragon must have made for a very attractive target from behind, because not one, not two, but three ectoblasts hit his back. One of them, Danny thought it must be Ellie's, neatly severed the chain of Aragon’s amulet. Danny, using as much strength as he could draw on in one burst, leaped halfway out of the wolves’ grasp, headbutting Aragon in the stomach, and seized the amulet between his teeth.

Aragon shrieked, but was diverted by a particularly wroth Vlad. This fight was just as uneven as before, but in Vlad’s favor, not Aragon's. One of the wolves released Danny, and flew off after that fight, to help Aragon. The other tried to get the amulet away from Danny. Danny, who had once put an entire orange in his mouth, to the delight of his friends and the disgust of his sister, had nearly gotten his lips closed around the amulet, and was using the chain as a makeshift whip as he thrashed back and forth.

Ellie was abruptly thrown across Danny's field of view. His heart skipped a beat. The wolf pushed him down, and his head hit the floor hard enough for stars to dance across his vision. He threw a punch blindly upwards. No! He needed to see what happened! He needed to make sure Ellie was safe, that Valerie was safe, that his teacher was safe, that his classmates were safe! Then he'd punch Aragon in his stupid smug snake face! His mind bubbled in fury.

Fury that he had, more or less, counted on.

Even for a princess of a deposed royal family living in the most haunted town in North America, it wasn't every day that one saw their classmate turn into a dragon. Of course, said classmate had just revealed that he had been turning into a ghost just fine every day for the last couple of years, so it was somewhat less impressive than it would have been, especially when coupled with the fact that it actually wasn't the first time she had seen a classmate turn into a dragon. That honor went to her first homecoming dance in freshman year.

Valerie's life was unbelievable.

The wolf-headed ghost that had been holding on to Danny was promptly flattened. The resulting smear of ectoplasm fled for the nearest door.

Pressing question: Did Danny know what he was doing, or was he going to attack indiscriminately?

Valerie had been out of her depth in this fight from the moment it had started, and her strength was flagging. Those ectoblasts took more energy than ghosts' prolific use of them would suggest.

Maybe... it was time to go.
Ellie decided that Danny had had too much fun for today, and that it was her turn. For certain values of 'fun,' 'today,' and 'too much.' She was worried that he was overreaching himself, working himself to a collapse. She also didn't know enough about the Amulets of Mattingly to say whether or not using them would result in side effects. So, once she had chucked the archer downstairs, and dropped a settee in front of the door, she flew over to Danny.

Aragon was now the one hiding (he wasn't doing it very well, he kept cursing at Danny). Vlad was fighting the executioner. The other wolf-headed ghost was nowhere to be seen. Mr Lancer was bleeding from a cut in his upper arm. Valerie was running across the floor to Mr Lancer. Cujo was watching the fight, growling and confused.

Ellie whistled, and he perked up. “Go help Valerie,” ordered Ellie, pointing. Cujo barked, low, deep, and echoing, and ran to Valerie. Valerie had better take Cujo's help, and not go off on a revenge tangent. This wasn't the time or the place for that nonsense.

Great. Now. Plan for getting Danny to go with them to the next floor. She didn't have one. She didn't even have a plan for 'stop Danny from being a dragon' or 'stop Aragon from being a massive pain.'

But the absence of a plan turned out to be a non-issue, at least for the 'Danny is currently a dragon' problem. Without any real warning, Danny popped back to his usual shape and size, and fell to the ground. Ellie got to him just before Aragon made an attempt to stab him, and hit the other ghost so hard he left a dent in the wall.

“Are you okay?” she asked, because Danny did not look okay. At all. He was easily three shades paler than he normally was, and his eyes were wider than baseballs.

“... swallowed it,” whispered Danny.

“What?”

“Swallowed it. I swallowed it.”

Aragon decided to make himself known again. “What did you do to my amulet?”

At this point, Vlad threw the (large, bulky) executioner into the deposed prince.

“I suggest you leave, Daniel,” he said. “We can take it from here, and who knows what troubles your classmates are getting into on the next floor?”

Danny went paler still. He turned to Ellie. She nodded. Danny bit his lip, but ran after Valerie and Mr Lancer.

Ellie scowled, and raised her fists to continue the fight. “How do you do that?”

Vlad laughed. “I'll teach you, someday, Danielle.”
Chapter 143

Chapter 143: Ghost Zone Standoff

When Danny got to the next floor, his classmates were all huddled together. This might have been due to the frigid temperature, but was more likely because of the guns being pointed at them. More precisely, because a bunch of ghosts were pointing guns at them. Not ecto-guns or blasters. Guns that would kill humans.

The fight with Aragon had been a set-up. Something to run from, so that they would run into a trap. Danny shouldn't have stayed to fight. He should have gone with his classmates, his vulnerable, powerless, all-too human classmates. He should have protected them. What was wrong with him, doing something as stupid as leaving them alone?

"There's the ghost of the hour!" crowed one of the ghosts, who was dressed in painfully stereotypical 1920s-era gangster gear. Suit, tie, fedora, shiny shoes, the works. Half of the guns swiveled to point at Danny, Mr Lancer, Valerie, and Cujo. The wisps didn't warrant a weapon, apparently.

Danny's eyes flicked over the room, counting potential enemies. Either none of the 'noble' ghosts from downstairs had made it up here, or they had been chased along by the gangsters, because the floor (which was, for some reason, divided into office cubicles) otherwise appeared to be empty. There were twelve gangsters that he could see, but he wouldn't be surprised if more were hiding in the cubicles. Six guns were pointing at him and the others who had just entered. Five more were pointed at his classmates.

"So, tell me, Phantom," said the ghost, "why does the big eyeball want you dead?"

Danny mentally dubbed this ghost the boss. He seemed to be in charge, and was the only one not actively pointing his gun at anyone.

"Who?" said Danny, hoping that playing dumb would buy him some time to think.

The boss was willing to play along. "Issitoq. First of the three Judges. Head Observant. Watcher of Watchers. He's put a bounty on your head. Pretty big one, too. Why?"

"I honestly do not know," said Danny.

"Alright then," said the ghost, raising his gun to point at Dash, who went very pale behind his bruises.

"Wait!" said Danny. "Wait. Maybe- Maybe it's because I'm liminal, and Clockwork likes me."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I mean, the Observants never liked me, and that's one of the things they didn't like about me, so, yeah. It could also be because there was a future where I lost my mind and basically destroyed the world because a bunch of people I cared about died, but, like, that could never happen now."

Danny made the last sentence as pointed as it was possible to be without sounding like he was trying to threaten the gangsters. That would be a bad idea.

"Sure," drawled the gangster. "You wanna try another one before I blow this guy's brains out?"
"I also might have swallowed Aragon's amulet downstairs. You know, the one that turns you into a dragon if you get angry? So let's not do anything regrettable."

The boss looked suspicious of Danny's claim, but other gangsters started to shift nervously.

"Just, you know, for your information. Because, like, I don't really want to turn into a dragon right now. I mean, sometimes you just don't feel like being a dragon, you know? But, you see, I think that if you hurt someone, I would get really angry, and probably, you know, destroy you all. Because I'd be a dragon." Oof. That wasn't his most eloquent.

Despite his damaged core, Danny could feel a great deal of incredulity swirling around the room. Please, let this work.

The gangster boss did not lower his gun. "Is this your idea of a clever plan?" he asked.

"Dude, I haven't had a good night's sleep for, like, a week. Clever doesn't come into it. I'm just telling you facts, here, so you don't kill anyone. Also, you should know that we have an army looking for us. Like, on their way, right now. A literal army. From Elysium. And they're the kind of people who will have a clever plan. Or just beat the heck out of you, just so you know. I feel like that's a thing you should know."

The gangsters were looking really uncomfortable, shifting their weight from foot to foot. The door behind Danny creaked open. Danny didn't dare look behind him.

"What is going on here?" asked Vlad, voice deep and silky smooth.

"Yeah, I'm going to second that question," said Ellie. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Screw this!" said one of the gangsters. "I didn't sign up for three of these freaks!"

"Joe, if you don't stay right there, I'll end you myself."

"Oh, no. You should run, Joe. You see, you're the smart one here," purred Vlad. "Because if you don't, you will regret it for the rest of your afterlife."

The boss sneered. "Please, Plasmius. You have, what, three, four guys? Not exactly an army."

"I don't need an army," said Vlad. "I just need to identify you to Daniel's army."

Danny did not feel the need to mention that he didn't have an army. Not really. What he had were allies who had armies. Which, if he thought about it, amounted to almost the same thing. Actually it was worse, since it was armies, plural, and Danny wasn't in charge and, therefore, wasn't able to screw them up or call them off.

"But," continued Vlad. "If you insist on fighting me, I will very happily destroy you, in the here and now."

"Uh," said Ellie, "same. Especially if you try to hurt my cousin."

"Well," said the boss, "looks like we've got ourselves a little Mexican standoff here."

"Oh, screw you, Charlie!" shouted one of the other gangsters. "This isn't a Mexican anything! I'm outta here!" The ghost flew off, tail disappearing around the corner of a distant cubicle.

"Yeah!" said another. "Screw you and your politics!"
With alarming rapidity, the gangsters departed, leaving the 'boss' alone.

The ghost flushed. "Ungrateful bastards-!"

"I would hesitate to give advice to such a charismatic leader," said Vlad, "but you should be aware that intimidation only works when you have something to intimidate with."

"You're the one that will regret this," hissed the gangster, before running away himself.

Vlad sighed, then floated up, scanning nearby cubicles. "Let's get a move on, shall we? It's freezing in here."

They made their way to the next floor in grim, hurried, silence. The guns had spooked everyone but Vlad. Danny expected the gangsters to jump out from behind any and every thing that was big enough for them to hide behind, and several things that weren't. Maybe it was paranoia, but everything was out to get him, and he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"They called you Phantom," said Sarah, softly.

There it was, the sound of the other shoe dropping.

Intellectually, Danny knew his secret was shot. But Danny was being driven more by emotion than by intellect and logic at the moment. He was currently cherishing the notion, wild hope that it was, that if he didn't give direct confirmation that he was Phantom, then this would all go away. His classmates, without proof, would be treated much like Wes Weston, and Danny's general unpopularity and weirdness would gradually come to overshadow the mere suspicion that he was Phantom.

The thought crossed his mind that there might be more to it than even that. Ghosts were obsessive creatures, even before getting to capital-O Obsessions. Then again, why blame everything on his ghost half? He had been plenty stubborn before the Accident, and keeping the secret had been a life-or-death matter. No, it was a life-or-death matter. His secret getting out into the world-at-large, or even just the GIW and other ghost hunters, could sentence him to a second death, or something even worse.

He couldn't trust these guys with his secret! No. Not yet, at least.

But they already knew...

He shook his head, hard, lips pressed firmly together, brows furrowed.


"Yeah," said Dash, in the tone of someone who had just discovered that two plus two was four. "So why didn't you do anything before? You could have gotten us out of here!"

Dash's complaint was more confused than accusatory, but it was distressing to hear, and added one more entry to the list of 'reasons I'm not saying anything.'
"Hey!" snapped Ellie. "Back off!" She flew up next to him as he continued to walk forward. She started to say something else, but broke off in favor of surveying Danny with worry. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Fine," said Danny. "I just want to get out of here."

"There are the stairs," said Vlad, pointing.

"Thank Clockwork," whispered Danny.

Ellie hooked her arm through his, and extended her flight to include him. "We're going to go check it out!" said Ellie, voice forcefully bright. "No nasty surprises like last time!" She zoomed them to the stairs.

"Wait!" said Danny as they touched down halfway up the staircase. "We can't leave them back there! What if there are more gangsters?"

"Gangsters? I thought they looked more like mobsters, personally."

"Ellie..."

"Look, they'll be fine. Vlad's with them, the wisps are- Or, no, here they come."

"Ellie," said Danny, severely, as the wisps turned themselves into glowing crowns in the two Phantoms' hair, "Vlad is one person. And the wisps aren't going to be able to fight. That's not what they do." The wisps hummed in agreement.

Ellie tugged him up the stairs. "There aren't any more of those guys, we would have seen them when we flew over, and Vlad can take them, anyway. So can Val, probably. Hey, Cujo! Good boy!" She pet the dog. "You need another break from them, anyway."

"I took a break from them!"

"Not long enough, clearly!"

. .

. .

"Do you think," said Dash, "I said something wrong?"

Vlad repressed the urge to throttle the brat. He had been trying to repress his actions of several floors ago, and interact with Daniel and Danielle as usual, as if nothing had changed. A trying task, to say the least, but one that he had been successful at. The children had even, dare he suggest it, dare he even think it, seemed to warm up to him by some small increment.

But then these- these- Vlad couldn't come up with a suitable epithet. They had chased Daniel and Danielle away, driven them off with their thoughtless inquisition! Either as his human self or as Phantom, hadn't Daniel done quite enough to earn the benefit of the doubt from these children? Vlad wanted nothing more than to abandon them himself. He was ill-suited for looking after children. He was no babysitter.

But, by leaving them, Daniel and Danielle were demonstrating trust in him, a trust he was not eager
to betray. Not even if the task that trust had saddled him with was unpleasant.

He grimaced. The task wasn't too onerous. He would only have to get them up the stairs.

"Ancients!"

"What?"

"We must've-" started Danny spinning around wildly. "We forgot about Andy! We left him outside!"

He lunged for the door.

Danielle dragged him back by the back of his shirt. "Who?" she asked, brow furrowed. "Wait, we left Lin! The heck did we forget Lin?"

"Who's Lin?" asked Danny, momentarily distracted. Had Ellie picked up a new friend?

This time, Ellie whirled. "Madeline! My twin! You know, your other female clone? How the heck do you forget about that? How did I forget about that?"

"Er, Ellie? What does this floor do?"

"It- Oh. It makes it so that you have an identical twin. I'm a moron. Crap."

"Oh," said Danny. He sat down. "So Andy... He isn't real."

"Guess not," said Ellie, sounding equally depressed.

"I hate this floor."
Chapter 144

It turned out that everyone hated that floor, with the exceptions of Nathan, Lester, and Ashley. Ashley was very excited by this because she thought it might mean that she had an identical twin out there somewhere, but Rebecca had opined, rather rudely, that it was more likely that how many siblings she had didn't matter, since Ashley was adopted.

Danny wasn't sure he cared. He had sunk pretty deep into depression. It hurt to find out that the person he was closest to just didn't exist. It was like finding out he'd been missing a limb all his life and no one had bothered to tell him. His heart hurt. His head hurt.

Mia was crying. Hannah was off on a rant about aliens stealing her sister. Everyone else was silent. Even Vlad, who was walking way too close to Danny and Ellie for either of them to be entirely comfortable.

Ellie and Danny, meanwhile, had become almost glued to one another. They didn't have quite the relationship of real twins, they didn't have that lifetime of knowledge, of interaction, of experience, but it was better than being alone, and they almost had it, with the memory sharing. Danny shuddered closer. He should try to pull himself out of his depression, for Ellie's sake, if not for his. He should try to cheer her up. But he just couldn't call up the willpower.

He missed Andy. He couldn't believe- Well, he could, after all the other floors. That was why he hadn't barreled outside to rescue Andy from the mercenaries lying in wait outside, like he dearly wanted to. That seemed to be the general sentiment.

Ancients, how was this floor more depressing than the floor where their parents were dead?

"What's the next floor?" asked Danny.

"Zombie apocalypse," said Ellie.

"Plague," corrected Vlad. "Well, epidemic, really. It creates a recent one, in an area you spend a lot of time in."

"Well, I always get the zombie apocalypse," said Ellie. "So does-" she broke off, frowning deeply.

"Your twin?" asked Vlad, voice softer than usual.

"Yeah."

"What is- What would she be like?"

This, surprisingly, started a whole series of stories, of anecdotes and vignettes. Everyone described their twins, picking the best out of hundreds of stories. Mia was still crying, but she was laughing,
Danny realized what had happened, what was happening, halfway through his own story about Andy and the biology frogs. They were in mourning, not for people who were dead, but for people who never existed in the real world, who never would exist outside of their own minds, and this sharing was letting them ease that burden. Maybe most of his classmates would forget his stories, but some would remember, and that made Andy a little more real, somehow.

Eventually, they got to the next set of stairs.

"Time to get the plague, I guess," said Elliot, entirely without enthusiasm, because, well, who would have been excited about getting the plague?

Mr Lancer frowned. "That- We aren't actually in danger of getting sick, are we?"

Vlad sighed. "No. Remember, the people who built this were doctors, at least in part, and they didn't build this to study diseases. They wouldn't have wanted to spread one, or, worse, create one."

"So it's safe?" asked Mr Lancer.

Danny almost burst out laughing. "Mr Lancer, we're not safe now."

"A fair point, Danny," said the teacher. "This next one, it is... The fifty-ninth floor?"

"I guess," said Ellie, shrugging.

"Eighteen more," whispered Mr Lancer. He probably thought he was inaudible, but half-ghosts had sharp hearing. "Only eighteen more." He said it like a prayer.

"Oh, jeez," said Danny. "Wow. Okay. So, you guys are all alive, apparently."

Everyone stared at Danny.

"Wait," said Elliot, "we're dead from your perspective?"

"Not really, obviously," said Danny. "But most of you, yeah."

"Zombie apocalypse?" asked Ellie, who was wearing a lot of leather.

"Ah, no. It was the snake thing. Viral snakes. You know about the snake thing, right? Did you ever get it?"

"Let's say, no."

"It's, uh. Snakes. That bite you. And then they, um. Make more snakes inside of you. It started off as a ghost thing, but then made the jump to humans in Amity, and, uh, humans couldn't really handle that kind of thing. I mean, for ghosts they just sort of, uh, grew off the outside, like, um. Snake tumors. Then they'd get over it. But humans... Yeah. Humans are, uh, less good about that kind of thing, so, um. You know. But not everyone is dead? And it turns out you aren't dead at all really, huh?" Danny finished brightly. His eye twitched, he was so optimistic. "Isn't that great?"
"Are you crying?" asked Sarah.

"No," said Danny. "Hey, Lester."

"What?"

"If you see a snake, don't let it bite you."

"Don't let it- Are you saying that I'm patient zero?"

"Maybe. So, uh, what happened with you guys?"

"Snakes."

"The flu."

"The flu."

"Bird flu.

"Flu."

"Swine flu."

"Plague," said Vlad.

"You would get the plague."

"Measles."

"Ebola."

"Smallpox."


"Look, tell that to China."

"Zombies."

"Also zombies."

"Thank you!" said Ellie. "See, zombies are normal!"

"Not really. I mean, it looks like most plagues are actually the flu."

"Hello there!" said Prunella.

Danny stared. "What- Where have you been?"

"Well, I'm a doctor, not a fighter, and the talent floor is cold."

"Why was it so cold, anyway?" asked Ricky.

"The air conditioner broke."
After that, the plague floor turned out to be surprisingly peaceful, though at the end of it Mr Lancer was whispering 'seventeen.'

Danny was, personally, exhausted by the whole ordeal. It turned out that he wasn't dead in very many of the others' universes, probably because they needed him to get here in the first place, but he was seeing (and remembering from the last several floors), people who had been dead for over a year, and this after being convinced that he had a twin. A twin that he didn't have, that he would never have. This kind of emotional jerk-around would have been tiring even if he was in top physical shape. Maybe that's why the walk through this floor was so peaceful. Everyone was about to fall over. Again.

It seemed that was their whole journey through the Tower was. A bunch of tired walking, brief bout of intense activity, and then collapse. Sometimes without the intense activity.

(Of course, Danny was the only one who also had to deal with having swallowed a powerful ghostly artifact whole, and the only one who had recently been turned into a dragon. He thought that these two things taken together might make him feel just a little, tiny bit more crappy.)

They eyed the stair with disfavor.

"You don't think you can fly us up?" asked Elliot.

Everyone in the group who could fly turned and glared at Elliot. Even Cujo. Especially Cujo.

"What is the next one?" asked Danny.

"Don't remember," said Ellie.

The class, as one, turned to Vlad.

Vlad raised his hands in negation. "I'm afraid I've lost the order. I usually skip this group of floors. They're unnecessarily trying."

They looked to Prunella.

"I think it will be more interesting if you don't know what it does."

The twitch of Danny's eye intensified. "You think it will be more interesting?"

"Yes. Don't worry so much. It isn't anything terribly traumatic. You might even find it interesting, yourselves."

"Excuse me," said Mr Lancer. "That isn't exactly our goal, here."

"So? No reason you can't do both."
They went up the stairs without getting anything from Prunella, and without jogging Vlad's memory. They were, therefore, surprised when everyone seemed to sprout extra body parts. Some of them were obvious, like an extra (if slightly shrunk) arm. Others were more subtle. Extra fingers. Extra teeth. A couple people looked like they didn't have extra anything, Danny included.

Ellie had wings. Vlad had horns. Prunella was wearing four arms, in the Greek style. Cujo had two tails. The wisps didn't look like they had anything extra, but who knew? Maybe they had an extra layer of ectoplasm, or something like that.

"Extra body parts, huh?" said Danny, heavy with resignation. At least his wings didn't show up in human form. Maybe he could convince everyone that he had an extra kidney.

"Yes," said Prunella, happily. "I'm rather surprised that no one grew an extra eye. But then most of you are human, hm?"

Danny made a face.

It turned out that the few others that had no visible extra body parts did have extra organs. It also turned out that not one of his classmates, not a single one, believed that he, Danny, had one. On the contrary, several of them asked him if he had wings like Ellie.

Stressful.

"Hey," said Mia, a touch testier than she usually was. "Maybe you could all, like, back off a little? This isn't cool."

"Very not cool," agreed Sarah.

"Stop harassing him. He's not comfortable."

"None of us are comfortable," pointed out Rebecca, "and it's his fault we're here."

"Oh," said Paulina, "stop being so-so-" she waved her hands, showcasing her extra pinky, "ugh!"

"I think that technically it's Valerie's fault," put in Ashley.

"Can you stop? Please? Or at least blame Spectra?" asked Danny, tiredly. "This isn't accomplishing anything."

"I, er, I think maybe we should stop," said Dash, scratching his nose.

Danny couldn't help but give Dash a sidelong look and assess whether or not he could have been possessed while he wasn't looking. It was possible, but not terribly likely.

"Yeah," said Dale, "you would side with your boyfriend." Dale had been quiet up until now, probably because he'd gotten the crap kicked out of him in the fight with Dash. He sneered, extra canine snagging on his lip.

It took Danny's tired brain too long to process the words. He didn't know Dash had a boyfriend. Wasn't he going out with Rebecca? Didn't he have a ridiculous crush on Jazz a few years ago?

Wait. Oh boy. Oh, heck. Really? Really, Dale? After he and Dash got into a giant fistfight, which Dash won. Did nobody here have a sense of self preservation?

Well, no. Otherwise they wouldn't be here in the first place.
"What did you say?" demanded Dash, muscles taught.

"I said, of course you're siding with your boyfriend. You know, Fenton. It's so obvious, like, you just pretend to beat him up, but instead you go off and-"

"Mr Gordon!" exclaimed Mr Lancer. "That is quite enough!"

Dale said something hugely insulting and not fit to repeat.

"Please," said Danny, "this isn't helping."

"Oh, and you are?" said Dale. "What good are you, freak?"

Danny wilted. Dash went to hit Dale, but Danny grabbed the back of his shirt, quickly followed by Ellie. In a shocking display of common sense, all of the rest of the class piled in between Dash and Dale, forcing them apart.

"Mr Gordon," said Mr Lancer, "I know this is a stressful situation, but that doesn't excuse this behavior."

"What, you don't want to talk about how Paulina isn't the only one with a shrine to Phantom, huh, Dash? No wonder, I bet you're secretly-"

The later half of the sentence was drowned out by a wave of protest from the other students.

"That's really gross," said Ricky, who had been one of the closest to Dale, looking queasy.

"Stop being such a jerk," said Valerie, nose wrinkled in disgust. "You're such a hypocrite, too. Didn't Phantom save you a bunch of times? Screw off."

Dale blushed slightly, but squared his jaw. "At least I'm not shooting at him, 'Red Huntress!'"

There was a quiet 'Ooh.'

(Prunella was standing to one side, taking notes.)

"Hey," said Ellie, sharply, "I'm new to this whole 'high-school drama' thing, but could this wait? You know, until the whole mortal danger thing is over? Maybe? At least don't fight each other. Ancients, I don't know how Danny deals with you all, considering how self-absorbed you are!"

"We're not that bad," objected Mikey. "Are we?"

Dale attempted to lunge across the small crowd.

"Oh my god!" exclaimed Star. "Are you forgetting the freaking ghost mafia that just tried to kill us? Like, not even an hour ago? Or the dragon?"

Danny swallowed, remembering the amulet that was currently in his stomach. He really hoped that wouldn't cause any complications. It probably would. He just hoped it wouldn't.

"Can you, like, not make this harder for everyone?" continued Star. "Like, seriously? Just stop fighting with each other! It isn't rocket science! We've got enough issues without you inventing fifty more! I mean, I'd prefer not to die just because you can't deal with..." she faltered. "Whatever. I don't know what your problem is." Star switched her glare to Dash. "I don't know what either of your problems are. But I'm tired of 'em!"
Star was shaking by the end of her rant, third arm quivering.

She sniffed, tilting back her chin. "Come on, Mikey."

"Uh, what?"

"We're going?" prompted Star.

"Just, uh, you never talk to me. You think I'm a freak."

"Uh. Newsflash, nerdlio, I'm the one with three arms."

"You hang out with Paulina."

"Uh. No I don't."

"Yes you do!" said Paulina, panicked.

"Uhm," said Star, somewhere between suspicious, confused, and apologetic.

Dale didn't like that everyone had been thoroughly distracted from him, and attempted to sucker-punch Kwan. Kwan, who was about twenty pounds lighter than usual and had six fingers on each hand, ducked. Elliot, who was standing next to Kwan, yelped, pulled back his arm, and punched Dale right in the face, knocking him out.

Everyone went silent, staring.

"I panicked, okay! I take boxing lessons!"

"No you don't," chorused the class.

"Okay, I don't," admitted Elliot.

"Uh, so, we're friends?" asked Mikey. "What about Ricky?"

"You're all friends!" said Danny, forestalling another long digression. "All of you! All of us! Everyone in the class!" He circled the group to check on Dale.

"Even Dale?" asked Nathan.

Danny let out a sigh of relief as he found that Dale wasn't bleeding significantly and his pulse was steady. "Yeah, sure, whatever. Ancients, he's going to have brain damage at this rate. Does he have a glass jaw or something..?" He prodded Dale's face.

"He does not," said Dash. "Not that I'm defending him or anything, um, Fento- Phantom." He sounded nervous. Scared.

Danny pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Ow. That hurt. He pulled his hands away, putting them very deliberately on his knees.

"I'm not going to attack you. Hey, someone is going to have to carry him. He's pretty out." Danny poked Dale's face again.

"Here," said Ellie, flying over. "I have an idea."

(People tried to touch her feathers as she passed by.)
Danny stood and stepped back. "Go for it."

Ellie raised her hands, a few sparks flying off her fingers. "This'll be fun."

"No, wait," said Vlad. He sounded like he would prefer to do anything but speak up. "That won't work on a human." He swept his hair back behind his horns. "I'll wake him. It won't be pleasant. For either of us." The edges of Vlad's body went wavy and transparent.

"No, wait!" shouted Valerie, right before Vlad sunk into Dale's body. She cursed. "No-good, body-stealing..." she trailed off into outraged grumbles.

"So, what were you going to do?"

"Shock him? Shock him? Like, how much?"

"I don't know, until he wakes up?"

"Ellie..."

Dale sat up, eyes red.

"Well," he said, in Vlad's accent, "this is disgusting."

Vlad flew out of Dale, who immediately gripped his head in pain.

"Thanks," said Danny, directing the monosyllabic expression of gratitude at Vlad.

Vlad preened. "If only you let me train you..." Vlad cut himself off. "Excuse me."

Why had- Oh. Yeah. The secret wasn't officially out yet, for Danny. That was sporting of Vlad, considering that his secret was already out. Danny couldn't quite bring himself to say that it was nice.

"Dale," said Danny. "Can you get up? We've got to go."

Dale's response was muffled, but clearly uncomplimentary.

"We'll leave you here if you can't," lied Danny, who would do nothing of the sort, "just FYI, you know?"

With a groan, Dale got to his feet.

"D'you want some ice?" asked Danny.

"'M not a wimp."

"Okay, whatever, but do you want ice?"

Dale growled and stomped off.

"We're going this way," said Ellie, pointing in the opposite direction.
"Now," said Vlad, "keep in mind that the next floor is one that is divided into many rooms, and that some of them can be tempting."

"Tempting, how?" asked Danny, already not liking the sound of it.

Vlad rolled his eyes. "Well, it's somewhat ridiculous."

"It is not," said Prunella. "It's perfectly reasonable, and it shares the burden of research with those who have an inclination towards psychology!"

"It turns everyone into mad scientists. It's irresponsible."

"In all honestly, it isn't as if you need much help to turn into a mad scientist," shot back Prunella.

"He doesn't need any help at all," said Danny. "You sure it changed you? Ellie, did it change him?"

"I don't know, he never took me to that floor."

"I am not a mad scientist!"

"The term 'mad' isn't terribly accurate," said Prunella. "It's more along the lines of 'passionate.' Or perhaps 'motivated' is the correct term."

Danny sighed. On one hand, it was good to have a guide who knew the Tower well. On the other, Prunella was obviously mainly motivated by the prospect of collecting research data. Mainly. She also seemed like a decent person who didn't want them to get hurt. But. Yeah. Being looked at as mainly research subjects wasn't pleasant, nor did it engender trust.

"Do you get changed on the next floor?" asked Lester.

"Of course not! I'm always passionate!"

… This did not surprise Danny.

"What do you mean by tempting?"

"The rooms are labs. Fully stocked labs," said Vlad, wrinkling his nose. "Under the conditions of that floor, you will want to stay. Experiment. But you cannot. We must be extremely careful to avoid researchers and delays."

"Why?" asked Hannah.

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'vivisection?'"
Danny curled his lips back to show teeth. "Why would anyone want to stay here?" he asked, disgusted. "What's the point? It's completely enclosed! You can't see the stars. Although you wouldn't be able to in the Ghost Zone anyway. I can't imagine the setups for ectobiology, general ectology, metaphysics, and particle physics are any better. There just wasn't any thought put into this. I thought you said staying here would be tempting, Vladimir."

Vlad made a sound like a dying cat, which was exactly what Danny was going for. Hey, if Vlad called Danny 'Daniel' all the time, then Danny was very well going to call him by his full name. Especially since it annoyed him so much that Danny could make fun of him for being a grown man bothered by his own full first name. Not that the name, in itself, was a bad thing, nor was Vlad's dislike of it, but it was okay to mock since it was Vlad. Danny would mock Vlad for thinking the sky was blue, if he thought he could get away with it.

But even Vlad's discomfort wasn't enough to distract Danny for long.

"You said the labs were fully stocked," complained Danny. He opened a door to look in on an equally disappointing lab room.

"These first ones are always a little depleted," said Prunella. "So many people go through them, after all..."


There was a mutter of negatives, accompanied by a quiet "Butter biscuits," from Vlad, and a "The Missing!" from Mr Lancer.

"So no one," Danny gestured at the many doors out of the first lab, "saw where they went? None of you? And... Star is also missing. Okay."

"You didn't see where they went either, Danny," said Paulina. "Gosh, don't blame us for everything."

Danny blushed. There was his inability to talk to people properly popping up again. He wished he wasn't such a freak, sometimes. "I'm not. I'm just annoyed." He crossed his arms. "We're going to have to find them. Um. We know they couldn't have come through this door, since we were all looking at it, and that one is too close to Mr Lancer, so... That leaves those three." He pointed. "But we don't even know that they went together... I mean, they probably did. Mikey and Ricky are friends, right? But Star is... not. Right?"

"Uh, duh?" said Paulina. "Do you live under a rock, or something? It isn't rocket science. It isn't even dermatology."

"What does dermatology have to do with anything?" asked Danny.

"Me," said Paulina.

Danny blinked slowly at her. Was that supposed to make sense? He didn't really know. Why and
how could he understand some people so well, and others not at all?

"H-Hey," said Kwan, getting Prunella's attention. "Is there a medical research wing on this floor?"

"Yes," she said, "it's right over there, a few rooms down."

Kwan nodded.

Danny frowned. "Wait, Kwan, why-?"

"Sorry! I have to cure my dad's cancer!" He ran through the door.

There was a beat as the door swung behind him, and Danny, unwilling to leave the rest of the class, stared, frozen. Kwan's dad didn't even have cancer, as far as Danny knew, and Danny made it his job to know a lot about his people, even if he didn't understand it. Which was maybe a little creepy. But, hey. He was a ghost. That was his thing. One of his things.

The class scattered.

"No! No, don't!" shouted Danny. It didn't help any. He groaned, bent at the waist, and pounded his head into the metallic surface of a lab table. "Why?" he moaned. "Haven't we done this enough to know that it's a bad idea?"

The only people left were Danny, Vlad, Ellie, Prunella (who was smiling in the most infuriating way), Mia, Mr Lancer (who was gaping), and Ashley.

Danny moaned again. Even Valerie had jumped ship. Danny suspected that Mia was only still here because she couldn't see. From the way she was squinting, she was even more near-sighted than usual.

He picked himself up. "Okay," he said. "Everyone is supposed to be really smart on this floor, right? So, any insights about how to solve this problem?"

"Um," said Mia, raising her hand.

"Yes, Mia?"

"I don't think this floor makes us smarter, it just makes us dedicated scientists."

"Sure, but dedicated scientists who are in high school. Or... Huh. Well, only you and I are in high school. The rest of you... It still takes some intelligence to be a scientist, right? I think we have to be smarter. I hope we're smarter." He paused. "So, no ideas?"

"Now someone wants my ideas," muttered Mr Lancer. "They could have had them before but, no, the grants fell through... had to be a teacher... had to teach in ghost town... can't believe this..." Mr Lancer cleared his throat. "Other than going through room by room until we find them all? No."

"We could leave them," said Vlad. "We should leave them. Honestly, Daniel, they're more trouble than they're worth. We can send a specialist through to get them. Someone without a scientific bone in their body."

Danny knew a lot of people without any bones in their bodies, and he didn't think that would work. Many of them were very scientifically oriented.

"Yeah, no," said Danny. "They'll die."
"We could split up?" asked Ellie, dubiously.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Danny.

"I don't know," said Ellie. "I'd like to see the other labs, though."

"Really? You too? Prunella, do you know the layout of this floor? Please?" He approached her, hands clasped. "I don't want my friends to die in lab accidents. I've done that. It's not great."

"You've done that?" said Mia.

Danny winced. "Later."

Prunella sighed. "Not completely. But a friend of mine is here regularly. I know where she likes to stay."

Issitoq held the crystal disdainfully, between the very tips of two of his clawed fingers.

"Penelope Spectra," he said. "This is your last chance. You will find the abominations, and you will destroy them. Or I will arrange for your core to be dropped in the deepest, darkest hole I can find, and watch as you shrivel away. The only reason I haven't done it already, is because you did get the worst of the three of them out of Elysium."

The core vibrated slightly under his fingers.

"That goes for the rest of you as well," he said, regarding the assembled ghosts with a look akin to what one might bestow on another person's vomit. "You have one chance. One."

One ghost cackled. "For a chance at seeing what makes a halfa tick? I'll take the risk!"

The other ghosts twitched, muttered, or sniffled. Few of them nodded, or otherwise signified acknowledgment. Issitoq had to admit that he was scraping the bottom of the barrel with this. He was recruiting madmen from the Grinder. But he wanted to get rid of the abomination before it was back under Pandora's protection, and pulling more competent minions from farther afield in either time or space would draw suspicion and use more of the hourglass's power than he was willing to expend. He had back-up plans, but many of the more desperate ones required the hourglass.

With a flick of his fingers, Issitoq opened a portal that led from the small, dark cave to the appropriate Tower door.

"Go on, then."

He tossed the crystal to the ground. Its shadow twisted and boiled, lifting up off the floor in the form of pitch-black flames. It wasn't long before the shadow became a silhouette of a woman. One Penelope Spectra.

Spectra glowered at Issitoq, but said nothing before she, too, left for the Tower.
Prunella’s friend was not in residence, as it turned out. Also, their room, an odd combination between office space and lab, was a mess, a disaster area, worse than the Fenton’s basement lab. It looked like someone had ransacked it.

Danny held the collar of his shirt over his mouth. There was a nasty chemical smell in the air, and he didn’t want to breathe in any more of it than he had to.

"Is it always like this?" asked Danny, not daring to take more than a few steps in. There were things spilled on the floor.

"No," said Prunella. "This isn't right at all."

Danny shook his head. At least coming here hadn't been a total waste. They had located Rebecca and Elliot on the way, dragging them away from a group of ghosts researching biology just before Rebecca got stabbed with a nasty looking needle.

Most of the labs they had passed through were either set up for chemistry, biology, or ectobiology. Danny was somewhat intrigued by the ectobiology labs, but he had one in his basement, they were of limited interest to him.

None of the ghosts they had encountered had been very helpful. They were too absorbed in their studies, and were unwilling to be pulled away from them. Taking Elliot and Rebecca away had roused contention and ended in a tussle, but that tussle had ended quickly, with the ghosts bitterly returning to their work. Few of them would even talk to Danny and the others, none had noticed anyone else come in.

"Any idea what could have happened?"

Prunella shook her head. "No. She's always here. I don't understand what could have happened."

"She was attacked?" suggested Ellie. "I mean, that's what this looks like. Did she have any enemies?"

"That's a ridiculous question. Everyone has enemies. That's what happens when you're essentially immortal and hold grudges."

"Okay, what I meant was, does she have any enemies that could be here? And who, uh, would dump ten pounds of purple goo all over her floor?"

"I don't know!"

"Let's just go," said Danny. "The more time we spend here, the more likely it is that someone has their arm cut off for science."

Pandora’s lips thinned as she looked out over the battlefield from a relatively 'lofty' vantage. She didn't like what she was seeing. There were more mercenaries than she had initially estimated. They
had been hiding behind the flying islands, or standing by invisibly. Oh, to be certain sure, her people were more than holding their own. Each Elysian soldier was worth more than a dozen of these mercenaries. However, with groups Alpha and Beta in the Tower, all available soldiers were involved in the defense of the ship.

This meant there was no one to investigate or intervene when an incredibly suspicious and inconveniently timed portal appeared in front of one of the Tower's exterior doors, and disgorged a number of ghosts. The ghosts then proceeded directly into the Tower. This would have been bad enough, as most of them appeared to be the kind of deranged scientists that gave the Grinder its bad reputation, but then Pandora spotted one Penelope Spectra.

That was not good.

That was one of the floors Danny might be on. This felt like Issitoq's work, though she was unsure how he could have organized it all so quickly when he had been all but blindsided by the decision of the Council of Ancients. Not to mention the portal. Issitoq should not be able to do that. The creation of portals was a rare power, and not one that Issitoq possessed. Clockwork certainly wasn't going to make portals for Issitoq. Danny's safety, his child's safety, was one of the few loopholes in his contract he could actually use.

She could order the ship farther in, reduce the compliment protecting it, send those removed from the ship into the Tower after Spectra's cohort. That would be dangerous, but doable. The ship probably wouldn't be destroyed, and even if it was, the ship wasn't exactly necessary.

For ghosts.

No, for ghosts it would just make the journey back to Elysium take longer, be more difficult, if that. They had fast fliers among their numbers. But she hadn't brought the ship along just to make the trip easier, although that had been a consideration, she had brought it along so that there would be somewhere to put Danny's human classmates, so they wouldn't be forced to carry the humans in their arms all the way back to Elysium.

Then there were the humans already on board. She couldn't risk their lives like that.

On the other hand... Well. The situation was already chaotic. If things got worse, it could only be by increments.

(This was patently untrue, and Pandora knew it, but positive thinking was her bailiwick, and no small amount of her power.)

They would want to do it, to help. They had been pushing for it for a greater or lesser extent for the entire trip. Oh, she hoped she wasn't going to regret this.

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"Oh, cool," said Tucker. He bounced merrily over to the wall. "Check out these circuits!"

"Focus," said Sam, pulling him back.

The handful of Elysian ghosts that had accompanied them spread out, checking the room.
"Odd," said a ghost who had only introduced himself as the captain. "There should be people here."
He brushed his hand over a soldering iron. "This is still warm."

"Lunch break?" suggested Tucker.

"Unlikely," said Jazz.

"You don't think Spectra did something to them, do you?" asked Sam. "Something to make them leave?" She hesitated. "Hostages?"

"It was more than just Spectra that came in," said the captain. "Be wary."

"Sure," said Tucker, "but could I just maybe get a look at those circuit boards?"

"Tucker."

"Oh, fine."
Danny hid under a table as the cackling ghost in the lab coat shot a spray of ectoblasts across the room. Vlad and Ellie were locked in battle with the surprisingly tenacious ghost. Danny and the other students they had managed to pick up did their best to stay out of it.

Mia squealed.

"Mia! What-?"

"I'm fine! I'm fine!"

"I'll see what colors you have inside!" shouted the ghost, brandishing a scalpel. "We all will! They all will!"

What was it with everyone and vivisection? Just once, could he meet an obsessive scientist who was interested in half-ghost behavior?

Okay, that would probably be equally bad. He'd probably end up in, like, a zoo or something.

The door burst open. Valerie stood in the doorway, suit on, a gleaming red and silver gun in her hands. "Eat ectoblast, ghost!" she screamed, firing into the room.

She might have hit Vlad once. Or twice. In any case, she hit the scientist ghost a lot more.

"Ha!" said Valerie, as the ghost slumped unconscious to the ground after being thrown into a wall.

"That's right! Ha!" echoed Star gleefully, poking her head into the room alongside Mikey. "I told you we could fix it."

"Oh, hi," said Danny, removing himself from his hiding place and brushing shattered glass off his shoulders, and dropping shards intangibly through his hair. "Good timing. Anyone else with you?"

"Nathan and Lester," said Star, waving behind her. "Who have you guys got?"

"Me, Vlad, Ellie, Mia, Ashley, Rebecca, Elliot, Sarah, and Hannah," said Danny, pointing at each person as he went through the list. "So we're missing, um."

"Dash, Dale, Paulina, Tiffanie, Ricky, and Kwan," said Mr Lancer.

"Okay," said Danny. "That shouldn't be too bad. Do you think any of them are together, or..?"

"I saw Paulina go with Kwan," said Lester. He rubbed at his nose, pulling away a long string of snot. "I think I'm coming down with something."
"Ugh, that's not..." Danny trailed off. "Hey, there isn't any, like, infectious disease research going on here, is there?" he asked Prunella.

"Of course there is! But things like that won't leave the floor they were made on. As soon as we move on, if you picked something up here, it will vanish." She cocked her head. "Unless you die, I suppose."

"Brilliant," said Danny. "Just- Just great."

Lester looked pale. "I'm going to die?"

"You would probably come back as a ghost," said Prunella, cheerful.

"No," said Danny, coldly, severely. "That is not going to happen."

"Which part?"

"The dying part. Look, how about- How about, Vlad, you take these guys upstairs, and Ellie, Prunella, and I will look for everyone else? Ellie and I have good immune systems."

"Yours isn't all that shiny right now, considering, uh. You know. How beat up you are, and lack of sleep. Whatever. That stuff is supposed to weaken your immune system, right?" asked Ellie.

"I guess," said Danny. "I was thinking more about, you know."

Ellie frowned. "Didn't you get sick that one time, though? Sam and Tucker told me about it."

"Sort of? But, like, that was just the one time, and you've got to admit, I'm more qualified for looking for people, and with just one of us..."

"Yeah, but with what happened last time we did that..." Ellie trailed off "I think it would be better if it was just me, and Val, maybe. Val, are you up for that?"

"I'm up for anything with this baby," said Valerie, hoisting the gun, a broad grin on her face.

"Hey, what about us?" asked Mia. "I don't want to go! I haven't even been able to see anything! I want a chance to use the labs."

"I- Okay," said Danny. "How about- How about, if you still want a lab when we get out of here, we can, like, visit Method? Or I can show you our lab at home? Just, let's put it on hold for a minute? Get away from the people trying to kill us?"

Mia squinted at him, though Danny was entirely sure if it was out of suspicion or just because she couldn't see. "Ugh, fine."

"Great, so, you guys go with Vlad, and, uh, Vlad..."

Vlad sighed. "Very well, but you are coming with us."

"I can't, I've got to-"

"Go, Danny," said Ellie.

It was Danny's turn to sigh. "Fine."
The Elysians weren't picky about whether or not the scientists they fought had come in with Spectra or not. Jazz understood this, there was no way for them to tell who was who, and the scientists would not be permanently harmed by their experiences regardless. Ghosts were remarkably elastic, and the Elysians didn't even get close to destroying them.

It was still disturbing to watch, even for Jazz, who was used to seeing Danny's fights with ghosts. Danny typically did not beat ghosts into unconsciousness, preferring to capture them or chase them away, and when he did, it wasn't to this degree.

Tucker and Sam seemed less bothered. Jazz wasn't sure if this was because they were excellent at hiding their emotions, as they all had to be with how many secrets they kept, or if they had encountered this kind of violence more often. Either was possible.

Tucker retrieved an arrow from where it had hit a wall, still grumbling about the circuits, and how he wanted to test them. Sam had almost fallen to temptation in a bizarrely themed botany lab that had been host to, among other things, a plaque reading 'Botany Bay.'

Jazz didn't think she had been affected, but then, she wouldn't be, according to her understanding of the Digressed Tower's rules. She was already highly passionate about a science. But then, Tucker was too, so... Did a fascination with electronics not count? Or was this simply Tucker's normal personality? It was embarrassing that she couldn't tell for certain. Perhaps she had been changed.

"Hey, am I acting normally?" she asked.

Sam gave her a look. "Define 'normally.'"

"You know. Like I always do."

"I guess? I don't know you that well."

"Yes you do. We spend a lot of time together, ever since I joined the team."

"The what?"

"The team. Team Phantom."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what? Never mind."

"Wait," said Tucker. "Do you really not remember?"

"That is what this place does," said the captain. "What you know and what you don't know will change. Your best friends may become strangers to you."

Jazz shook off the feeling of unease that had settled over her. They had reached the next door, and one of the Elysians stood poised to open it. Others were positioned to storm the room. Jazz, Sam, and Tucker were ushered to the back, away from anything nasty that could emerge.

The door was pulled open, and the Elysians rushed in. "Humans!" shouted one, causing Jazz to perk up.
Then, more alarmingly, "Spectra!"

There was the sound of fighting.

With resignation, Ellie turned toward the sounds of battle. Sure, humans weren't likely to throw ectoblasts at each other, but (and here she glanced at Valerie) it wasn't impossible. Add that fact to Murphy's law, and the tendency of Danny's classmates to maximize how much trouble they were in, and it was almost certain that they were at least tangentially involved in the fight.

She sighed.

"Let's go check it out."

Danny reminded himself not to get angry, not to feel frustrated. He didn't want to randomly turn into a giant dragon in one of these cramped, chemical-filled labs. It was perfectly reasonable for Ellie to insist that he go up with the others, as injured and mentally drained as he was. It was probably for the best, anyway. He could make sure that Vlad didn't suck everyone's blood, or something.

It wasn't working.

He hummed a quick request to the wisps. Paused mentally, and gave them a headcount. Good. All of them were still there, at least. Unless this floor had made them forget some of them. But he couldn't dwell on that. He would work himself into a conniption, which was definitely contraindicated at this point.

The wisps hummed back, something about wanting to try out new techniques. Well, the floor would affect them too, he supposed. He cautioned them against trying anything too extreme.

He looked up to find Vlad shooting odd glances at him as they walked. Drifted, in Vlad's case. "You speak that remarkably well," said Vlad. "I hadn't quite realized before. Who taught you?"

"The ones back home, mostly," said Danny. "What does this next floor do?" He was beginning to hate that question. How many times had he asked it?

"It changes your social status. It's largely harmless, though somewhat unpleasant."

"Wait," said Danny, remembering something from social studies. "Your social status where? On Earth? The Ghost Zone? Canada?"

"In every place you have a social status," said Vlad.

"Oh," said Danny. "That sounds... complicated." It did. His social status in the Ghost Zone was vastly different from his social status in Amity Park, and it further varied from Realm to Realm. Then there were the questions of how much, and in what way. He didn't want to think about it. It was
giving him a headache.

"It can be, yes," said Vlad.

"Yeah? What happens to you, then?"

"A story for another time, I think."

Translation: Vlad was embarrassed.

"Does that mean that I'd be *unpopular*?" asked Paulina. They had found her and Kwan in a very suspicious, but thankfully abandoned, medical lab, on their way to the stairs.

Vlad gave her a sidelong look. "I suppose."

Paulina took in a deep breath, as if to argue, protest, or complain, but let it all out in a plaintive sigh, and slumped, losing her perfect posture. "Fine," she said. "I give up. Let it happen. You can all laugh at me, then leave me."

"What are you talking about?" asked Star. "We'll be unpopular, too, probably. Right, Mikey?"

In a display of either good taste or distraction, no one commented on the inclusion of Mikey.

"But you'll *see,*" said Paulina, "and when we get back home, you won't want to be seen with me anymore."

"We wouldn't be very good friends if we did that," said Star. "I mean, I won't say that I don't get *mad* at you sometimes, but we're still friends, and ditching you over something that happened in another universe would be pretty stupid. Back me up here, you two."

"Yeah," said Mikey, uncertainly.

"Duh!" said Kwan, with more force.

Paulina shook her head.

"Ah ha!" said Vlad. "Here are the stairs!" Apparently, billionaire half-ghosts didn't deal well with teenage drama. Several of the teenagers glared at him.

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Jazz only caught Spectra's tail end, disappearing through the far door. One of the Elysians threw the door open to follow, but she was already gone. The Elysian cursed in Greek.

"Whatever she said to you," said Jazz, hoping to head off later issues, "it isn't true. She just finds what hurts and twists the knife." She looked around the room. "There were people...? Oh," she said as she caught sight of Dash and Tiffanie. Dash was crying, Tiffanie was pale-faced and shaking.

"It *was* my fault he left," said Tiffanie.

"What did I do?" asked Dash.
"Um," said Jazz. This was, perhaps, a little beyond her present level of expertise.

She looked at Sam and Tucker. Perhaps they would know..? But they were giving her looks in return that clearly said, 'Don't look at us.' Helpful.

"Are either of you hurt?" she asked, choosing not to go into what Spectra said that had traumatized them. Studies she had recently read indicated that forcing someone to talk about an incident could be counterproductive.

"I've hurt..."

"You're hurt?"

"I've hurt people," said Dash. "It was just a thing to do. It wasn't supposed to matter. I didn't want-"

"Maybe we can save the mental breakdowns for later?" said Sam, rather sharply. "Where is everyone else?"

Jazz gave Sam a look, but either she didn't see the look, or didn't understand the look due to universe changes.

That was an odd thing to think.

"Hey," said Jazz, returning her attention to Dash, "it's okay to make mistakes, that's how we learn and grow. Now that you know, um, what you know, you can move on, and make amends." She really hoped she wasn't doing more damage.

"I can't make amends," said Dash, tearfully. "He'll forgive me."

Jazz blinked. Had she misheard? "Isn't that what you want?"

"Not if he doesn't have any choice!"

"Are you talking about Danny?"

"... Yes."

"Then, trust me, he has a choice. I don't think he's forgiven me for burning a hole in one of his NASA posters, yet, and I'm his sister."

Dash looked up, and Jazz wondered if that was the tack she should have taken.

"I mean, Danny's more forgiving than most people I know, but he's not a saint," she tried, "and it isn't as if anyone is going to force him to forgive you."

"Are you sure?" asked Dash, voice hushed.

"Positive," said Jazz. "Spectra lies. Don't let her get under your skin." She paused. "But it really would be a good thing if you could tell us where Danny and the others are. Can you do that?"

"No," said Dash. "We, uh, we sorta ditched them. Tiff wanted to see if they had any sociology stuff set up, and I wanted to see if I could get some nitroglycerin going..."

Jazz made a face. "Right. Well. How about you two get up, and we can start trying to find them?"
Chapter 147: A Free Society

"So, you're saying I'm a social pariah," Danny laughed a little at this, "basically at the bottom of the food chain?"

This floor was set up like a high-end restaurant. Danny was currently perched on one of the bar stools, alternating between trying to convince the bartender to give him a drink and listening to his friends swapping stories. He was stressed, and worried about all his friends left on the lower floor, but there wasn't anything he could do about that. He might as well make the best of the situation he was in.

"Pretty much," said Mikey.

It was fascinating how much everyone had changed on this floor. Mikey was, sadly, considered to be rather unpopular in Danny's universe, shy and soft-spoken. He was still well thought of, but he wasn't thought of often. Here, though, he was confident, and brash, and dressed significantly more boldly than was his norm back home.

"And this 'A-list' thing? What's that?"

"Well, it's all the popular people," said Lester. "Basically, me, Nate, Dash, Paulina. You know."

"W-wait," said Paulina, nervously, "I'm popular? For real? That wasn't just, um, the other floors being weird?"

"Yeah, you're pretty popular," said Danny. "In my universe at least. But we don't have this... 'A-list' thing. I'm not really sure what the point is?"

"Well," said Mikey, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "if you aren't in the A-list, you can't get invited to parties, or respect from everyone else, or discounts at the Nasty Burger, or, well, things like that."

"How does being popular translate into discounts at the Nasty Burger?"

"I- er. Never mind that."

"Are you bullying the cashiers into giving you money?"

"That- um. Nooo. Nope. Do you really not have that kind of thing in your version of reality?"

Danny laughed a little. "Um. No. That sounds as distopian as heck, actually. I mean, really, that sounds like a caste system."

"You're saying you don't have cliques?"

"There are cliques, sure, just, they aren't that important."

"Weird."
"But I was this close to making a functional battle robot!" complained Ricky as Val and Ellie dragged him out of the lab.

"No you weren't," said Prunella, sounding bored.

"What do you know about battle robots?" demanded Ricky angrily.

"More than I want to," said Prunella.

"Look, maybe you two can bond over robots or something," said Ellie, shoving Ricky in Prunella's direction, "since you were so helpful when we were fighting the angry dry dude in the polo shirt."

Prunella raised an eyebrow, but took hold of Ricky's sleeve. "I think the word you're looking for is 'desiccated.'"

"I was talking more about the way he talked, but that, too. Yeah. Sure." Ellie sighed, heavily.

"Hey," said Valerie. "Are you sure this is the way we were going before?"

"No, but the fighting sounds have stopped, so there isn't anything we can follow."

"Great."

"Yeah, great."

Wes Weston leaned around the corner and took a picture. He wasn't sure how he had been chosen to do this. Apparently, he was the best at taking 'uncomfortable' and 'compromising' pictures, whatever that meant. He took normal pictures! Selfies, pictures of friends, pictures of sunsets, interesting dogs, that kind of thing... And, okay, pictures of ghosts, for his website. And the odd picture of Danny Phantom aka Danny Fenton, who was a ghost. How else was he going to reveal the truth?

… And, yes, okay, many of those were taken in the bathroom. Or in storage closets. Or from trees. It wasn't his fault Fenton was so elusive!

Yeah.

So, here he was. In a 'restricted' zone (and, jeez, that was so stupid) trying to take pictures of the GIW doing... Things. He didn't know enough to tell what they were doing. It seemed to involve a lot of vans pulling up in front of the Fenton household. A lot of vans. And briefcases. And big, puffy HAZMAT suits.

He really hoped he wasn't going to get cancer from being here. He wouldn't be the only one, though. Other people had volunteered to spy on the GIW. Other people weren't so close, though.

Wes took one last picture, and slipped away, back to the streets he was 'allowed' to be on. He stayed wary, however. There was a good chance one of the agents occupying the city would accost him,
ask him where he had been, and where he was going, toss him in 'holding' for a couple days, search his house, and confiscate all his stuff. It had happened to other people he knew. It was why his group of conspirators had decided to move all the incriminating evidence out of their homes. Well. Most. All would be difficult, with the curfew and other restrictions.

A dust devil spun across the empty street in front of him. He paused.

Weird things had been happening lately, even if one ignored the GIW. Street names would change while no one was looking. His neighbor swore up and down that a skyscraper that no one else had ever heard of had disappeared overnight. Extra notes on agent movements were written into their notebooks in unfamiliar hands. Yesterday, his friend, Zane, claimed that some agents had looked right at him while he was out after curfew, but that they hadn't seen him. There were reports that Marley Park (the largest, most popular, and most haunted public park in Amity Park) had started screaming a couple days ago, before the GIW had set it ablaze with flamethrowers. Wes himself had seen lights moving in houses he knew to be abandoned.

This being Amity park, there was really only one explanation. Well, Hannah, would claim aliens were also a valid explanation, but Wes didn't think that was very likely. He'd put his money on ghosts. Ghosts, who were probably even more unhappy about the occupation of Amity than the humans.

There was no dust on the rain-soaked street. Nor, for that matter, was there a breeze. Was this some kind of warning? Should he hide? He should probably hide, regardless. He backed himself into the shoulder-width gap between the fences encircling two small yards. Yeah. This was a crappy place to hide.

The ground began to rumble. Okay, this was an incredibly stupid place to hide. He was going to die here.

A black cat ran through the slice of street Wes could see. Was that Inky? Was that his cat? What the heck?

Whether it had been Inky or not, the small, normal, black house cat was quickly followed by a much, much larger, spotted cat. Then another. Then a larger striped cat. Orange and black striped, to be precise. A few dogs ran by, accompanied by what he was fairly confident were wolves, coyotes, and foxes. Then a number of rather exotic deer, all with various birds and monkeys on their backs. Then a rhinoceros. A rhinoceros. A rhinoceros being ridden by a large, white and purple gorilla. Then, as if the universe was trying to one-up itself, a second rhinoceros stampeded by, this one ridden by two gorillas, one significantly smaller than the other. Elephants followed shortly after, then a number of less-swift creatures. Including bears. Large bears. Wes held his breath until they went by.

The sky went dark, and Wes looked up. That was a large number of birds.

Only after Wes was completely sure the stampede was over (Was it really a stampede? It seemed too organized.) did Wes squeeze himself out of the gap.

That was... different.

Inky was quite pleased with herself. It wasn't every day that one liberated an entire zoo. True, she
didn't do it on her own. Even for a cat of her considerable skill, that would have been impossible. But between all the ghosts that despised what was happening to the town, the clever hands of the primates, a rather foolish GIW-hired set of zookeepers (the original, well-liked ones having been told to stay home after the GIW shut the zoo, and most other recreational areas, down indefinitely), and a set of handy inter-dimensional 'shortcuts,' it was quite doable.

It was a little more difficult to arrange for places for all of the freed animals to stay until things returned to their rightful state, and Inky had wisely left that part to more humanoid ghosts. Amity Park was riddled with hiding places. There were locales and locations only visible if seen sideways, or glimpsed half-asleep, roads that could only be entered with a toll, exact change, buildings that needed keys, or passwords, mirrors that were actually doors, and doors that only appeared on certain dates. Inky knew that even she was aware of only a fraction of the forever-shifting, forever increasing constellations of byways and tiny, secret worlds.

But there had been places, more than enough. There would have been more if the GIW hadn't burnt down the park, destroying the most reliable entrance to the most appropriate place for the living animals to stay. It didn't matter. Amity would adapt. Amity would provide.

"Okay," said Ellie, "what the actual heck made you think this was a good idea?"

Dale was lying on the floor. Prunella had a number of syringes set up and was injecting them sequentially into his leg. His arms weren't available for that purpose, as the easy to get to veins had already been used. By him. He had, apparently, been trying to turn himself into the Hulk. His words, not Ellie's.

"I mean, you're really lucky you're not dead, and that Prunella knows how to fix overdoses from ghost steroids."

"I was thinking that maybe I'd be able to protect myself," growled Dale.

"There are other ways to do that," said Val.

"That's easy for you to say. You two have ghost powers."

Ellie shifted uncomfortably. That was true. "Poisoning yourself isn't going to help, though. Look, just stop doing this... stuff, and we'll try to get you lessons, or something. Weapons. I don't know. But you have to get through this without dying. Please. I mean, just, show a modicum of common sense."

"I have a modicum of common sense! I have more than a modicum! I have a bunch! I graduated from college at fifteen. I'm a biochemist, for crying out loud."

"That means nothing," said Valerie. "You still injected yourself with a dozen things without knowing what they were, or what they'd do. That's nuts."

"I knew what they'd do!"

"No, you didn't," said Prunella.
"... I thought I knew what they'd do."

The door opened. Ellie tensed, raising her fists. Valerie raised her weapon.

"Well, hello hello, children," said Penelope Spectra.

Oh, well. This wasn't good. After everything, Ellie wasn't in fighting shape. How did Spectra even get here? According to what Danny, Valerie and the others had told her when she first met up with them, outside the Tower, she'd been reduced to her core. There was no way to recover from something like that so quickly.

"Ignorant children," continued Spectra. "And you. Whoever you are. I."

Ellie threw an ectoblast directly at Spectra's head. The ghost dodged, body deforming to do so, and laughed. Valerie hoisted her weapon. Ricky hid inside a cabinet. Dale, however, wasn't in any condition to move, and Prunella stayed by him.

"You there, not a fighter, hm? Letting these children do everything for you? An adult like you?"

Prunella hissed. "Better than you, you fraud!"

Spectra laughed. "Oh? Me? I'm the fraud? You're the one living in a fantasy world. And you, Dale Gordon, don't think of yourself as a scientist. You're at the bottom of your class, a failure in every sense of the word. The only thing you have going for you is muscles, and it looks like you're not going to have that anymore, either, not if this hack has anything to say about it! But then, you did this to yourself, didn't you? Shouldn't you know better than to play with test tubes?"

"Shut up!" shouted Ellie, as she chased the fiery ghost around the room. She was trying to hit her with a blast of ice, on the theory that fire and ice didn't mix well, but Spectra was too quick. Neither she nor Valerie hadn't been able to get a clean hit on Spectra.

"Oh, yes, the little clone would know all about test tubes, wouldn't it? Pity you aren't a very good clone. The original puts up much more of a fight!"

Ellie tamped down on her anger. She had put those issues behind her.

"You know he resents you, don't you? What am I saying, you'd have to be blind not to see that!"

Ellie refused to engage, refused to give Spectra more ammunition. It was what the woman wanted, and Ellie wasn't about to play along.

"I wonder what it would take to make him hate you? Not much. The loss of one of his precious humans perhaps?" With that, Spectra dove at Dale, claws extended.

Ellie, not even thinking once, jumped in front of Spectra, who immediately latched on, her claws digging through Ellie's suit, into her skin. Spectra smiled.

"Your original" purred Spectra, "wouldn't have let me get a hold of him so-"

"Let her go!" said Valerie.

"Oh, don't think of yourself as a hero, Valerie! We both know it isn't true. After all, it's your fault everyone is in this situation, isn't it? If only you had trusted your friends over a complete stranger."

"It's your fault-!"
"I only told you what you wanted to hear, my dear, and what you wanted to hear was that all ghosts were monsters, and that you were the victim. Sound familiar?"

The thing about being 'caught' by Spectra was that Ellie was also in a very good position to hit Spectra. Vampiric abilities or not, grappling someone who could freeze things with a touch was a dumb move. Actually, grappling ghosts was generally pretty risky. It was why so many preferred ranged attacks.

Spectra flinched away from Ellie as ice climbed up her arms, coating them to the elbows. It was Ellie's turn to don a wicked grin. Spectra had finally bit off more than she could chew.

The door slammed open. A number of unfamiliar ghosts swarmed in. Enemies?

As they immediately started attacking Spectra, Ellie decided that they probably weren't. Or, at least, they were enemies who wanted to beat up Spectra, and Ellie was happy to let them do that. Now, how to disengage gracefully, ie, without getting an ectoblast in her face..?

"Ellie!"

Ancients! She knew that voice!

"Jazz?"
"So, Vlad, what about you?" asked Daniel, far too innocently.

"Excuse me?" asked Vlad, who had managed to distract himself from the inanities being spewed by the children.

"What about you? How have you been changed? You've heard how all of us have been changed, so it's only fair if we hear how you're different." Daniel swung his feet back and forth on the stool and tilted his head. There was something desperate in his gaze, a need to be distracted. "Like, why did you change to ghost form right away. You weren't on the last floor, I think."

Vlad thinned his lips. Of course he changed right away. His ghost form actually looked respectable, unlike his human one. He didn't want to talk about this.

Daniel was fidgeting on the bar stool, looking anxious. He glanced at the door.

Vlad sighed. "I am a fugitive," he said, grudgingly.

"What?"

"I'm a fugitive, on Earth. I've been on the run from the law for longer than you've been alive. I rarely return to Earth, nowadays."

"Why?" asked Danny. "What did you do?"

"Why do you assume that I did something? Perhaps I was framed. Perhaps the GIW or other hunters discovered me."

Daniel's eyebrows knit together in worry. "The GIW is after you?"

"No," Vlad admitted.

"Then what happened?"

Vlad's sigh was deeper this time. "I was caught on tape in a high security area in a military facility, where I wasn't supposed to be."

"In human form?"

"Yes."

"Where you weren't supposed to be?"

"Yes, Daniel."

"Then it was something you did."

"Yes, I suppose it was. It's the principle of the thing. It might have been something entirely different."
"But it wasn't. What were you even doing there?"

"Spying on a potential business rival," said Vlad. "Sadly, I did not have full control of my powers at that juncture, and they tended to... malfunction, when I over-strained them."

"Then you shouldn't have been going into 'high security military facilities,'" said Daniel, crossing his arms. "But you're okay? Like, your human form isn't, like, weird or diseased, or anything, right?"

"No, it is not."

Unbelievably, Spectra got away. Again.

Jazz pinched the bridge of her nose. That was going to be a recurring headache and a massive problem.

On the plus side, however, they had found Ellie, Valerie, Ricky, and Dale, and they knew where Danny was. In theory.

"Alright, who else haven't you found, again?" she asked Ellie.

"Just Paulina and Kwan, but they might have made their way up to the next floor on their own. Maybe. Or they could have run into Danny and the others. Vlad's been traveling with us, by the way."

"And he's been behaving?"

"More or less. I mean, he's still Vlad."

Jazz wrinkled her nose slightly. "Yeah. He's probably going to try to use this to back him up in court."

"Yeah, I know, that crossed my mind, too. I don't know if Danny realizes, he's got other things on his mind, but, you know, we kind of have to get there first. Priorities, you know."

"I get it, I get it," said Jazz. "So, what now? Do we go looking for Paulina and Kwan, or..?"

"We must find Phantom first," said the Captain. "Be warned, the next floor is tricky."

Issitoq's approval and coin, Spectra decided, wasn't worth it. She wasn't what she would call well-versed in the abilities of the Observants, much less the Head Observant, but her own abilities, her perception, her power, and her skill, told her that if he couldn't reach into the Tower to destroy the brat, he wasn't going to be able to destroy Spectra, either. As long as she stayed in the Tower, that was.
It would be a distinct reduction of the freedom she usually enjoyed, but it was necessary, and she doubted she would have to endure it for long. She didn't have any objections to Phantom's destruction, and she was clever enough to avoid responsibility, but Issitoq? He wasn't exactly being subtle. He would face the wrath of every one of the child's allies, whether he succeeded or not.

Honestly, he didn't stand a chance.

Changing floors was one of the strangest things Jazz had ever experienced. That was saying a lot, since she had experienced many, many, strange things. She kind of had to, to become a captain of an Elysian company despite being a living human.

This thought, however, was driven from her mind as her brother collided with her.

"Jazz!" he said. He smiled up at her. "You're here! And you found everyone! Have you come to rescue us?"

"That we have," said Jazz. "We'll still have to travel through the Tower for a while, so we can meet up with Team Beta." She turned to her troops. "Alright, form up and secure this floor."

The thing was, she wasn't the only one who said those last words.

She frowned. "Alright, how many of us think they're in charge?"

Several hands went up.

Once who was in charge got sorted out (and Danny finished hugging his friends), preparations were made to go to the next floor, such as raiding the restaurant for food and water. The Elysians paid, but made sure the (rather eclectic) staff understood that refusing wasn't really an option. Danny didn't like strong-arming people like that, but if they got stuck on one of the other floors, the humans in their party would need that food, and Danny was just so relieved to have someone else, someone trustworthy, in charge. He felt safer than he had for days.

"The next floor," said one of the Elysians, "alters your history so that you spent a period greater than a year unjustly imprisoned. It tends to be a rather disturbing floor, but do not fear. We," he nodded at his fellow soldiers, "will be unaffected, as we have already experienced such a thing in our long service to Elysium. We will be able to guide you without any problems."

Danny nodded, happy to receive this reassurance. The others looked less convinced. He sighed, letting his head rest on Tucker's shoulder. They were going to get out of this, and everything would be fine.

"I missed you guys," said Danny.

"We missed you, too, dude."
"Thanks for coming for us."

"Hey," said Sam, "you'd come for us. You have come for us before."

Danny nodded. "So, what's with the camera?"

"Long story."

They went up the stairs, Danny kept a hold on the hem of Sam's shirt. Sam didn't mind. He had been through a lot, and he occasionally got clingy when stressed. Heck, Sam was feeling a little clingy herself, not great for her image as goth queen of Casper High, but image wasn't impor-

The thought dissolved as they reached the next floor. It was replaced with the memory of a half a year at juvie (she had not been breaking and entering, that had been the ghosts), followed by half a year at a boarding school, followed by blackmailing her parents into letting her go to Casper High again.

So there was more than one kind of unjust imprisonment. Interesting. She'd be glad to be out of here, so she could bleach both juvie and the boarding school from her brain. Yikes. Her shirt pulled as she stepped forward again, and she turned her head to check on Danny.

She almost swallowed her tongue.

On one hand, she approved of the goth look one-hundred percent. Black turtleneck? A little hipster, but good. Black gloves? Very good. Black jeans? Excellent. Black combat boots? Superb. She was rocking her own pair right now.

The leather eye patch?

Oh, yeah, definitely cool, but what did he do to his eye? And the other scars? They'd be interesting on a fictional character. On her best friend? Not good. How many more did the turtleneck and gloves hide?

"Sam?" he asked, clearly upset. There were tears welling up in his one visible eye.

"Yeah, that's me," said Sam. "What's up?"

He sniffed, then hugged her. His hug was tighter than usual, and colder. Sam patted him on the back, hoping he didn't have any injuries.

"Hey," she said, "it's okay. We're all here, now."

"I missed you so much!" he said.

"I know, I missed you, too."

"You understand why I couldn't come to see you, right?" said Danny, revealing that he was living out a completely different scenario than Sam. "I wanted to, but I couldn't."
"I- um."

Danny pulled away, frowning, and looked around. "Wait, this is, um," he ran his hand through his hair. "This is the Tower. The Crooked Tower. This is the Tower, so... This isn't- That's not what happened. That didn't happen? I don't-" He caught sight of Jazz, who was presently sporting some very short hair, and literally bounced over to her. "Jazz, Jazz, Jazz! You're here!" He grabbed hold of Tucker. "And you're here!" He looked really happy, which was a stark contrast to virtually everyone else in the group, most of whom were taking turns glaring at each other. "I love you guys," he said, leaning heavily into Jazz. He perked up again. "Oh! Ellie! Look! Everyone is here."

Ellie was wearing an old-fashioned striped prison jacket over her normal jumpsuit. "Yep. Sure looks like everyone's here," she said. "Are you okay? What happened to you?"

"I'm okay," said Danny, brightly.

"I think she means," started Jazz, "you're a lot different now than you usually are. Where were you unjustly imprisoned, and why?"

Danny started. He looked down at his feet. "We don't talk about that," he muttered.

"Okay," said Jazz. "No worries. We won't talk about that. Right guys?"

Whatever had happened to Jazz, her glare had become a lot more effective. Everyone nodded, even Ricky, who appeared to be going through some kind of extreme grunge-punk phase, and had about three times as many piercings as Sam.

"Good," said Jazz.

Danny sniffed and leaned into Jazz. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Yeah, me too."

Sam's lips twitched up. Same old Danny, same old Jazz, no matter that they had been in jail or whatever for over a year. Her face fell as she realized that Danny's imprisonment almost definitely was in the 'or whatever' category. Judging by how he was acting... And the fact he was missing an eye... Yeah. Sam really didn't want to think about it.

She looked around the room. It was darker than the lower floor. The lights were flickering and fluorescent. The walls were concrete and covered in graffiti. It looked like a prison. A stereotypical prison. Appropriate.

Oddly, it reminded her more of the boarding school than juvie.

There was just one door out of the room other than the one they had come in through. Sam frowned. It would be a good place to stage an ambush. Yes, the room directly off the stairs would have been just as good, if not better, but it looked like the Elysians had the same idea. They were heavily guarding both doors.

"What's wrong?" asked Danny.

Sam jumped. She hadn't heard Danny getting closer. He could be so quiet sometimes. He was standing on the balls of his feet, staring up into her face, and just slightly too far into her personal space.

"Just worried we might get attacked," said Sam.
"Don't- You don't- You don't need to worry," said Danny, bouncing, "I'll protect you."

"That's our job today," said the Elysian captain. "You need not worry, mimaalesuulsei."

Danny turned his wide, one-eyed gaze to the captain. "Yes I do," he said very seriously.

The captain smiled. Danny hid himself behind Sam and started mumbling to himself under his breath.

"Hey, come on," said Jazz, "let's get over to the side. Just in case." She took hold of Danny by the shoulders, and gently lead him away, towards the wall.

Sam glanced around the room again, this time focusing on the other people in it. Specifically, her classmates. She had to wonder what had happened, for none of them to be making fun of Danny for saying that he would protect her. Normally Dash and Dale especially would be laughing at the idea that a 'wimp' like Danny could protect anyone.

Maybe they hadn't noticed. Maybe they were too tired, too worn down to object. Maybe they had finally gotten it through their thick heads that Danny wasn't a wimp, and was actually quite a bit tougher than any of them. It wasn't like Danny had been keeping that particular thing a secret. He had stopped trying even before they got out of his lair.

Sam followed Jazz and Danny to the wall, and made sure her weapons were free.

The surgeon wasn't what he would call a great tactical thinker, but he wasn't an idiot. He wasn't going to just go and attack Phantom with no plan! That would be the highest form of insanity, and the surgeon liked to stay comfortably in the middle levels. He would treat himself to maniacal laughter only on special occasions.

Therefore, he had a plan. A number of plans, actually. Or perhaps he should say it was one plan with many steps. That was worth thinking about.

In any case, the first thing he did on entering the Tower was use the floor's superior facilities to create a few minions. No one would miss those limbs. Really, no one. They would be too busy being his minions!

The surgeon indulged in a bit of laughter.

He wouldn't be attacking from the front, either. That was stupid! And predictable! Predictable was bad! The unexpected would always be victorious, and in this case, unexpected would be attacking up the stairs! Attacking from behind! With his army of minions!

Well. Small company of minions. But they had backwards hands and odd numbers of limbs and eyes! Gloriously unexpected! Beautiful! Especially the stitches. All the nice, thick stitches, more than on baseballs. Wonderful!

They could have been better, of course. The quality of the facilities was excellent, the best that the surgeon could ask for, but the materials were so-so. Everyone on this floor was- had been, the surgeon corrected himself- Obsessed with science. They didn't get out very much. They had poor
eyesight. Their bones were... eh. But he made do.

He wouldn't have to for much longer, though. That was the beauty of this. In just a little bit, he'd be able to get his hands on some grade-A material. Liminals! Real ones! The surgeon could barely contain his excitement.
Chapter 149

Chapter 149: A Confusion

Everyone was looking at the door out of the room. Danny wasn't sure why. It wasn't very interesting. There wasn't even anyone on the other side.

The door back down on the other hand...

Danny didn't like how that door felt. It had... It was a division. Something. A membrane. Danny didn't think he could articulate. He wasn't very eloquent lately. He hadn't been for a long time. How long? How long, how long... That sounded funny. Words sounded funny, if you said them enough times.

He stifled a giggle. Everyone else was being so quiet. It would be rude.

What had he been thinking about?

It couldn't have been imp-

The door behind them flew open, catching one of the Elysians standing next to it in the face. The other Elysian guarding the door raised his weapon, but was bowled over by the creatures that came flying into the room.

No, not creatures. People. People who had been hurt and changed and twisted-

(Like Danny.)

-Danny didn't like it. No. No. No. They shouldn't be like that. It was wrong. They were hurt, they were hurt and they shouldn't be. They were being controlled.

And they were going to hurt his people! Why were there so many of his people here?

(Later, later.)

Who could fix this?

There was a hospital he'd been to once. Twice. Several times. They were good at this kind of thing. He couldn't recall what it was named, but that didn't matter.

So, he sent the other people there.

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The receptionist at the Duat Hospital sighed as several mutilated ghosts fell through a portal in the middle of the lobby. She picked up her phone. It was going to be a busy day in the surgery department.
He doubled over. Ow, ow, ow. His core hurt. Why did his core hurt?

"My minions!" shouted an aggrieved voice. "What did you do? Where did they go?" This was followed by the sound of something heavy hitting someone's face, and then a body hitting the floor.

"Danny?" That was Jazz. Jazz, Jazz, Jazz. How had she gotten here? Where was Frostbite? He'd come into the Tower with Frostbite. He was glad Jazz was here.

Oh no. His nose was leaking. He hated that. It was so gross.

"Is he bleeding ectoplasm?"

Who was that? It was one of his old classmates. It had been such a long time. Hannah. It was Hannah, who was blonde and short, and far too curious.

"Yes," said Danny. "Jazz, my insides hurt."

Jazz's frown was thin and flat. "Danny, did you open those portals?"

"What?" said Valerie. "He can do that now?"

"Mhm," said Danny. Didn't she know he could do that? She should know. Danny had thought she knew. Maybe he had been wrong. He had a hard time remembering things, sometimes.

(That's what happened when people put needles in your brain and cut you open.)

He blinked hard. His skin stuck strangely to the eye patch. Oh, no, was his bad eye leaking, too? He hated that. He would have to take his eye patch off to make sure his eye didn't get all crusty and hurt, and people acted weird when he took off his eye patch.

But it had to come off, anyway. He peeled it back from his skin, and it made an awful sticky noise. Ectoplasm dripped on the floor. He closed his eyes. He didn't want to see that.

"Oh my gosh," said Paulina. "His eye."

Danny dabbed at his eye with his sleeve. Gross, gross, gross. He kept doing this. Frostbite said if he kept straining his eye, it would never heal.

"Danny," said Jazz, getting his attention. "Your core is injured."

"Well, I mean, I mean, um, yeah. I sort of- I got that I- um. Why? I don't think- I don't remember- I don't remember doing anything to it, um, recently." Danny frowned. Had he said that right?

"It happened before you got to the Tower," said the doctor woman. Her name had something to do with plums? "Here, let me help you with your eye."

Danny licked his lips, and turned slightly towards her. "Okay," he said. He was holding onto Jazz's hand.

"It was very good," said Jazz, "that you helped us. That you protected us. But you can't do that
"What do you mean he can't do that again?" asked Elliot. "If he can make portals, he can take us home!"

Sam scoffed. "Be serious. Are you going to take the risk that those portals will drop you in whatever universe he comes from?"

"Actually-" started the doctor woman. Prunella! That was her name.

Sam nudged her with her foot.

"Even if that wasn't a problem, you see what *those* portals did to him," continued Sam. "So lay off."

"Tucker," said Danny.

"Yeah, what's up, man?"

"Why do you have a bow?"

"To shoot things with."

"Oh. Okay, that's cool." Danny licked some of the ectoplasm off his lips. It was sticky, sticky, sticky. It felt like he had smeared the ectoplasm all over his face. He probably had.

The pain in his chest was subsiding. He could probably stand, but Prunella was touching his eye, and that probably wasn't a good idea. Hopefully, he would remember that.

Byron stood outside the open door frame of Alice's house and clapped. Alice brushed the beaded curtain back.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Want to go exploring?" Byron asked. Things had been surprisingly quiet (that is to say, boring) ever since the people from Amity Park left. The absence of many of the adults and ghosts probably added to the sense of stillness that laid over Harmony.

"Uh," said Alice, looking back over her shoulder. "Sure. Why not? Who else is going?"

Byron shrugged, and leaned against the side of the house. "I haven't asked anyone else yet, but I was thinking Sonia, Teddy, Ada, Bobby, Ben, Tandi, she kind of got left out, last time. Maybe Ryan."

"Isn't Sonia's place closer to yours than mine?" asked Alice. The implied question was clear. Why did Byron come here first?

"She's over at Teddy's."

"Okay. Yeah. Let me just grab a thing, first." She disappeared behind the curtain.

"A thing?"

"Great vocabulary there."

"Pot. Kettle. Found it!"

It turned out that Sonia and Teddy were busy working one of the gardens, Bobby was tied up doing something for his parents, Tandi was, well, they couldn't find Tandi, and Ryan was stuck doing make-up schoolwork. She liked disappearing, sometimes.

So, it was Alice, Byron, Ben, and Ada who left to explore.

"We are going to the Deeps, right?" asked Ben, as they angled towards the town hall.

"That was my plan," said Byron, "are you alright with that?"

"Oh, yes. I've wanted another look down there for weeks."

"Sounds like a fun plan."

The four Harmonians jumped at the new and unexpected voice. A blue-eyed shadow gave them a jaunty wave.

"Mirror?" asked Byron.

"Or Mirage?" asked Alice.

The shadow smiled broadly, eyes closed, head tilted. Byron briefly wondered how he could see where he was going.

"You got me~" sang the shadow. He opened his eyes. "Hey, want to play a game?"

The four children exchanged glances.

"Mirage, then," said Alice. "What kind of game?"

"Oh, gosh, there are so many~" The shadow flinched away, blinking hard.

"Is something wrong?" asked Byron.

The shadow made an odd face. "No, no, nothing." He ran a hand through his hair. "Just, your landlords aren't in the most comfortable of places, currently. Nothing we can do about it, so why not have some fun? Oh! I know! A scavenger hunt! I'll write up some lists, and meet you downstairs!"

The shadow melted away.

"That was a bit odd," observed Ben.

"Oh, you think?"
Ellie crossed her arms and stared down at her brother. This was- she didn't like this. She didn't like seeing Danny hurt like this, fragile like this, confused like this. He was the one that always saved her. He had rescued her from her latest screw-up (aka being arrested by Walker and locked in his prison), even if he'd shown up way, way late.

That was why they were here. Hiding from Walker. At least, that's why Ellie thought they were here. Judging by the presence of Danny's classmates, teacher, and Vlad, however, that wasn't the case. When they'd come in the Tower, it was just Danny and Ellie.

Danny looked up at Ellie. His left eye was liquid green and burned bright, like a star trapped at the bottom of a lake. It dripped down his cheek. Prunella wiped the ectoplasm away, and covered the eye with a thick, blue-tinted cream. Danny tensed and hissed.

"It's okay," soothed Prunella. "Sorry, I should have warned you."

"It's okay," Danny said. He looked back up at Ellie, and smiled, somewhat absently. "You're wearing stripes," he observed.

"Yeah," said Ellie. She hadn't yet had a chance to change out of her prison uniform.

"Was Walker being mean again?" he asked, voice light but sharp. There was a predatory glint in his eye. "I told him not to."

"I guess, yeah," said Ellie, curious as to where this was going, but not sure she wanted to know.

"I'll have to talk to him," Danny said, cheerfully. "A nice long talk." He paused. "You'll have to remind me. Or, um, Jazz. Jazz can remind me. Jazz will you remind me?"

"Sure," said Jazz. "How does your eye feel?"

"Gross."

"Your core?"

"Needles," said Danny, sticking out his tongue.

"Stay still, please." She sighed. "There isn't much I can do about your core at this juncture."

"I know," said Danny.

Prunella put a cloth bandage over the cream. It stuck in place. She fastened it further with patches of tape. "How does that feel?"

"Okay," said Danny. "Where are you getting all this stuff from?"

"Pockets," said Prunella.

"You have deep pockets."

"I have dimensional pockets."

Danny giggled. "They're bigger on the inside."
"Yes," said Prunella.

Ellie saw Tucker and Jazz suppressing smiles. She looked to the other side to see Sam with the same expression.

"Hey," said Danny. "Who died?" He blinked. "Was it me again? You guys can laugh, you know."

"Again?" whispered one of Danny's classmates.

"This isn't a funeral," Danny continued. "Is it? It's not a funeral, right?"

"Not as far as I know," said Jazz.

"Yep, no one's died recently," said Ellie.

"Oh. Good."
"Do you think they're in trouble?" asked Ben. He peeked around the corner, then withdrew. "Do you think we're in trouble?"

Alice shrugged. "I think that if they thought we were in trouble, they'd be evacuating us, not asking us if we wanted to do a scavenger hunt. Did you see anything?"

Ben glanced around the corner again. "Nope. Looks like we're clear."

The teenagers ran lightly down the hallway. The town hall was so large compared to the number of people that used it, that most of the halls were unused. A lot of the people who worked there had gone to be witnesses at the trial as well, so town hall was doubly abandoned. Still, the teens didn't want to be caught. Everyone knew the Deeps were safe, now, but the four of them hadn't exactly asked for permission.

But the run, coupled with the increasingly obvious lack of people, lead to some... mischief. By the time they got to the stairs, they were all breathless and giggling, determined to race to the bottom.

"Races are fun!" said Mirage when they got there. "Are you guys ready?"

"Give us a minute," said Byron, panting.

"No hurry," said Mirage, pleasantly.

"Haha," said Ada, "you guys- you guys are all wimps. Here, give me the list."

Mirage smiled broadly, and handed Ada a piece of notebook paper.

"Are you playing?" asked Byron after a moment.

"No, it wouldn't be fair. There's a prize for you at the end if you win."

"What kind of prize?" asked Alice. She briefly tried to pull Ada's paper away, but Mirage gave her her own sheet.

"A secret prize! It's the best kind," he said. The shadow was vibrating with excitement. "Ooh! Oh! I just got a great idea! I'll dress up like a wizard!" As Mirage spoke, his jeans and t-shirt were replaced with spangled robes and a large hat. "I'm a wizard!"

"Um," said Byron. "Why?"

"Because wizards give quests!" said Mirage, giving Byron and Ben the two last pieces of paper. "A scavenger hunt is sort of like a quest, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that makes sense," said Ada.

Mirage gave the group two thumbs up. "Cool. I'll be watching. Do your best!" The shadow vanished.
"Does this really say 'tiger?'" asked Alice.

"Maybe he has some statues?" suggested Byron.

"Or stuffed animals?" put in Ada.

"Pictures?" finished Ben.

"That makes sense," said Alice, slowly. Then, more confidently, "Yeah. That makes sense."

The teens looked up, over the knotted mess of stairs and pathways that made up the Deeps.

"We aren't splitting up, are we?" asked Ben.

"Not a chance," said Byron.

An hour later the teens had a variety of small things and not-so-small things shoved into their pockets and tucked into their arms.

"I can't believe you found an aspidistra," said Ben.

"I can't believe you found a Christmas tree angel with a raygun," returned Byron, rustling the plant at Ben.

"I can," said Ada.

"Oh?"

"Mirage plays fair. He wouldn't ask us to find things that don't exist."

Something small and black ran in front of them, and paused.

"Inky!" exclaimed Alice happily. She ran over to pick up the small cat, and cradled her in her arms. She turned slightly, towards the rest of the group, and froze, staring at something in the direction Inky had come from. "Eep," she said.

"Alice?"

"Don't come closer," said Alice, voice strained.

Byron licked his lips and took a couple steps back, trying to see around the vertical pathway blocking the walkway perpendicular to theirs.

Oh. That was a tiger.

"Don't worry, don't worry," said Mirage, reappearing. "Kira is just a guest!"

"Could have warned us," managed Byron.

Inky leaped from Alice's arms, walked over to the tiger, and rubbed up against it (her?), purring.
"I did! They were on the list."

"We didn't think that meant there was an actual, real, live tiger!"

"I know that now."

Once the situation with the tigers had been explained, namely that they had been displaced from Amity Park, and needed a place to stay, the teens relaxed considerably. They had all seen much more frightening things in their time in the Spirit World, before coming to Harmony. Their reaction had been one born of surprise.

They were still leery of being too close to the large, powerful creature, but Mirage was so obviously embarrassed about the whole thing, and was trying so hard to put them, and 'Kira,' at ease, that they couldn't help but try to humor him. He was drooping. Even his hat looked sad.

"I guess this means you don't want to do the rest of the scavenger hunt," said Mirage, listing to one side. "I'm sorry I ruined it for you. I guess I'm not very good at figuring out what people will enjoy."

He sighed heavily, his feet sinking to the floor.

"No!" said Byron, the objection being echoed by his friends. "No, the scavenger hunt was fine, it was a good idea, just..."

"You should warn people about scary things, usually." Alice waved at Kira. "Sorry, not that you're a thing. Just that you're scary."

"Okay," said Mirage.

"So, if there's anything else on here that's scary," said Alice, holding up the sheet of paper, "maybe you should take it off and warn us about it now?"

"Well, I mean," Mirage fidgeted, "this is a ghost's lair. There are ghosts here. And we have a lot of things here. There are heights, and dark places, and things like that." He shrugged.

"But, not like, anything actively dangerous?"

"No, there's nothing like that in here. This is a safe place. Kira isn't dangerous." Mirage looked up hopefully. "So, you'll still play?"

"Yeah."

"This is a pretty picture," said Danny, looking at one of the brightly colored paintings on the wall. He touched it with both hands. The wall was smooth and bumpy. "Pretty," he said again. "Do you like it, Jazz?"
Jazz looked up and back at Danny. "Yeah," she said, casting a critical eye at the graffito, "it's okay. I've seen better, though. Show you when we get home."

"It isn't the same at home... Is it?"

Jazz frowned, and tugged Danny along, trying to keep him with the group. Danny followed obediently, running his fingers over the wall as he went by.

"Maybe our homes are different," said Jazz.

"Well, yeah," said Danny. "You still live in Amity Park."

"Wait, where do you live?"

"At home."

Jazz gave him an odd half-smile. "Okay." She looked ahead. "Hey. What's up next?"

The captain made a face. So did Prunella, Ellie, and Vlad. Danny frowned.

"Is something wrong?" asked Danny.

"No, no, nothing. The next floor is, ah..." The captain sighed.

"Is it that bad?" asked Sam.

"Not exactly. Let me try to explain," said Prunella. "Ghosts can alter their appearance, somewhat. How we look is a matter of how we view ourselves and our situation. The overall, er, style of the Realms is a large influence on how ghosts look."

"Sure," said Jazz.

"It would be much different if the style was different, correct?"

"Yes. So, this floor, what, changes your style?" asked Jazz.

Sam turned back, raising an eyebrow. "Does it put you in plaid and stripes?"

"No. It, ah... If you look at human mythology, there isn't a clear distinction between ghosts, spirits, monsters, deities, demons, and fairies. There still isn't, in some cultures. Some time ago, the Realms as a whole began to lean more towards the ghostly or spiritual aesthetic. This next floor... changes the direction of that lean."

"So," said Mia, "you turn into fairies?"

Prunella sighed. "Some of us. Others take a more monstrous, or more demonic look. It really is only our appearance."

"I bet you look pretty," said Danny.

"Thank you."

"And after that?" asked Jazz. "For planing purposes."

"It makes you dreams come true," said the captain.

Jazz glanced back at Danny. "Like, literal dreams, or just what you hope to achieve?"
"The latter."

"We do have a floor that does the other one," said Prunella, "but it's up above the seventy-seventh. You won't see it."

"Cool! Does it do dreams of flying?"

"You can fly on your own," said Valerie.

Silence.

"Excuse me, what?" said Rebecca.

"I know, but you can't. Well, you can. But not by yourself." Danny skipped ahead. He turned around to look at the class. "What's wrong did you not know I could fly?" He paused. "How did you all get here, anyway?" He shook his head. "Never mind, I won't remember."

"You really are Phantom, aren't you?" asked Dash, in tones of despair.

"Who did you think I was?" asked Danny, quizzically.

"Well, Danny Fenton," said Dash.

Danny scrunched his face. "Fenton?" He ran his hand through his hair, and it found itself rubbing the back of his neck. "Is that- Is that, um. I don't know that." He looked away. "Where are we going?"

"Upstairs," said Jazz.

"Oh, okay, cool."

"Oh, boy, that was weird," said Danny. "That was-" he shook his head. "Well, now I know what serious brain damage feels like from the inside. Wow." The rest of what happened on the lower floor hit him. "Oh no," he said in a very small voice, covering his face with his hands. "Oh no. What did I do?"

"Hey," said Jazz, "it's okay."

"Yeah? Did I, or did I not, just blow my secret?"

"Honestly, it wasn't much of a secret anymore," offered Kwan.

"Oh, jeez, I'm going to die."

"Why would you die?" asked Sarah.

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Hannah, excitedly. "Can any of you keep a secret? What d'you think the GIW, or other hunters would do to him if they found him out? What do you think was going on on the other floor?" She turned to Danny. "What was going on down there?"

"I'm not really sure," lied Danny. He didn't want to dwell on the random flashes of memory that he'd
received downstairs. "I was pretty messed up. But otherwise, yeah. You're right." He looked up. He glanced at Prunella and the other fae. The lower floors where everyone was a ghost were weird, even if the relative numbers meant that the ghost look was probably the real one.

Prunella crossed her arms and twitched a wing. Danny looked away. He hoped he hadn't been staring.
Issitoq thought he had been scraping the bottom of the barrel before. That was nothing. He was now using the barrel itself. His hands twitched and jittered nervously, claws catching on the fine fabric of his robe. His plans were like dust. Aragon was defeated, and, worse, stripped of his amulet. Many of the feral scientists he had recruited now lay in beds at the Duat Hospital, twisted into horrors. His other mercenaries were little use against the Elysian soldiers- and now Egyptians had arrived. He had predicted they would, of course, he had foreseen it, but he had expected the issue to be resolved by now.

He thought to the thermos being prepared back at the Panopticon. Was it-? No. Not that. He could not yet bear to unleash that horror upon the world. Not yet. He forced himself to smooth his robes. There were still other options. Other options. Yes. This was not the time for panic, it was a time for calm. For careful planning.

The hourglass felt cold on his chest. There was less sand in it than there had been when he first removed it from the vault.

He was running out of time. He was running out of pawns to sacrifice into the abomination's hungry maw. If only he had known. If only hadn't been blinded by the possibility of Pariah Dark's return. Even the renewed reign of the old king and all its privations would be preferable to the utter destruction of his order- Of everything! The visions flickered behind his eye once more.

He was running out of pawns. He was running out of intelligent pawns. No. He had already run out of intelligent pawns, and was now into the barely sapient pawns.

There were, however, other kinds.

Danny had to admit he was amused by Vlad's horns. They were curly, and laid oddly against his hair. The cape, too, was a new addition. He was rather envious of Ellie's current set of wings. They were much prettier than his, much prettier than the ones she usually wore, in his opinion, luminously green, rather than transparently, ghostly gray.

Cujo was the most changed out of all of them. Typically, in Danny's memory, anyway, he wore a rainbow coat. Now, he was black, with demonic red eyes. The green he'd been exhibiting on lower floors was an interesting middle point between the two.

He liked this floor, he decided. It wasn't overly stressful, or maddening, and all his people seemed normal, at least relatively so. Vlad was a bit aloof, but that could be for any number of reasons, and at least he wasn't acting angry at, well, everything, like he sometimes did.

It would be better if he stopped being angry.
Danny rubbed his chest. His core hurt. His stomach hurt, too. He had to do something about the amulet in his stomach, he really did. It was probably indigestible. Probably. Based on the size of the thing, he doubted it would just... um... come out, either. Would phasing work? He hadn't tried it yet, but he'd phased things out of his stomach before. The amulet was inherently fae, though... That changed things.

There wasn't anything he could do about it now, of course, not with his core injury. He sighed.

The stairs loomed ahead of them, a broad spiral staircase. Danny blinked and rubbed his eyes. Had they been so close? He was having trouble focusing on what was going on.

"Remind me, what was next?" he asked.

"It makes your dreams come true," said Ellie.

"Right, right." He paused. "Which dreams?"


"Oh," said Danny. "I wonder if Pandora would like that floor..."

"Pandora? She's the one who's coming to get us, right?" asked Sarah.

"Mhm," said Danny.

"Why would she like it?"

"Because she's the Ancient Master of Hope."

"Okay," said Sarah. She sounded confused. Given other circumstances, Danny probably would have explained, but he was too tired just now.

As Danny mounted the steps, he wondered what his aspirations were, at this point. For a long, long time, he'd wanted to be an astronaut. Some part of him still wanted to be an astronaut. He'd been to space multiple times, he'd even been to the Moon, and Mars, and he'd flown a shuttle in that summer that didn't happen, but there was something about the idea of 'working for NASA' that he just really wanted. Recognition, maybe? He felt like that wasn't it. Adding to humanity's knowledge? Broadening the final frontier? Reaching out? Paving new roads for others to walk behind?

... Ah. There it was. 'Helping people' wasn't far from the surface of those sentiments. He smiled gently to himself. It was a nice reminder that he always had been, and always would be himself.

(Sometimes, looking at his alien, fae features in the mirror, running mental fingers over the inhuman shapes in his mind, he wondered and doubted.)

(But faeries were supposed to be cruel.)

But was that really what he aspired to, nowadays? Was it even possible, what with his unnatural biology? Would the Tower change the past to make that future more likely?

What else did he hope for?

He had a dearth of plans for the future, a result of having to fight off evil faeries all day and all night. He had a tentative desire to go to college, but he didn't know how that would turn out, and the idea of moving away from Amity Park, long term, without someone there to protect it made his skin crawl. Thinking about it now made it crawl, and he didn't think he'd been away for a month, much
less four years.

His parents had often mentioned him taking over FentonWorks, and that had some appeal. He was good with ghost tech, and Amity Park's citizens and faerie problems gave them steady business. It wasn't quite a sure thing, but it was close. Security was, perhaps unsurprisingly, something Danny had come to value.

But did he hope for that? Could he even see himself doing that, now that his parents knew?

He turned the thought over in his head, once or twice. He was halfway up the stairs.

Maybe he was thinking of this too narrowly. This wasn't only about his future job choice.

His mind drifted to the dreams Nocturne had given him. All of them. The first... Being accepted. Being liked. Being with Sam. The most recent one... Peace. Being with friends.


Getting out of the Tower safely- It couldn't show him that.

His parents being released. Vlad being less creepy. Valerie stopping her vendetta, permanently. The people in his class getting along. Danielle joining his family officially. His mistakes smoothed over, forgiven, forgotten. His friends being happy, successful.

Would this next floor show him a world like that? Would it show him things he didn't even know he hoped for?

He hoped.

He climbed the last step.

“Ah,” he said, quickly getting out of the way of the people behind him. “I suppose we're not on a tour, then?”

He was on the receiving end of several glares.

“No,” said Sam, shortly. “I don't think so. We weren't with all these people when we came in.”

“So, we're 'these people,' now, Sam?” said Mia, with slight but strained amusement.

“You look good,” said Danny.

“Thanks,” said Sam. “You too. Is that a NASA jacket?”

“Haha, yeah, perk of working for them, you know?” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, I know,” said Sam, giving him a half-smile before becoming serious again, and scanning the room.

“Oh, hey, Danny,” said Tucker, “you still have that NASA jacket!” He looked around. “Oof. Not a tour, then.”

“Why would we be here on a tour?” asked Paulina.

“And why are you all older?” asked Ellie, who wasn't.
Danny looked around the room. Most of his classmates were older than they had been on the lower floors. Of course, to Danny's memory, they looked to be about the right age. Late twenties to early thirties.

“I would guess,” said Danny, “it's because a lot of our goals take time, or need us to be older.”

“That's fascinating,” said Prunella. “I've never seen this many humans on this floor before. This is great data. What are your lives like currently, from your perspectives?”

“Um,” said Danny.

“We should keep moving, shouldn't we?” asked Mr. Lancer, who didn't look much changed from the time Danny was in high school. Or from the other floors, for that matter.

“Yeah, since we're apparently being chased,” said Danny, as he started walking. “What are you all doing, here, anyway, if it isn't a tour?”

“Fell through a portal on my way to work.”

“Same.”

“Kidnapped by that hunter ghost.”

“Got lost in one of those 'shortcuts.’”

“GIW experiment exploded and then we were here. Well. Here-ish.”

“I came here to help you guys,” said Ellie.

“And the, you know, all the people chasing us? Anyone know what that's about?” Everyone shook their heads.

“Okay, cool,” said Danny. It wasn't, but it wasn't like he could do anything about it. “Great.”

“Hey,” said Hannah, who was wearing the remains of a blue pantsuit, “what were you doing giving a tour of the Ghost Zone, anyway?”

“I- er. Sam, Tucker, Jazz and I are on the council for human-ghost relations- we're working on a better name, by the way- so we were trying to, um, showcase some of the more interesting aspects of the Realms,” said Danny, stumbling over the introduction he'd practiced. “Foster personal connections. That sort of thing.”

“And you work for NASA?” asked Mikey, who was wearing a professorial jacket. He narrowed his eyes. “And you're taller. Like, a lot taller.”

“With your grades?” added Ricky.

“Yeah. I mean, I didn't go the usual route. But once they realized what I could do for them... and that they didn't necessarily need a rocket to get into space...” Danny shrugged, awkwardly. “I save them a lot of money.”

“You do more than that, Danny,” said Sam. “You've rescued whole missions. Who else are they going to get to repair stuff on Mars?”

“Well, it wasn't just me, I just got the actual people and equipment through the Zone...”
“You know what I mean, and that's not it, either. Jazz, you're being pretty quiet.”

Jazz pushed her glasses up her nose. “Oh, it's nothing. I'm just wondering if you're still married.”

“Now, I think we should move on. I'm not interested in talking about that.”

“Okay, let's not talk about it.”

“So,” said Danny, as they reached the next floor. “I'm gonna just get this off my chest right now. I'm a spy.”

Everyone stared at him. As if they were surprised. When they had just heard what this floor was supposed to do, not three minutes ago.

“For who?” asked Mia. Danny noted that she had her glasses back. Was that a camera he saw built into the frames? Interesting.

He shrugged his thin shoulders. “Who are you being a spy for?” he asked pleasantly. “Come on, we all knew we'd be spies, and it isn't as if this is going to give us any actual intelligence, or like we're still going to be spies once we get out. It isn't like we're really spies.” He smiled lazily, and tipped his head to one side. “Is it?” He let his eyes flick over to the Elysians. Some of them flinched away.

“Let's hurry up,” said the Elysian captain.

“Whatever you say.”

No one discussed the floor that would come after this one, even though the journey took some time. They were all too busy being suspicious of each other, despite Danny's very best efforts. He'd even gone to the length of revealing his employer (Clockwork). People were just like that, he supposed. It was incredibly inconvenient, though, and-

He crossed over onto the next floor, and the thought skittered away. Ah. Okay. So, now he knew what this floor did. He turned around and walked backwards into the room, raising his hands.

Sign language, anyone?

A couple of his classmates were raising their hands to their ears, or throats, as if surprised by the memory of hearing or speaking.

He smiled as several of his classmates, people who he had interacted with only very rarely, on account of the language barrier, signed back yes.

The whole, on the run from bounty hunters thing aside, this was going to be great! Silver lining, and all that. He'd actually be able to get to know his classmates. Well, he probably wasn't deaf in the 'real' world, and might get along better with his classmates there, but that didn't change how he felt.

He smiled.
Paulina gave Danny a small smile. He was the only one of her classmates who cared enough to actually learn sign language.

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Mikey grinned at Danny. He was one of very few people he knew who bothered to learn sign language to talk to him.

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Dash flipped off Fenton. He was always so smug about knowing sign language. Freaking show-off. Dash didn't know why he had bothered. The two of them hated each other.

Then he remembered that Fenton was probably Phantom and cringed.

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Jazz smiled at seeing Danny's face light up. It had taken her a couple of minutes to put two and two together, and seeing everyone else sign back to Danny, but this floor must make people deaf.

She thought back to the lower floors. Hearing was weird. It was like how being psychic was described in books, sometimes.

The Elysians were signing, too, but not in a language she knew. Danny seemed to understand it, though. It was probably a Ghost Zone version of sign language.

This would be interesting.
Chapter 152

Chapter Notes

Hello! Please read this, it is an announcement about update times. Since the school year is starting soon (and I am a teacher), I am sadly going to have to reduce the frequency with which I update. Starting next week, I will only guarantee an update on Friday, though I may also update on Sundays if writing has gone particularly well for me that week.

Thank you all for your understanding!

Chapter 152: Speak Silent

Danny was still too tired and hurt to skip, but he was pretty happy. The floor had made his sister and friends much more fluent than usual, not to mention the rest of the class. He was so excited his words were blurring together. Many of his classmates were a bit more reticent, but they started to open up.

The Elysians kept their attention outward, keeping an eye out for threats, and Danny gathered that, rather than having some kind of defect, they all were cursed. Or had a frailty. Danny was not as well-versed in their version of sign-language as he would like to be.

He understood why they were so alert. This floor was designed as a maze, and there were a lot of blind corners. They went through starting, stopping, and then starting again. He was glad he wasn't the one who had to think about that anymore. He could take the time to talk to his classmates, and look at the geometric, ceramic tile murals on the walls, and argue with Tucker about whether or not the patterns were more Greek, Egyptian, or Japanese.

He was also, in ghost sign language, having a conversation with Ellie, Vlad, and Prunella about the amulet in his stomach. Ellie was worried she'd accidentally grab his spine instead of the amulet. Prunella wasn't sure if she wanted to try removing a ghostly artifact from a half-ghost, especially considering the relative proximity of the artifact to said half-ghost's (probably oversensitive) core.

Vlad was all for trying it. But he was worried about whether or not the amulet could be phased out, and whether or not it had any special 'rules,' being, as it was, an old and powerful artifact, and if it was just ghostly, or if it contained non-ectoplasmic substances. Vlad claimed that all those things could affect whether or not it could be phased out, especially given Danny's own oddities. Danny didn't know the answer to those questions. He wasn't sure how he could find out, with it in his stomach.

Vlad broke off the conversation, clearly deep in thought. Danny rolled his eyes. He thought Vlad should just try it, and then it would either work or not. It wasn't as if it could hurt.

Could it?
He returned his attention to his classmates. This really was nice, and, well, if he really was deaf, in the real world, he wanted to enjoy this moment of communication.

The Elysians peered around the corner. Then one of them let out a laugh. Voiceless, of course. They pulled back, with another, new Elysian in tow.

'This is the beta team,' signed the Elysian captain, as other Elysian ghosts approached.

Danny sighed in relief. The appearance of a new person had startled him somewhat. He started to sign a translation to his classmates.

The Elysians started to sign an explanation to each other of what they were doing and how they had gotten here. Danny tuned most of it out, until the leader of the new Elysians turned to him, grinned, and signed, 'Let's get you out of here.'

The humans (and Danny) had to be carried. They consented to this with various degrees of grace. Thankfully, however, there were no arguments. At this point, everyone was very much aware of their limitations.

(It was good that most of the Elysians had four arms, in the usual manner of the Greek ghosts. That way they could hold their charges and their weapons both.)

Danny was a little put out that no one considered 'I can just ride Cujo' an appropriate plan for him. He understood why, of course. Similarly, Vlad was sulking about not being allowed to carry Danny. So, here he was, in the arms of an Elysian soldier he knew only in passing, bracing for a signal to charge out the door, and into what was almost certainly a battlefield.

And, yes, he had explained to the man that he might randomly turn into a dragon at any moment. It was the kind of thing you stated up-front, when someone was carrying you. It was a courtesy thing.

Prunella was standing nearby, watching the proceedings with disapproval. She was disappointed that they were leaving, he'd caught her signing to herself about lost research opportunities, but she wasn't trying to stop them, so that was good. He gave Prunella one last wave, by way of farewell. She returned it desultorily.

He turned his attention to the doors. They were large double-doors, the largest they could find on the floor. The left hand door had a simple, almost rustic floral pattern carved into it. The right hand one was flat, and marked only by an ugly smear of black paint. The handles were matched, but at different heights. It didn't really matter what the doors looked like, though. The important thing was that they were wide enough for four Elysians to go out at once (five if they squeezed), provided they went out with their bodies perpendicular to the plane of the door, rather than parallel to it, like people bound by the laws gravity would have to.

The plan was that about half of the Beta team would go out first, and make a start of securing the area, and locate the Elysian ship. Then, they would signal to the Elysians carrying the humans to follow them. Finally, once all the humans were out, the remainder of the Beta team would form a rearguard. They would then go to the ship, and hopefully go home.
The Infinite Realms were infinitely full of monsters. Chimera, griffons, hydras, unicorns, kappa, kirin, manticores, nekomata, barghests, and stranger things still. Some of these monsters were weak. Some of them were strong.

In the common manner of the Realms, some of these creatures were sapient. They were, in other words, people. Others were not. Some of them were merely sentient.

Unlike even the most idiotic of sapient ghosts, few of them could be reasoned with on any level. They possessed only animal intelligence, nothing more.

This was why Issitoq was so hesitant to use them. There was no way to keep them from attacking his mercenaries.

But there were so very many of them. An infinite number, or nearly that, and that was without even counting coreless 'ghosts,' non-sentient spirits, non-entities which were mere eddies in the varied energy currents of the Realms.

Issitoq used his powers to watch the battlefield. There weren't many of his mercenaries left. Those that remained wouldn't be enough to destroy the abomination when it finally emerged. If it got to Pandora's ship-

Issitoq twitched. As soon as it came out of the Tower, he would unleash his beasts. He would wait until then.

He would wait until then.

Sound came back to Danny instantly. Too instantly. He cringed at the assault on his suddenly-sensitive ears. Battles were always loud. How had he forgotten? A few of the Elysians seemed to be having similar trouble, but thankfully not many. The ship Sam, Tucker, Jazz and the Elysians had described was there, as well as an Egyptian sun-barge.

Both ships were farther away than Danny would have liked. Yes, he or Ellie could have, at full strength, flown to the Elysian ship in a matter of minutes, provided they didn't get sucked into one of the many battles happening between them and there, but they weren't at full strength. Danny wasn't even flying under his own power. Over twenty of the Elysians were weighed down by human loads (and it would be inappropriate to refer to them as 'dead weight,' wouldn't it?). It would be difficult at points, Danny thought, but not impossible.

The air tore itself apart with portals. Long, ugly, horribly unstable things. Unnatural, even in this landscape; too large, too well-ordered- Portals generally did not form almost-enclosed bubbles!

The portals began to pour out swarms of ghosts.

Danny hissed under his breath. Whoever was doing this was powerful, to form the portals, and wealthy, to afford the mercenaries. Offhand, Danny could think of a small number of enemies who
might barely possess that level of power, and that level of wealth, if they pushed themselves hugely on both counts, but they would all come to face him themselves. They would be here, after him, not skulking behind all these mercenaries and animals, endangering his friends and all these people... But this person, or these people, whoever they were... They could have moved against him directly, put a portal in his path, dropped him into the Burning Lands, or a GIW research facility, or a thousand years ago, or, goodness, into the sun, if they could create portals at a distance! They didn't have to involve all these people! Cowards!

Too late, Danny noticed the white-hot filament of anger running through his thoughts, anger fed on and fed by the amulet in his stomach, which, itself, was growing hot.

He knew he should have insisted Vlad take it out...

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The monster's appetite knew no bounds. Issitoq had known that for years, ever since he had discovered its future in the ruins of two worlds, but he had not thought the sentiment to be so literal. He had not expected the abomination to eat one of the Amulets of Mattingly. He had not seen it until just now.

His portals faltered, the sands of the hourglass stilled.

It was feeding on the magics and energies of the amulet. His eye, so sharp, so piercing, could see that plain as day. To what end? To what horrific end? This was one of the ways that thing in captivity back in the Panopticon had augmented and grown its already considerable powers.

His clairvoyant gaze turned to Pandora, who was preparing one of her boxes. He would have sneered, if he had lips. She couldn't hope to contain all the creatures he had unleashed- Or maybe she could. That was her purview, after all. She wouldn't be able to do it, in any case. Not with all the varieties he had sent her way, and her own allies out in the mess.

True, that would only delay her victory. Issitoq twitched at the thought.

If he could just-

Enticing images danced in his mind's eye. The abomination sliced in two by a portal. Its body pierced by a mighty ghost ray. Its throat slit. All done by Issitoq himself. Direct action. Change made by his own two hands. But he was sworn against it. Most of his order was.

In any case, none of those things was likely to kill the creature outright. It had been created by a bisecting portal, after all.

No. Issitoq could do none of those things. It was time for him to retreat. To gather his forces. To plan.

To make a way to finish this.
Chapter 153

Chapter 153: Expected Difficulties

Ah, thought Pandora, upon seeing Daniel turn into a dragon. *I had not quite expected that.*

She had, however, expected something of the sort. Her old enemy Murphy (the principle, not any of the ghosts, of which there were several) practically required it, not to mention Daniel's rather... *extreme* luck. Perhaps, though, she shouldn't call it luck, but merely *circumstances.*

His transformation, despite increasing the firepower available to their side, also disrupted the well-ordered formation of the soldiers he had been traveling with. Pandora had the sinking feeling that there would be other, later, consequences.

She flipped up the lid of her newest box. How many of the creatures here could be called evil? How many were simply wild? No matter. Even reducing the number of non-sapient ghosts by an eighth would be a boon to her men and women.

Her box glistened with power and began to pull in.

Well, Ellie couldn't say that she hadn't expected this to happen. Really, she was surprised it hadn't happened earlier.

On the plus side: more firepower (literally), and Danny was apparently too intimidating for most of the animal ghosts to attack. On the negative side: Danny wasn't fighting with his usual... Ellie didn't know what to call it. Cunning, maybe-? Strategy? Skill? Some of that might have been because he was currently in an unfamiliar body, but Ellie doubted that. His movements were... Uncontrolled. Too wild. Too... something.

And he was angry.

The atmosphere stirred as ectoplasm began to pull towards the Elysian ship. A good fifth of the animals were caught in the current, and tumbled towards it, as if it were a hundred times stronger for them than for Ellie. Ha! Ellie grinned sharply.

Then she ducked, just barely avoiding a pack of brightly-colored lizards.
Valerie wished her board wasn't out of commission. She wished she wasn't being carried by this ghost. She wished. Wishes were useless. She couldn't do anything.

And she hated it.

Jazz was glad she had practiced a lot on the ship. Her spectral hands were proving to be useful in keeping the swarms of ghostly animals away. The others were having more trouble.

Sam kicked at a tiny, sharp-toothed rabbit. How many of these things were there?!

“Please,” begged the Elysian carrying her. “Stop moving! I'm going to drop you.”

“No, you're not,” growled Sam. It was probably a good thing ghosts didn't need to breathe, or she'd be strangling the poor ghost.

Another rabbit bit her ankle. She kicked it.

Ellie was having trouble getting close to Danny. For one, he was attacking rather indiscriminately, for another, Danny's classmates kept distracting her with their need to be saved. How they could still be such disasters even under the care of the Elysian soldiers escaped her entirely. They were just complete disasters. She didn't understand.

She had just finished chasing a mean-looking turtle away from Paulina when a movement near Danny caught her eye. She wasn't sure why it caught her eye, there was a lot of movement near Danny, but she swung her head around and over, and saw a huge pack of dogs (wolves?) racing towards Danny.

Crud. Heck.

She zapped an over-sized hedgehog, and zoomed towards Danny, hoping to get to him before the dogs.

She didn't.

The dogs surrounded Danny, barking and howling, seemingly not caring that Danny was many, many times larger than they were. Was that Cujo in there, trying to keep them back? She thought she could see him, but she couldn't be sure.
Danny started to fall.

It was a fall, Ellie could tell, even though from her perspective he was falling sideways, in the odd manner of the Ghost Zone. The way he was moving showed her as much.

Then, to her increasing concern, Danny began to shrink. She couldn't see him behind all the dogs. Energized by her worry, Ellie put on another burst of speed. She broke through the pack of dogs, to find Danny, human again, draped over Cujo's back, being licked by the dogs. Who were, to a one, wagging their tails furiously.

“How do you do that?” she demanded, ectoblast fading from her hand.

Danny shrugged as a large, winged dog licked his face. “They’re Cujo's friends,” he offered. “I think.”

“Okay,” said Ellie, examining his face. He looked awful, sweaty and exhausted. “Let’s see if your new friends will help us get you to that ship.”

“Uh-huh.” Danny groaned. “I think I ate something that didn't agree with me.”

“You think?”

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It turned out that riding Cujo was a good idea. Who would have thought? Danny had thought. That's who.

He buried his face in Cujo's fur, one hand on his stomach. It felt hot, which was bad. His core had inched up, closer to his heart, trying to get away from the source of the heat, even as it drank in the amulet's shed power. He should have known that a dragon amulet would be hot, would run on hot ectoplasm, would be imbued with fire. He wanted it out, out, out. He wanted it gone. He shivered, trying to shake off the heat.

If he wasn't a child ghost- If he, his core, just could stop pulling the amulet's power and heat in, then maybe he could have some relief. But he couldn't and he felt awful, and he wanted to stop being sick, just for a little bit.

He was highly aware of the battle happening around him. He was even more aware of his inability to do anything about it.

Breathe, breathe, he reminded himself. The air of the Zone tended to be cool. He could shed heat by breathing it out.

Cujo abruptly stopped. Danny tumbled over Cujo's ears, and hit wooden boards. Ah. He was on the ship. That was good. He sat up.

His classmates were also touching down on the deck, the Elysians urging them towards the hatches, and relative safety below decks. That was good, too. They didn't seem to know what to make of all the dogs, however. That was okay. Neither did Danny.

Danny waved weakly at Pandora, who scooped him up with a lower arm. “It looks like you’ve
“Yeah.” Danny leaned against Pandora's side as Cujo tried to lick his feet. “I don't suppose Frostbite or Dr. Iceclaw came with you?”

“Dr. Iceclaw did. We had not yet gotten word from the Far Frozen when we left Elysium.”

“Oh,” said Danny.

“Let's get you to h-”

There was a large, angry shriek from beyond the ship. Not all of the bounty hunters had fled or been defeated, there was still a sizable contingent of them, and it appeared that one of them was rather upset about the prospect of Danny escaping.

“My bounty!” wailed the ghost.

Danny flinched into Pandora's side. His ears- or maybe his brain- was still recovering from the silent floor of the Tower.

(At least, that's what he wanted to tell himself. Truthfully, he had run out of the energy to be brave.)

(Pandora was too warm, too. She had dark fire for hair.)

The screaming ghost began to grow in size. How was it that so many ghosts could do that? Walker, Pandora, Pariah Dark, Nocturne, Cujo... Those were just the ones he could think of off the top of his head. It was annoying. Sure, when he had to fight someone like that, it gave him a bigger target, but it was hard to defend people against something the size of a skyscraper.

Ah. And this ghost was also on fire. Why was there so much fire, right now? Couldn't they get some air conditioning in here?

Pandora cursed in Greek, and handed Danny off to a ghost he recognized, but couldn't immediately name.

She lifted up, off of the deck, and began to grow. Soon, she equaled the size of the other ghost. Both of them radiated heat, and lightning sparked from Pandora's limbs.

The ghost brandished his sword, which glowed sun-bright against the dim green backdrop of the Ghost Zone. “I am Surtr! Doom of Gods! King of the Fire Mountains! You shall not escape me!”

“Grand names for a common murderer,” growled Pandora, voice low and loud enough to make Danny's bones vibrate, “and falsely taken, too.”

The ghosts collided in a flurry of spear jabs and sword slashes. The remaining mercenaries went for Pandora's sides, but the Elysians held them off.

“Think you, that I have never been to Muspell?” demanded Pandora. The giant ghosts tumbled through the void, and into the Egyptian ship, cracking its mast and setting it on fire.

Danny winced as the other ship spun. He hoped nothing important had broken.

A couple of mercenaries attempted to attack the Elysian ship in Pandora's absence. They quickly became studded with arrows.

(Were those Tucker's?)
The Elysian jumped through a hatch, put Danny down, then flew back up, battle ready. The ship shook. Danny sat down on the floor.

He wasn't sure if he felt more relief or fear. Ancients, he was tired, and he was scared, and he really should go back up and try to help, but he was just... done.

“Danny?” asked Mikey, his nervous and pale face seeming to hover in Danny's blurred vision. “Are you okay?”

“No,” said Danny. “Not really. Can you, can you, um.” He blinked, hard.

The hatch overhead opened again, and Sam slid down the ladder.

“Danny!” she said. “You look awful.”

“I know,” said Danny. He looked up at the hatch. “I should probably move.”

“Yeah,” said Sam. She looped his arm over her shoulder, and started walking him away. “I've got you.”

“Can someone find Dr. Iceclaw? I think I really need him.”

“Yeah. Let's see if we can.”

“Where's everyone?” asked Danny.

“What do you mean?”

“Tucker and Jazz and Ellie, and, you know. Everyone not right here.” He hoped his woefully inaccurate hand wave illustrated his point sufficiently.

“I think Jazz, Ellie, and Tucker are up there fighting. Most everyone else went down a different hatches or doors or whatever.”

“Oh, good. They should be careful, though.”

“Yep. I'm sure they are.”

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If it was Danny doing this, Jazz would probably tell him to be more careful. But it wasn't as if she'd gotten herself into this position on purpose. It had been entirely unintentional! Really. Honestly.

Although, Danny didn't get into these situations on purpose, either.

One of Jazz's spectral hands dissolved under pressure from the attacking- Well. Jazz wasn't sure what it was, exactly. Some kind of mutant, rabid pig-creature with fangs. It charged her, but fell to the side with an arrow in its eye.

“Be careful!” called Tucker, already stringing another arrow to his bow.

“Yeah!” yelled Jazz, strengthening her hold on her other hands.
She gestured, and a spiny creature (a sea urchin?) went flying, just in time for her to use the free hand catch a sparking, half-invisible eel. She felt her left hand go numb. Oh, heck, she hadn't expected that, and she almost lost hold of her other hands and the creatures they were stopping. She used one of the other animals to bludgeon the eel until it went limp. That was harder than it looked, with both animals fighting. Thank goodness only relatively small ghosts were getting past the Elysians.

There was a shout, and 'Sutr's' sword came whirling towards the ship. Whoever was piloting the ship apparently saw it, too, because the ship suddenly veered left and up. This took the rigging into the path of a confused, but heretofore not particularly hostile giant snake.

Meanwhile, the ship shuddered and tilted as the sword scraped the bottom. In the way of ghost ships, it quickly adapted to its new 'down' and the feeling of being tilted disappeared. Several of the animal ghosts had been slammed into the deck as the ship maneuvered, and Jazz had lost more than half her hands in the impact.

She couldn't bring them all back. She was flagging, and the air felt thin.

A miniature goat jumped at her, and she reacted by making a wall of hands, and- Falling mast! Dodge, dodge, dodge- Gosh darn it, Tucker, get out of the way!

She yanked him out of the way by the collar of his shirt, tearing the fabric.

The falling timber kicked up a lot of dust, and Tucker started coughing. That could have been the fact that Jazz had almost strangled him, though.

“Are you two alright?” asked someone with an echoing voice.

One of the Elysians?

“I'm fine!” said Jazz.

“Yeah, fine,” wheezed Tucker. “Crud, my bow...”

“You should get below,” said the Elysian, drawing closer, and shooting another couple of ghostly animals with her ectoblasts. “There's a hatch that way.” She pointed with her lower left hand, as she charged the other three with ectoplasm.

Tucker scrambled over a pile of fallen ropes, careful not to put his foot through any loops.

“Hey,” he said, “we're not on fire, are we? That sword looked pretty hot.”

The Elysian's face fell, eyes widening. “Oh, dear.” She sped off.

Tucker grimaced, and wiped dust and dirt from his face- Or tried to, anyway. “That doesn't sound good,” he observed.

There was more creaking from above, and both Tucker and Jazz looked up, bracing themselves to jump out of their way. The giant snake was still up there, tangled in the rigging.

“You need to get downstairs,” said Jazz.

“Me?” said Tucker. “What about you?”

“I think I might be able to do something about that,” said Jazz, looking at the snake in the rigging. She stretched out both her real hands and her spectral ones. The later flickered as they reached the extent of her range, which, wasn't very far beyond her real fingertips.
“Jazz-”

“I know, I know,” said Jazz.

Another beam creaked and swung wildly overhead, and a stray ectoblast came close to Jazz’s ear. “Come on,” said Tucker, “let’s get out of here.”
Hello! I'm sorry for posting so late today, I had no internet this morning and then some things happened. This will be the last regular Sunday update. My school is doing in-service next week, and then school starts, so I'll be busy. I will still be updating on Fridays, and I have enough written currently that I should be able to keep doing Friday updates until mid-November, even if I can't find time to write more. Just FYI.

One more announcement-type thing. I am trying to give humans and ghosts in this diverse backgrounds, and to draw ghosts from multiple cultures, but I am, for better or worse, a middle-class twenty-something white girl living in rural America. If you notice that I'm relying on offensive stereotypes, or that I've portrayed something incorrectly, please call me out on it! I try to do research, but I know internet sources aren't always accurate.

Chapter 154: Fire and Ice

Ellie arced under the hull of the ship, shooting ice from her fingers to combat the fire eating it. She frowned as the fire vanished. She wasn't really well-versed in the anatomy (Architecture? Whatever.) of ships, but she thought that bit of crispy, cracked, and cut wood might have been the rudder, and she had the impression that it was pretty important, at least on water-bound ships. On Ghost Zone vessels? She had no idea.

Either way, it wasn't currently her problem. She'd put out the fire, that's all she could do for it.

The ghosts that had been on-duty guarding the ship's underside, those that weren't fighting, waved at Ellie as she curved back up, ectoblasts at the ready.

In the middle distance, Pandora fought with 'Surtr,' the two large ghosts slamming each other into the floating islands (which were mostly just very large, mostly featureless boulders) that surrounded the Tower.

Ellie wasn't getting involved in that fight, not when she was already so tired from navigating the Tower. She was smarter than that. Barely.

Could she do anything about the snake tangled in the sails? She examined the problem with a critical eye. No... Probably not. Not without damaging the ship more, or getting in the way of the Elysian sailors and soldiers already working on the problem.

So-?

She ducked out of the way of a ghost, one of the mercenaries, surprisingly. She'd thought most of
them had gone already.

Well, she'd been looking for a fight.

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Dr. Iceclaw took Danny's temperature with the large pad of one finger. Considering how the ship was shaking, he was loath to use any of his equipment. Apparently, one of the machines had broken.

Danny leaned into the coolness of Iceclaw's touch.

“You're far too hot,” said Dr. Iceclaw, frowning.

“I know,” said Danny. “That's why you have to take out the amulet. It's making me hot.”

Dr. Iceclaw's touch shifted to Danny's stomach. “Hm.”

“Please take it out,” begged Danny. “It shouldn't be there.”

“No,” agreed Iceclaw. “It shouldn't. But...” He glanced at his equipment, which was strapped to the walls of his cabin. “I can't just pull it out. I don't know what I'm dealing with, and I'm not sure...” he trailed off again, as if reevaluating what he was going to say. The ship trembled around them again. “I'm not sure that your core will easily tolerate someone reaching into you at this point. Not unless you trust them absolutely.”

“It's one of the Amulets of Mattingly, and I do trust you.”

Iceclaw gave Danny a strained half-smile. “I'm afraid that whatever I do, without more information, and without a more-” the ship shook and keeled to one side, before stilling, “-stable environment, I'm afraid it will only do more damage.”

Danny moaned, and leaned, exhausted, into Dr. Iceclaw's cool bulk. “Oh. You feel nice.”

“Ah,” said Dr. Iceclaw. “That... Might be a good idea, actually. I can keep you cool until we-” the ship jerked to the side once again, “-are clear of this battle.”

Taking that as implicit permission, Danny snuggled closer to the larger ghost, laying his head down on Iceclaw's soft white fur. He sighed.

Sam, who had been leaning in the doorway to brace herself, took a step into the room. Danny saw that several of his classmates were gathered outside the door.

“How did you even manage to swallow one of the Amulets of Mattingly, anyway?” she asked.

“Oh,” said Danny. “I forgot I didn't tell you. We were on a floor of the Tower that makes it so that everyone is nobility or something, except it wasn't working properly for me and Ellie, I think it was broken, and then Aragon came in, and we were fighting, and I pulled the amulet off with my teeth, and then I turned into a dragon, and we were all fighting and it was still in my mouth, and I moved the wrong way and I swallowed it.”

“It wasn't working for you?” said Sam. “The floor, I mean.”
“No,” said Danny.

“Hey, yeah, that was weird,” said Mikey. “I thought that the only reason a floor wouldn’t work would be—”

Sam whirled, and from the look on Mikey's face, Danny would guess that he was getting a full blast of Sam's trademark glare. She turned again, face completely pleasant.

“Didn't Dora knight you that one time?”

Danny frowned. “Oh, yeah. I guess she did. Does that count, though?”

“I mean, I think it should,” said Sam. “Knights are nobles, just very minor ones, right?”

“I think so.” Danny bobbed his head slowly, and tried for a smile. “Yeah. That makes me feel better. I was a little worried that… Well, never mind.”

The ship jerked again, and Danny pressed into Dr. Iceclaw. His classmates made various sounds of dismay.

“What's happening up there?” asked Paulina.

“A big fight,” said Sam.

“Why don't we just go?”

“I'm sure they're trying,” Danny said. “Where are the rest of you? Mr. Lancer? Sarah? Mia?” He tilted his head to see if he could spot them beyond the door. He knew there were other people missing, but, now that he had some relief, he was having trouble focusing enough to everyone straight in his head.

“I don't know,” said Kwan. “I think they went down different way than we did.”

There was the sound of running feet down the corridor, and everyone turned their heads.

“Who-?” asked Danny.

Jazz rounded the corner. “Hey!” she said. “How are you doing, Danny?”

“Not great,” said Danny. “What's happening out there?”

“A giant snake got tangled in the ropes and sails and stuff,” said Tucker, following soon after Jazz.

Both Jazz and Tucker were smudged with dirt and sweat, but otherwise seemed unharmed.

“A giant snake?”

“Yeah,” said Tucker. “Everything is going fairly well, otherwise.”

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This was an accurate assessment.
Even the most tenacious of the mercenaries had fled, once Pandora had soundly beaten 'Surtr,' and flung him into the distance, the animals were just that, animals, and the natives of Missing Theory, the scientists and researchers, were not inclined to pick fights with the Elysians and the Egyptians. They might have been crazy, but they did have a sense of self-preservation.

The snake in the rigging had been somewhat difficult to deal with, but they had gotten it out, eventually.

After that, the ships, both the Elysian ship and the Egyptian one, began to limp away from the Tower.

Pandora, shrinking, touched back down on the deck of her ship. That had been quite a fight.

Danielle landed nearby, then collapsed. Pandora looked at her with sympathy.

“Are you injured?” she asked.

“Not really,” said Danielle. “I’m just tired.”

Pandora raised an eyebrow. She had heard similar things from the Phantoms before.

“Well,” revised Danielle, “I'm sort of bruised, and I might have sprained my wrist, but I'm pretty sure nothing's broken, and nothing's really bleeding. Much. Nothing serious.” The dog, Cujo, landed on the deck next to her and started licking her.

“Mhm,” said Pandora, choosing to drop the subject. Danielle was better about her health than Daniel. Somewhat.

The captain flew over to Pandora, and started in on his initial report, distracting Pandora from Danielle. After a few minutes, she held up her hand.

“That's enough for now,” she said. “I believe I understand the general situation. Send a messenger to the Egyptians. Thank them for their aid, and find out how their craft fared.”

The captain nodded. Pandora looked back at Danielle and offered her a hand, which she took.

“Let's go see how your brother is doing.”

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Danny looked up at Pandora and Ellie, then shrunk farther into Iceclaw's thick fur.

“Hi,” he said, miserably.

“Hello,” said Pandora. “You do not look very well, Daniel.”

Danny shrugged. “I swallowed, um, one of the Amulets of Mattingly. Aragon was there.”

“There are likely other things the matter,” said Iceclaw, “but I cannot confirm that until I can start running scans, which I cannot do until I can be sure this ship is not going to shake itself to pieces underneath us.”
Pandora sighed. “It should not. Our enemies seem to have left, for the time being. I cannot guarantee their future actions.”

Iceclaw shook his head. “I suppose that will have to do. Little one, I must put you down to set up my machines.”

“Okay,” said Danny, reluctantly, letting go of Iceclaw's fur.

Iceclaw gently set Danny down in a chair, and formed an orb of ice to give to him. Danny hugged the orb like his life depended on it.

(A rather unhelpful part of his mind suggested that it very well might.)

Iceclaw began to unhook his various interesting (and vaguely intimidating) medical machines from the wall, and waved a hand at the other people in the room.

“You all need to leave. Close the door.”

“What about Jazz and Ellie and Sam and Tucker?” asked Danny.

Dr. Iceclaw hesitated. “I don't think there's enough room for all of them,” he said, finally. “Perhaps only one.”

Danny thought about it for a minute. “Jazz? Will you stay?”

“Yeah,” said Jazz, “of course. I wouldn't be much of a big sister if I didn't, right?”

She sounded tired, and Danny felt guilty for making her do yet another thing, but she really needed the support.

“Thanks,” said Danny.

“I will be returning for your report in an hour, Dr. Iceclaw,” said Pandora. “Daniel. I'm glad to have you back.”

“I'm glad to be back,” said Danny.

Pandora nodded. “Now, for the rest of you children,” she said, turning, and stepping out of the room, “I want to know how this situation-” the door closed, cutting off the rest of her sentence.

Before too long, Iceclaw had used all of his machines on Danny. He had been getting progressively less and less happy about whatever he was seeing. Danny was beginning to get a bad feeling. Well. More of a bad feeling. He had already been feeling pretty crappy.

Iceclaw sat down in front of Danny.

“It's bad, isn't it,” said Danny, resigned.

“Well. Yes,” said Dr. Iceclaw. “I'm afraid so. The, ah, condensed version is that I cannot remove the amulet. Not here, with the tools that I have, and certainly not by myself.”

“What? Why not?”

Iceclaw grimaced. “As a result of a combination of your unique biology, and the normal function of a ghost core, it appears that you have attempted to effectively digest the amulet.”
Danny gave a hesitant nod. That would happen to anything he swallowed, so he wasn't sure why it mattered.

“The amulet, being an artifact with a large amount of... call it ontological inertia, has tried to resist that, and has largely succeeded. Largely.” Dr. Iceclaw made another face. “It would be better if it had succeeded completely. As it is, a good part of the energy- the ectoplasmic structure- you've drawn from it has wound up tangled around one of your primary silver cords, and a number of minor ones. You know what silver cord is?”

Danny nodded. “They're the ghostly analogue of a nervous system. My parents just called them strands. I guess that doesn't sound as good...”

“Yes. Well. I can't remove it while it's like that.”

“And you can't untangle it?” asked Danny, seeing where this was going.

“No. Not without special tools, or a much better understanding of the artifact. Then, even if I could remove it from around your silver cord, your core won't let me near it. It's too irritated. It would lash out at anyone you don't trust implicitly. Now, considering your current condition, it wouldn't hurt me terribly, but it would hurt you when I flinched.”

“Could Ellie do it?” asked Jazz.

Dr. Iceclaw considered it for a moment, then shook his head. “No. She doesn't have the skills necessary, or the familiarity with the artifact.”

“Pandora?” suggested Danny.

“Maybe. She may have training... She is much older than I am... Might know more about the artifact than I...” He shook his head. “I will ask her. Before that, I have to do more measurements to see how tangled it is. This will likely be an operation requiring multiple persons.”

“Could Dora?” asked Danny.

“Princess Dorathea of Mattingly?”

Danny bobbed his head. “Mhm.”

“You trust her?”

“Yeah.”

“Possibly,” said Dr. Iceclaw. “I will have to talk to Lady Pandora about sending a message to Mattingly and the Far Frozen for more equipment. The longer that thing stays in you, the more damage it will do.”

Danny swallowed. “What kind of damage is it doing?” he asked.

“You have a cold core,” said Iceclaw. His lips twitched. “As you well know The finer structures of your ectoplasm do not cope well with excessive heat. So far, all the important structures of your core are intact, but some of the ectoplasmic shadows of your organs are degrading. This is a dangerous situation for you, because it means that if your normal organs are damaged, they will not be able to heal.”

“Right,” said Danny.
“If the heat becomes more severe, it will damage your core.” As he said this, Iceclaw summoned more ice. “It is, therefore, very important to keep you cool.”

“I'm always cool,” mumbled Danny, pressing up against the ice. “Always cool...”
Hey, I'm sorry I haven't been answering comments lately. I've been really busy with school starting up. Please still leave them! I do read them, and I really like getting them. I'll try to answer them all eventually....

Chapter 155: Indigestion

Vlad did not approach the Elysian ship.

He had gotten Daniel back to his allies, and out of the Bends. That's what he and Daniel had agreed to. Actually, if he thought about it, he had only agreed to get Daniel and his friends out of the bends. By guarding their retreat to the ship, he had done more than enough, he had gone above and beyond.

Even so, Vlad doubted he would be welcomed by Daniel's allies with open arms. The Elysians they had encountered in the Bends had given him enough askance looks to last an afterlife, even if they hadn't directly confronted him or his presence.

He watched the ships slowly pull away, and disappear behind the mists and boulders of the Grinder. He didn't feel the need to follow. Daniel would be fine, now.

In the meantime, well, Vlad had a few things to talk to his advocate about.

Danny settled in a comfortable-looking chair, then shuffled around for several minutes upon finding out it wasn't terribly comfortable, at least not in the position he wanted to sit in. He sighed, and wrapped himself more tightly around his ice pillow.

Other people walked into the conference room, and sat down. Sam, Tucker, Jazz, Ellie, Pandora, Dr. Iceclaw, the ship's captain, a handful of engineers, the navigator, one of the Elysian commanders, and a bandage-wrapped representative from the Egyptian ship.

They started talking. Danny was glad that he was here, that he had been invited to this conference, but he was honestly miserable, and was having trouble following everything the engineers were saying. It basically boiled down to both ships having taken a lot of damage, but-

“How many weeks?!” exclaimed Dr. Iceclaw.
“Three,” repeated the chief engineer, calmly. “At least. There's too much damage to go faster, and we can't fix everything with what we have on-board. I barely managed to salvage the rudder, and steering is going to take a lot of positive thinking.”

Iceclaw turned to the Egyptians.

The representative shrugged. “Our ship wasn't as fast as this one to begin with. We're no quicker now.”

“Three weeks isn't fast enough,” said Iceclaw. “Is there somewhere we can get to faster? The Far Frozen?”

“The Far Frozen is even farther from here,” said the navigator, “and we'd have to find a way around or through the Sanzu Currents to even get to the Lands of Ice.”

“The Drowned Quarter?”

“Closer, but humans can't breathe underwater.”

Iceclaw bit his lip. “Is there any medically advanced community nearer here than Elysium?”

“After the science wars? I can't speak to individual lairs, of course, but Elysium is the closest community.”

“Dr. Iceclaw,” said Pandora, “is Daniel's situation that severe?”

Although Danny had already given the doctor permission to talk about him, Iceclaw looked at Danny. Danny nodded.

“Yes. Ideally, the great one would already be in the Far Frozen.”

“What about carrying?” asked Ellie. “The boat's-”

“The ship,” interjected the captain.

“-just for Danny's classmates. Most of us can fly faster than this.”

“That would also make whoever went more vulnerable to attack,” said the Elysian commander. He nodded to Danny. “Someone is trying very hard to end you.”

“What would be necessary, to care for Daniel on such a journey?” asked Pandora.

“Ice,” said Iceclaw. “A great deal of it. I would have to come with you.”

“A larger party would travel more slowly,” said the commander, tone that of warning.

“Hm. Yes,” said Pandora. “What would your estimate on travel time be?”

“Ah,” said the commander, thinking, leaning back to cross both sets of arms. He turned to Iceclaw. “How often would the group have to stop, and for how long?”

“At least once every six hours, for an hour.”

“And needs other than ice? Food?”

“Ideally, he should not eat until the amulet is removed from his stomach. But...” He glanced at
Danny. “The amulet may be interfering with his ability to pull in ectoplasmic sustenance. I will need to take a few more readings to be sure, but if that is the case, he should eat. Sparingly. Cold liquids only, like broth, or juice.”

“How often?”

“If the journey lasts more than two days, then at least once a day.”

The commander nodded. “Assuming we were not attacked, and only the swiftest and strongest of us made the journey, it would take a week.”

“That’s too long. Far too long,” said Iceclaw. “Even once in Elysium, I’m not sure I can find all the tools I need. I was planning on sending out to the Far Frozen, but...”


“Not well mapped,” said the navigator, “and they tend to change.”

“There is a reason the Infini-Map is so sought after,” said one of the engineers.

“Yeah,” agreed another, “even if it is a myth.”

Danny looked at Iceclaw. He had a very strange expression on his face. Okay then.

“Sure,” said Ellie, “but is there one that could take us closer to where we want to go? Elysium or the Far Frozen?”

“Or Mattingly?” added Jazz. “Dora might be able to help with the amulet.”

The navigator flipped through her maps. “None that I see... Mattingly... One of the Time-Locked Lands, wasn’t it? Doldrums of Time, and all that. Those never had much of a presence here.”

“What about Long Now?” asked Danny.

“Lord Clockwork’s lair? That doesn’t show up on maps.”

“Oh,” said Danny, disappointed.

“We could get a door to Method,” said Ellie. There are tons of them there. “They have doctors and stuff there, don’t they?”

“Yes,” said Pandora, slowly. “But although the scientists there are more moral than those here, that doesn’t mean they are precisely trustworthy.”

“Yeah, but, you can get the stuff you need from there, right? And it has a lot of doors to other places.”

It looked like Iceclaw hadn’t considered that.

“Or,” said Ellie, “if we go back to the Digressed Tower, Fifty-Three Card Jake at the casino owes me a boat.”

“That’s not a good idea,” said the commander. “There are likely still mercenaries in the area, not to mention the animals. In any case, I believe the casino was damaged and evacuated during the battle.”

“Oh. I didn’t see that.”
“We could go through the Library of Tongues, if we can get to Method,” suggested Danny. “They have lots of doors to a lot of places. They have a door near the Far Frozen, I think.”

“There’s a door to the Library of Tongues here,” said the navigator. “But it doesn’t matter. They don’t let in people who haven’t at least been vetted by members, not to mention payment...”

“We’re Library members,” said Ellie and Danny in stereo.

“You are?” asked Jazz.

“Hey, don't sound so surprised,” said Danny. “We speak a few dozen languages apiece.”

“And what would the payment be for, say, ten others coming with you?” asked Pandora.

“They’d probably just want us to translate some books...” Danny's brain, as slow as it was currently being, located a problem. “Oh. They’d probably want us to do it up front. That's not going to work...”

“Would they though?” said Ellie. “They like us there. They like you. If they know we’re trying to get you help, I think they would let us through.”

“Let's table that for a moment,” said Pandora. “What are our other options?”

Ellie paused for a minute. “If we could get to Method, we could take the Architect's Gate to the Goblin Market. It should be passing right by Mattingly at this time of year.”

“It is,” said Danny. “At least, it was going that way when I visited a couple weeks ago.”

“It was?” asked the navigator. “I didn't think the Goblin Market- Or, no, Mattingly isn't one of the Time-Locked Lands anymore, is it?” She scratched his head vigorously with one hand while the other three were occupied with maps. “Where did it move to..?”

“It's on the outskirts, and moving on,” said Danny, “sort of towards Folkvangr and the Hills? Not towards the Barrens, anyway... Makes it hard to get to, sometimes... But not directly away from it, anyway. I don't know. Yeah.”

“Towards Folkvangr... Yes, the Goblin Market does skim along there.”

“I think Dora put Mattingly on the Goblin Market's path on purpose,” said Sam. She shrugged.

“That sounds like her,” said Jazz.

“That does seem to be a relatively short jump,” said the navigator. “Perhaps two days at the absolute most, assuming individual flight, rather than a vehicle. Then the overall journey time depends on how quickly we can get to the Architect's Gate from here.” More rustling of maps. “Could do the library, but the internal distance and payment is difficult, and the door in is a quarter of the way around Missing Theory... That'd take a while... That one only works in June... Only works if you're a dervish...” The navigator trailed off, muttering in Greek.

“What about the Tutors?” asked Ellie, suddenly. “I almost forgot about them.”

“Who?” asked Danny.

“I used their door one time when I was with Vlad,” said Ellie. She leaned forward across the table, toward the navigator. “That's a stable door, right? It comes out sort of near the Architect's Gate, right?”
The navigator made a sour face, but sorted through her papers. “I suppose it isn’t entirely unreliable, but I don’t think it’s on this side of the Missing Theory at this time of... Oh,” she finished, with a touch of displeasure. “I was mistaken. The Tutors’ Door is only two hours away, if we change course now. Then the overall travel time... Depending on conditions in Method... Three or four days. But both the Tutors’ Door and the Architect’s Gate have tolls. I don’t know how much, or what they will want, or how long it will take to pay them.”

“We would have to take a variety of payment with us,” said the commander, “along with whatever other supplies Dr. Iceclaw deems necessary.”

Pandora nodded. “The Architect’s Gate has a number of destinations other than the Goblin Market. Nineteen of them, if I recall correctly. The Drowned Quarter, and Dis, for example. Cynosura,” said Pandora, addressing the navigator, “do you have a list of destinations?”

“Mhm. Yes,” said the navigator, handing Pandora a rather creased piece of paper. “Here.”

Pandora examined the sheet, and gave it to Dr. Iceclaw in turn. “Would any of these be more useful than the Goblin Market and Mattingly?”

Iceclaw spent several minutes looking at the sheet. “No, I don’t think so. Princess Dorathea’s familiarity with the amulet outweighs most other considerations. I will have to send someone to get a few things once in Method. I didn’t expect to be doing this kind of operation when I packed, sadly. I’ll make a list.”

“About that,” said the navigator, “the Tutors’ Door is small. Big enough to fit you, yes, but not anything larger. Meaning we will have to carry anything we want to bring through.”

“Yes,” said Pandora. “Leaving aside that we would have to do that anyway, considering our other passengers.”

“Yes, dragging a herd of humans across all the Realms would not be pleasant... No offense to current company,” amended the commander quickly.

“Wait,” said Sam, “not that I’m disagreeing about it being a pain to deal with our classmates, but we’re not letting Danny go off on his own again.”

“He won’t be on his own,” said Ellie. “I’m going with him.”

“As will I, Dr. Iceclaw, and as many others as are necessary,” said Pandora. “Sadly, you three cannot fly as we can.”

“We’ve gotten better at the falling thing,” said Tucker, “and I think we can fly a little, if we try...” He shook his head. “Sorry, I know, it’s a speed thing. We’d slow you down.”

Sam looked like she wanted to argue, but instead, she sighed, and slouched back in her chair. “You’re right,” she said, angrily.

“We will send you a message as soon as we get there,” said Pandora, comfortably, “by the fastest route possible.”

“I just feel like he’ll get kidnapped, or half-killed, or whatever again as soon as we take our eyes off of him,” grumbled Sam.

“Me too,” said Danny. “But I need it out. I feel like that time we in sixth grade when we went to that Thai place because Dad thought it might be haunted, and I had the fire sauce and I put on too much,
but, like, a thousand times worse.”

Jazz made a face. “Worse?” She was the only one present who had been there for that incident.

“Yeah,” said Danny. “So, what are we doing? Are we seeing Dora, or trying to get to Elysium, or what?”

Pandora smiled. “We'll be going to Mattingly. In the meantime, you should be getting some rest.”

Hemlock regarded the Elysian woman with a look of disbelief. He had come to speak with Daniel about how the preliminary committee was progressing.

“What do you mean, my client was kidnapped?”
Chapter 156

Chapter Notes

Oof. First week of school is almost over. I hope all of you are doing well. I will start answering comments again once I have more social energy. I do still read them even if I don't answer! They make me happy. Even if I do sometimes act like I'm a little goblin in a hole, reaching out and going "Commentsssssssss..."

You know what I mean?

Chapter 156: the Tutors

Danny, despite wanting to spend at least some time talking with his friends and older sister before they were all separated again, spent most of his remaining time on the ship either asleep, in a sick doze, or dazed, and the rest in fevered (literally) preparation for leaving.

Dr. Iceclaw kept packing snow around him. The snow kept melting. Danny kept feeling awful and hot, although now the heat was concentrated in his stomach, rather than radiating throughout his limbs. His core was happier, although it was still distinctly uncomfortable.

Danny didn't understand. He'd been out in weather that was hotter, he was pretty sure, and he'd been okay, so why was this bothering him so much? Was it the supernatural element? The 'tangling' Dr. Iceclaw had described? He shifted, and the ice crunched around him.

Ancients, but he was miserable. This'd teach him to eat random ghost artifacts. Not that the amulet had been random, exactly, or that he had meant to eat it.

When Danny was roused from his semi-stupor, he was confronted by the sight of Dr. Iceclaw wearing an odd kind of sling. He eyed it with some suspicion, but sighed. It wasn't like he was up for any heavy flying, and this way he could take advantage of Iceclaw's nice, cool, temperature. Maybe he'd even be comfortable.

“I know this isn't ideal,” started Dr. Iceclaw, looking somewhat awkward.

“It's fine,” said Danny. “It's better than me trying to hold onto you by your fur the whole time. You'd have none left.”

“And I'm the only one with a core cold enough to produce ice,” added Iceclaw.

“Okay. Yeah. That sounds about right.”

“You will also be able to rest while we travel,” offered Iceclaw.
Danny found that he could hide quite nicely in the sling. If he didn't look out, no one would know he was there. Of course, for the moment, he wanted to look out. Jazz had stepped away to use the bathroom. Sam and Tucker were waiting with Danny and Iceclaw, half asleep. Their journey through the Tower hadn't been as long or as taxing as Danny's, but it had been a journey, followed by a taxing battle, and they'd been napping with Danny.

“Do the rest of my classmates know that I'm going?” asked Danny.

“Ah, no. They were asleep when we made the decision, I'm afraid,” said Dr. Iceclaw. “Your teacher was still awake, though. He asked to see you off.”

“Oh,” said Danny. “That's good.”

Tucker yawned hugely, then looked at Danny apologetically. “I still can't believe you have to go. It's so- It's- I don't even know. You'd better not disappear on us. No getting assassinated.”

“Yeah. As long as you don't disappear on me. No- Um. No dying. Or getting in trouble. I'm the only one that's allowed to get in trouble.”

“Ha, no way!” said Sam. “I guarantee we can get in trouble just as well as you.”

“But you're not allowed,” said Danny, with a bit of a whine.

“Not allowed what?” asked Jazz.

“To get in trouble, apparently,” said Tucker.

Jazz had the audacity to snort. Danny gave her a small glare and hid.

“We'll do our best,” said Jazz, in a conciliatory tone. “But you'd better focus on getting better, okay?”

“Hey, that's what I said!” said Tucker. “Well, almost.”

“Mf,” said Danny.

The door creaked open. “Are you guys ready?” asked Ellie.

“If you guys are,” said Jazz.

“Should be,” said Ellie. “They got the last of your equipment assigned, and stuff. Hey, Danny, how are you doing?”

“Fine,” said Danny. He poked his head out again. “I'm gonna miss you. I don't wanna go again.”

“This time we'll know where you are,” said Jazz.

“Unless you get kidnapped again. Don't do that, it isn't good for you.”
“Shut up, Tucker,” said Sam, elbowing him fiercely.

“Hey!” complained Tucker.

Danny laughed, weakly. “I'll miss you,” he said.

“We're not saying goodbye just yet. We're seeing you off, remember?”

“Mhm,” said Danny.

Taking this as his cue, Iceclaw began to make his way up through the ship, Ellie and the humans following behind. They had to take a detour or two, to avoid engineers and carpenters making repairs, but otherwise made good time.

The escort assembled on the top deck was small, perhaps six or seven Elysians. From what Danny remembered of the earlier conference, it was necessarily so. Danny was impressed by the size of the pack Pandora had assigned herself, and by the fact that someone on board had packed pajamas for Mr. Lancer, because that was what he was wearing. The old teacher looked incredibly out of place.

Jazz took pity on his nerves, and waved him over as they walked (or, in Iceclaw’s case, flew).

“You aren't all going are you?” Mr. Lancer asked, his voice thin with stress.

“No,” said Jazz. “We're just here to see Danny off.”

“He's really quite ill, isn't he?” worried Mr. Lancer. “Where is he?”

Well, Danny wasn't all that visible where he was. “Hi,” he said.

Mr. Lancer jumped about a foot, and then pressed a hand to his heart. “Oh,” he said, faintly.

“Are you okay?” asked everyone, more or less simultaneously.

“I'm fine,” Mr. Lancer said, waving off the concern. “More importantly, Danny, what happened? I was under the impression that Ellie, here, had helped heal you?”

“Swallowed something I shouldn't have. Need it removed.” The laconic description made it sound like Danny was a toddler that had swallowed a Lego, or something. “You should be asleep,” he finished, by way of turning attention from himself.

“I will be soon enough, I suppose... I had wanted to make sure all my students were safe first, but, well...” the teacher trailed off, uncertain. “I'd like to see you off, first.”

“Mhm,” said Danny, trying not to feel guilty. “Okay.”

“Danny, just, please, be safe.”

“I'll try,” said Danny.

There was a yip from below, and Danny twisted to see what it was.

“Don't do that!” said Iceclaw, alarmed. “It's just your dog.”

“Oh,” said Danny. “Okay.”

The teacher peeled off of the group when they reached the soldiers, who quickly swarmed around
them. There were apparently a lot of checks they had to go through. Danny settled down into the sling, and most of what was going on around him devolved into a white noise and babble.

Danny had almost dozed off again, but when he detected movement towards the side of the ship, he woke himself. He poked his head out. They were standing by the railing of the ship, looking out at a small collection of doors cupped by a geodesic egg with a missing end. A single humanoid ghost floated, reclining, among the doors, along with several oddly colored clumps. Danny squinted.

“Are those flowers?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Pandora. “The Tutors keep several species of ghostly flora, for protection.”

“Oh,” said Danny.

The Tutor, because that's who that ghost had to be, waved at them.

“Time to go, then,” said Pandora. She nodded to the captain, then turned slightly, so as to address a greater number of people. “Safe travels,” she said, lightly.

Danny's goodbyes to his friends were just as short. There wasn't a lot to say, and Danny was too fatigued to say much of it.

The ghosts took off smoothly, the navigator, Cynosura, leading the way. The other ghosts fanned out, forming a sort of protective bubble around himself, Iceclaw, and Pandora.

This was the only leg of the journey the wisps were going to follow him on. Even if they could pay the Tutors (a proposition the navigator doubted), the tolls at the Architect's Gate might be too much for them to go through with the others, and then they'd be stranded in Method, far from home or friends, and vulnerable with that distance. They wanted to come, anyway, but Danny had finally resorted to a small, exhausted tantrum to get them to agree to wait for him in Elysium. They hadn't been happy. In fact, they had been downright sulky. Some of them were even complaining about Cujo right now. But Cujo's case was different. He could take care of himself. Usually.

Danny kept his eyes on the ghost as they came closer. It was a girl, a woman, with long, braided, lavender hair, and an almost-transparent purple-striped coat that rippled strangely, even for a ghostly thing. She was otherwise quite mundane in appearance for a ghost.

“Hi!” she said, cheerfully, though she had her face shyly half-hidden behind a book. “Do you guys need to use the door?”

“Yes,” said Cynosura in a repressive tone.

The ghost blinked, and the edge of a smile slipped past the book. “H- Hey, Cynosura, haven't seen you in a year or two, how are you?”

“Fine. How much is it to use your door to Method?”

“You- Um.” The ghost's eyes darted over the little party. The book inched back up, covering more of her face. “You're not going to introduce me to your friends?”

“No.”

Although her face was now completely covered, the ghost's body language clearly showed a pout. “Then you can't use our door.”
“We're in a hurry.”

“Then you can hurry in another direction. We like to know who we let through our door.”

“Don't be dense, Mar. You know who this is.”

“No I don't,” said Mar. “Is- Is this going to be some kind of- of 'Don't you know who I am?' stuff, is it? Because that didn't fly for me when I was al-alive.”

“Mar-”

“Cynosura,” said Pandora, in a chiding tone.

“My lady, this is the Tutor, Mar. The only one I've ever met, despite there theoretically being more. Mar. This is Queen Pandora of Elysium, Ancient of Hope, Doctor Iceclaw of the Far Frozen, Abderus, Dictys, Physcoa, Timandra, Enyeus, and Meda, also of Elysium, and Ellie. And Cujo.”

Mar peeked out from behind her book, and looked straight at Danny. “Your name is Cujo?”

“No, he's my dog.”

“Um.”

“My name is Danny-”

“And he's very sick,” interrupted Cynosura, “which is why we want to use your door. So if you would-” she prompted, gesturing at the door with her hands.

“Oh! Sorry. I didn't realize. Ah, so, still have to charge you. Um.” She opened her book. “Did you know, if you have a powerful laser, you can use it to pick up microscopic objects? It's called laser tweezing.” She smiled nervously. The smile slid off her face. “Not that one. No.” She turned a few pages. “The color magenta doesn't exist as a discrete wavelength of light, it's just your brain's way of telling you that you're seeing light that isn't green, because red and blue receptors in your eyes are lit up, but not the green ones, and red and blue are on opposite sides of the spectrum of visual light!”

“Excuse me,” said one of the Elysians. Danny thought that it might have been the one introduced as Abderus. “But what does this have to do with a toll?”

“It is the toll,” said Mar. “Or at least it's how I get the toll. Cynosura didn't explain?”

“I didn't explain, because it doesn't make sense. You can't feed on the emotions of other ghosts.”

“Au contraire, mon amie. Just because you can't doesn't mean I can't.”

“You mean- You're like Spectra.”

Mar made a face. “Oh, gross. No way. Don't compare me to her. Ick. I feed on the excitement of discovery! Curiosity! Sort of. It's complicated. You've already paid, anyway.” She shook her head. “Here, let me so a few more. Maybe you can pay for all of them, even if you are sick. It's so hard to do for people who were born before the advent of the scientific method. They think they know everything, and I'm just babbling nonsense.”

“This is why I advised you to make the ship wait, my lady. The last time I was here it took hours before she was satisfied.”

“You just don't have any sense of wonder, Cynosura. Especially for someone named after the Ursa
Minor. The constellation is used for navigation in the northern hemisphere of the human world.”

“I am aware.”

“Did you know Polaris is the brightest Cepheid Variable in visible in Earth’ night sky?”

“You told me that last time, and I still don't know what it means.”

“It's a type of star that changes brightness,” said Danny. “Because they pulse. They change size and temperature.”

“But the way they pulse, the rate at which they pulse, has a direct relationship with how bright they are,” said Mar, picking up the thread.

“So they're a good standard candle for figuring out how far away things are!” finished Danny.

Everyone stared at him in faint bafflement.

“Oh! There you go!” said Mar, closing her book. “I'll get you going then. You said Method, right?” She put her hand against one of the doors. “That would be this one.”

Danny looked curiously at the door. It was somewhat different than the typical Ghost Zone door. It had a lock on it, for one. For another, it had a translucent framework of tubes and rods connecting it to the geodesic egg. So did the others. Was it just to keep the doors anchored, or was there some other purpose to it? One of the rods pulsed oddly, and Danny decided on the later option. Maybe it was to keep the doors leading to where they were supposed to go.

Mar pulled a key from her coat, and inserted it into the lock. “Here we go. Remember, there's no way to come back until we're manning the other side, which will be,” she checked a watch that Danny was sure hadn't been there a minute ago, “in about an hour, I guess. I mean, seriously, there won't even be a handle, and I don't open to knocks. Okay?”

“Reasonable rules,” said Pandora.

“Okay,” repeated Mar. She pulled open the door. Beyond was a landscape Danny could only describe as sparkly.

The navigator and the Elysian guards went first. As they did, the wisps kissed Danny, briefly, sang a few sad notes, and flew off.

Pandora motioned for Iceclaw to go next. As Iceclaw went forward, Mar's coat rippled, twitched and then morphed into a small, almost catlike creature with long, ribbon-like wings. It extended it's head towards Danny, large eyes whirling, and made a small chittering noise.

“Oh! I think Lie likes you. That's unusual.” She put one hand on the small creature's head and scratched its ear. “He's usually very shy.”

“Is that a chameleon moth sphinx?” asked Iceclaw. “They're quite rare, aren't they?”

“Y-Yeah. Sort of. Hey, I can't keep the door open for much longer, so...”

“Right, right,” said Iceclaw, stepping through.

Danny had looked at Method once before, from a doorway in the Library of Tongues. It looked much the same from here. Geometric, smooth, shining glass buildings. Pyramids, crystalline shafts, and octahedrons were the most common shapes, although Danny could see rectangular prisms,
decahedrons, dodecahedrons, and other, more exotic shapes. Many of them were labeled in neat, ghostly writing, or minimalist Latin characters. Twisting black and silver walkways wound through the buildings, and the ubiquitous floating doors. Small floating islands sprouted decorative floral arrangements and gleaming lamp posts filled with blue light. Ghosts, singly or in small groups, flew leisurely between buildings, or walked on the pathways. It reminded Danny of an airy atrium, even though it wasn't actually enclosed, or maybe of a futuristic Utopian city in a science fiction movie.

It was very bright. Too bright. Even the doors were silver and reflective, rather than the more natural (to Danny's eyes) purple. He hid in the sling.

“Well,” said Pandora. “Here we are. Lead the way, Cynosura.”
Chapter 157: Crowd Control

Danny didn't mean to doze off. He really didn't. But the sling was dark, Iceclaw was soft, and Danny felt reasonably cool. Being tired beyond belief didn't hurt, either. Two hours of feverish sleep was not enough to offset the ordeal of the Digressed Tower, or even being shot in the face by Valerie. Gosh, that would have been exhausting on its own.

Sadly, this didn't stop his dreams from being chaotic and alarming. He woke in a panic, certain that he was back in the Tower, on a floor where everyone had aphasia and they were under attack by something big with teeth instead of eyes, and it had melted a hole right through him with a blowtorch, and he was dying-

And he was trapped-

"It's okay, it's okay," soothed Pandora, stroking his back through the cloth of the sling. "You're safe, Daniel. It's just a dream."

Danny's response was unintelligible, even to himself.

"Do you think we ought to try to take him out?" asked Pandora.

"I don't think that will help," said Iceclaw in a strained voice. He sounded hurt! Why did he sound hurt?

Belatedly, Danny realized he was the reason Iceclaw sounded pained. In his nightmare, he had latched onto Iceclaw's fur and pulled. He released the yeti's fur, and attempted to make himself very small and very light in apology.

His core protested vehemently at the latter. He squeaked.

"Sorry," he wheezed, a moment later, when he had regained control of his breathing. "Didn't mean to, um..."

"It's alright," said Iceclaw, sounding relieved. "We're almost to the Architect's Gate now, would you like to see?"

After a moment of (admittedly hazy) thought, curiosity won out over embarrassment. He poked his head out and froze. They were all staring at him. A split second later, all except for Pandora looked away and pretended that they hadn't just been doing that. This included a couple of ghosts that Danny didn't know, and who had clearly just been passing by when Danny had his freak-out.

"Are you feeling more rested, at least?" asked Pandora.

"Um," said Danny. "Maybe."

Pandora gave him an encouraging smile and ruffled his hair. She floated back and gestured behind her. "That's the Architect's Gate," she said.

Danny looked. On his own, he would not have called the structure a gate. It was certainly large. Its base was a big, twenty-sided shape. On each of the sides sat a small clouded glass building. Each
building was set with a sturdy-looking door. The whole structure shone with viridian light, casting
rays into the surrounding space. There was a small crowd of ghosts around the thing, some coming,
some going. Every so often, a ghost would enter one of the buildings, and the light would swell,
before momentarily dropping below its original level.

"Unlike with the Tutors' Door," said Pandora, "these are captured natural portals."

"Oh," said Danny. At another time, he might be asking how natural portals had been captured. As it
was, the number of people down there looked... stressful. "It's pretty," he offered.

"It is," agreed Pandora. "It's alright if you would like to sleep some more."

Danny didn't want to sleep if he was going to have more fever dreams (nightmares), but he took this
as implicit permission to hide again. Which he did.

He really didn't mean to fall asleep again...

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"He is going to be okay, right?" asked Ellie, as she watched Danny's breathing go soft and even. She
had designs on sleep herself, and she was grateful that Pandora had elected to perch her on her
shoulder.

Pandora could make herself very large.

"Yes," said Dr. Iceclaw, with confidence. "Once he gets treatment, he should be perfectly fine."

With that, the little party made its way towards the Architect's Gate.

"Are we going to wait for Enyeus and Meda before we go through?" asked Ellie, referring to the two
who had been sent off for supplies.

"No," said Pandora. "They know the way. They will meet us in Mattingly."

Cynosura seemed to know exactly which of the little buildings they needed to go to, because she
flew very confidently to the end of a rather long line. Ellie frowned at it, then looked up at the
building. Was there some kind of marker...? She floated up, slightly. Ah, there was, over the
doorframe, in Old High Spirit. Ellie wondered why that was the language used, when the structure
was clearly more modern. Perhaps the builders had liked the script? It was pretty, but it could be hard
to interpret, sometimes.

She squinted, even though she didn't really need to.

The words read, 'nyitaasikis evie.'

She didn't know the first word, but the second was 'market,' so the first had to be 'goblin,' or 'goblin's'
or something like that. She settled back to the level of the line.

"So," she said, "how do we pay for this one?"

"It varies," answered Cynosura. "I don't know what it is today. Sometimes it's coins, sometimes it's
energy, sometimes it's ice, or fire, or bits of random junk. Sometimes it's stories, or news from other
Realms." She shrugged. "There was one time they wanted flowers."

"They?"

"The people who run it." She scowled, then. "Architect, singular, Tutors, plural, and for which one are there actually more people?" She shook her head. "I'll never understand that woman."

"There are more than one, though?" said Ellie.

"So she claims."

Ellie decided not to bring up the matter of Mar's coat... pet... friend? Whatever. It wasn't really important, anyway.

"The ship isn't sinking," said Jazz, tiredly. "There's nothing for it to sink into."

"It could still fall," said Tucker.

"Not helpful," hissed Sam.

"They've still left us!" said Paulina.

"Not, like, on purpose, though," soothed Star. "I mean, he was pretty sick-looking at the end, there."

"I guess," said Paulina, somewhat mollified. She picked a splinter off the edge of her bunk.

The students (and Mr. Lancer) were in the hold Pandora and the captain had dedicated to the sleeping needs of the human group. They had been there for some time, first to sleep, then to hide from the construction details. Jazz, Sam, and Tucker had their own room, in theory, but, well. Staying here, with everyone else, they had decided, was the more diplomatic choice.

At least, that's how Jazz had reasoned through it. She wasn't sure if the other two followed the same logic.

"We were all sick looking," protested Elliot. "We're still sick looking. We look like- like refugees from a war zone, or something."

"That is kind of what we are," said Hannah, not unkindly. "I mean, I'm not sure if that counted as a war, but it was definitely a battle."

Several of the children shivered.

"I've been near ghost fights before," said Mikey, "but that was different."

"It was like when the town was invaded," suggested Star. "Sort of."

"Which time?" asked Mikey with just a touch of humor. "But no, it wasn't, not really. I mean, we could still get under shields..." He shrugged.

"Yeah," said Ricky, a bit over-loud. He'd been a touch too close to an explosion, Jazz gathered.
"Even if you couldn't, it was usually only a couple of ghosts, and you could run on your own, but this- I don't know."

"Almost makes me want to take the Fenton's ghost safety classes," joked Mia. "Or that other thing they did- What was it? Ghostadors?"

"Ghostkateers," said Kwan.

"Oh! Right. You were in it, weren't you? What was that like?" asked Mia, momentarily distracted from current circumstances.

Kwan pouted. "I don't remember. I think I was overshadowed."

"Er," said Hannah. "You were overshadowed... while you were a member of a ghost-fighting group?" She shook her head. "And people wonder why I'm a conspiracy theorist."

"No offense Jazz, really," said Lester, so earnestly that Jazz had to believe him, "but your parents aren't very good at their job."

"I know," said Jazz.

"That's a good thing," added Sam. "Well. Sometimes, anyway. It usually keeps Danny from getting shot by them."

Paulina issued something like a strangled laugh. "Not this last time, though?"

Everyone winced.

"Anyway," said Jazz, deciding to at least try to get a grip on the direction of the conversation, "it isn't as if we've been abandoned. We're on our way back to Elysium, and we're surrounded by soldiers who are going to do their very best to get us there intact. I mean," she had to raise her voice slightly to be heard over the bangs of construction elsewhere in the ship, "that was the plan to begin with, when we came to get you. Just- Danny needed help, so we had to split up. That's all."

"I sort of got the impression they were mostly here for Danny," said Nathan. "I get it, it's just... That's my impression. No one here really likes us."

"They don't really know you," said Tucker, reasonably. "They can't dislike you, anyway."

"Knowing you would probably be a minus, really," mumbled Sam.

Jazz elbowed her gently. "I guess it is true they mostly came for Danny, but it was for all of you, too. You see, you were guests in Elysium, so they feel like what happened was their fault. It's a Greek thing," she added. "Xenia, but with a ghostly twist."

Mikey, Nathan, Lester, and Mia looked enlightened. The rest did not, but didn't ask any questions. Instead, their eyes swiveled to Valerie.

Valerie, like Sam, Jazz, and Tucker, had done some fighting in the battle, and now, well... Jazz was reasonably certain she wasn't asleep, she'd dealt with her brother's sleeping habits (or lack thereof) and late-night escapades too often to be deceived by an amateur, but Valerie wasn't quite an amateur, and she was doing a credible impression of sleep. She'd probably even fooled most of her classmates.

Speaking of sleep... Jazz let her eyes drift to Mr. Lancer, who was passed out on one of the bunks, and drooling. He'd spent much more time awake and worrying after getting aboard than his students
had. Than most of his students had. Jazz had been up for just as long, she thought, but then she hadn't been dragged more than halfway up that Tower, and she wasn't nearly as old.

"You know," said Sam, snapping Jazz from her reverie, "there's not any point in getting angry at anyone here because of this. Spectra's an expert in mind control."

Jazz opened her mouth to deny this, because what Spectra did wasn't, technically speaking, mind control, but stopped as she spotted what Sam had seen. Resentment. Not well-disguised resentment, either. She should go to sleep herself, if she was missing things like that. Apparently, now that they had made it to safety, and had a little time to think about things other than survival, or what new way their history and personality were being pulled into, they had the mental energy to be properly annoyed at Valerie.

(And Jazz was supposed to be the psychologist. What else was she missing?)

Jazz had just the bare bones of what had happened with Valerie, Spectra, and Danny. It was enough. She was more than a little aggrieved with Valerie herself, but this wasn't the time or place to air that grievance. She wasn't sure what the proper time and place would be.

(And she had a suspicion that Valerie hadn't been the only one Spectra had suckered that night)

It didn't matter.

The mind-control ruse seemed to be working, a lot of the tension bled off, some of it even transformed into a kind of reserved sympathy.

"So," said Ricky, "we're just going to wait? Do nothing?"

Jazz suddenly realized, far too late to do anything substantial about it, how problematic that would be. Twenty students (assuming one counted her, Sam, and Tucker), one teacher, bored, scared, traumatized, and more than a little angry, trapped on a slow ship taking them back to a place they had already been taken from forcibly once, without any familiar protection. The Elysians would stop anything physical from happening- or at least keep anything physical from escalating- but purely verbal disputes? Subtle bullying? Shunning? She doubted it. They might not even notice it was happening, or if they did, they'd think nothing of it.

"No," said Jazz. "We're going to see if we can figure out who sent all those mercenaries."

"How?" demanded Star. "It isn't as if they just told us who- Wait." Her brows went down, scrunching up her face. "They did, didn't they? Crap. What was the name?"

"Issitoq," supplied Mikey.

"Ah," said Jazz, surprised to be finished with that line of inquiry already. "I- um- I don't suppose they said why, did they?"

Star shook her head.

"Do you know?" asked Hannah.

She wasn't looking at Jazz, but past her, to Sam. Sam's face was... stormy, Jazz decided. That was the way to put it. Tucker's looked like it had been carved from stone. Why were-?
"They called him an eyeball, I think," said Paulina, "and some other things... The person who hired them, I mean, not Danny."

Oh. Ohh.

Jazz wasn't the best with names (the others still hadn't let her live down 'Ghost X' or 'Crate Creep'), but once they were in the proper context...

"Did they mention anything about him being a judge?"

"Maybe?" offered Paulina. "Why? What's wrong now?"

Jazz's eyes roamed over the cabin. "Nothing immediate," manged Jazz.

"I'm going to kill that racist, hypocritical, foul, little pustule," stated Sam, voice utterly calm.

"Sam," said Jazz, somewhat alarmed. "You can't. I mean, it isn't that I don't want him gone- I've wanted him gone for a while, now- but he has an army and he can see the future. I'm not even sure that he's killable. Destroyable?"

"Hey," said Hannah, raising a hand, "does anyone want to tell us who this 'Issitoq' is?"

Jazz sighed. "Do you all remember when Danny told you about the Ghost Zone's legal system?"
Chapter 158: the Architect's Gate

“Two the price today is weapons,” said Pandora, straightening after reading the small sign beside the door. Ellie thought she sounded a little sour. Well, Ellie would be, too. Those spears were works of art, for all that some of the woodwork had gotten a little ectoplasm-stained these last couple of days. Actually, the battle-stains only added to their appearance.

“I don't like the sound of that,” said Abderus. “What if there's an ambush on the other end?”

“In the Goblin Market?” asked the navigator. “Not likely. Bad for business.”

“Everyone has a price,” opined Abderus, “and it's lower for merchants.”

“Merchants are people, too, Abderus,” said Pandora, “and they have their own pride.”

“They'd have to bribe the people who run the Gate, too,” said Cynosura, “and if anyone found that out, well, guess who wouldn't be getting their research materials.”

“Who does that anyway?” asked Ellie. “Run the Gate, I mean.”

“Excuse me?” called a person behind them. “You're holding up the line.”

“Very well. Abderus, as you are concerned, you may go first.”

Abderus nodded grimly, and pulled a long, wicked knife from... somewhere. He fed it into a slot by the side of the door, and stepped through as it opened. It snapped shut quickly behind him.

“What did you mean, research materials?” asked Ellie, as Pandora motioned another Elysian forward.

Cynosura shrugged, an expressive movement with four arms. “I assume that's what they use all this stuff for. Consider where we are, after all.”

“I guess,” said Ellie.

“Maybe not the energy, though,” said Cynosura, contemplatively. “They have to power this somehow, don't they?” She shrugged, clearly dismissing the problem from her mind.

Ellie then realized a problem.

“I don't have a weapon,” she said. Not unless she counted herself, anyway.

“I have spares,” said Pandora. “A number of them.” She handed a knife, small, but well made, with interesting patterns running up the blade, to Ellie.

“Thanks,” she said.

It seemed Pandora intended to go last, because she sent in all the other Elysians, then Iceclaw and
Danny, and then Ellie. It made sense. Although making sure they were in control of what was going on in front of them was important, vitally so, at the moment an attack was most likely to come from behind. There really wasn't any reason to expect them to go to this way, after all.

Oh, how Issitoq wished he could attack the abomination and its spawn in the Goblin Market. Technically he could, but Pandora would be right there and Issitoq didn't need visions of the future to tell him how that confrontation would go in his current state of agitation.

He needed something foolproof.

His long existence told him there was no such thing, but, whatever he did, it only needed to be foolproof up until that thing died. Issitoq could improvise from there. Surely they would all see the wisdom in it, then, see that it was better than the consequences of the rule of something so unclean, so monstrous. If only they saw now.

The thermos waiting in the vaults of the Panopticon...

No. That was desperation. He could see it now. He ought to have left it with Clockwork, except that Clockwork, in his infatuation with his creature, might have set it loose. No. Better to have it be under the watchful eyes of the Observants.

Perhaps- Perhaps he could disrupt the portal, trap Pandora on the other side of it. Then he could have a freer hand with what to do with the others. The Elysians and the merchants would be a sad, but necessary, sacrifice. It wouldn't take much. He just had to-

The door of his workroom burst open, disrupting the hold he had on the portal, and uselessly expending a few precious grains of the hourglass's sands. He whirled, furious. He had given specific, very specific, instructions to his subordinates that he was not to be disturbed.

“My lord- My lord,” said the Observant cowering in the doorway. He was a young one, probably not even in to his fifth decade. There was a look to the young ones- An odd way of movement. Halting. Cautious. They hadn't yet mastered the art of seeing with a single, long, perfect perspective.

“What?” ground out Issitoq.

“The- The containment device you brought back,” said the young Observant. “It's failing.”

“What?”

Dan was thinking about escaping. Only thinking, at the moment. He was thinking... He wanted to be victorious, powerful, feared! But... What did victory mean, in the here and now?

He'd had a long time to think. A long, long time. He wanted to escape. But for what?
To do what?

He’d wanted to make his younger self follow in his footsteps, to make it so that everything he had done *would* be done, to ensure his existence. Because it *had* to be done, and it might as well be him. Might as well be a monster like him. Someone already damned and doomed.

It had to be done, even if it was evil. It was for the best. He knew that.

So why were his thoughts so... muddy? That was the word. He had been full of purpose, clarity, and hate, but now he was confused, and distracted. Lost. It was from being stuck in here for so long, from being trapped. It made him lose sight of what really mattered.

He pressed against the sides of the thermos. This was all Clockwork's fault, that old meddler. Snatching him away just when he was about to be *done*. Just when he was about to be able to *stop*. It wasn't fair.

His lips curled. He was worried about *fair*, was he?

It was like he was trapped in his own personal hell. Having to do this again, and again, and again.

(And, if it was just him, it would be fine, wouldn't it? He deserved it, if anyone did.)

He growled. He had kept out thoughts like this for so long, shut out his emotions for so long- He shouldn't be thinking of things like this, no, no, no. As soon as he got out, he would do it all again, and it would be *better*, and he'd be done, and he'd be too powerful to touch, this time around and this time-

This time he could send him on, his younger self. Get rid of him. Kill him. Because now he knew, they weren't really the same person. Divergent timelines. He existed separately, now. He could do it, and it would be a mercy. It would all be a mercy.

He continued his push against the walls, and smiled savagely as he heard them squeak.

Issitoq silently stared at the thermos, at its bulging sides, at the not-quite-cracks. This was Clockwork's fault, that rebellious brat. He didn't know how Clockwork had sabotaged it, but, surely that's what had happened. Trying to make him look bad, trying to destroy him... Treacherous slave, how dare he, how dare...

Issitoq forced himself to still. He had to regain control of the situation. He blinked slowly, thinking. He couldn't see the Panopticon being destroyed by the thing in the thermos, not immediately, so whatever he did, it must work.

Perhaps he could set this one on the abomination after all. They would destroy each other. It would be the neatest solution. Yes.
Clockwork watched the scene through one of his many temporal lenses. He was in his youngest form, curled inwards, with his tail wrapped securely around himself. He was alone in Long Now. He'd sent Oleander away, back to Libra, and Nephthys had been forced to leave to deal with a rogue portal halfway across the Realms.

Now that the principal players had left the Digressed Tower, Clockwork could see the future clearly again. He was even able to trace backwards to see what had happened, in the Tower. It wasn't good, but Clockwork hadn't expected it to be.

As for the futures, those many, branching, futures, so many of them depended on what happened there, now, in that room. What Issitoq said didn't matter, not really. But what he did, oh, there was a fork in the tree, a great and terrible one, and no doubt Issitoq was blind to it. Curse the Observants for their singular perspective, their refusal to see things from other points of view.

Issitoq could still choose the path of sanity, he could still pull back from this. He could bring Dan back to Long Now, and Clockwork could repair the thermos. There was still a chance, however slim, however small.

But if Issitoq didn't make that choice, then whether he chose to let Dan out or not, the paradox would be free in a week.

The paradox... Clockwork could stop this, even now. Dealing with Dan, ending Dan, was well within the constraints set him by Issitoq. But... Clockwork followed the thread of time onward. No, that wouldn't do, that wouldn't work. Not the way he wanted it to. Not in a way that would be good for Daniel and Danielle. Not in a way that would be good for the worlds.

He would have been biting his nails if it weren't for his gloves.

Would Issitoq choose sanity or madness?

Would he- And there it was. Issitoq had finally made his decision, his real decision, and the immediate future coalesced. The Observant in the lens reached out to touch the thermos, and it disgorged a column of blue-white light. A shape, more slender than it had been when it went in, but still imposing, formed, shadowy, behind the light.

Madness it was. Clockwork made a small, noise, like a wheeze, in the back of his throat. He wasn't sure if he didn't prefer this outcome, but he hadn't had enough time to work on Dan, not nearly enough at all. The choices he could make from this were multitudinous, and there was no way for Clockwork to rule out a choice. He splintered the timeline as badly as Daniel did, now that he was free.

But that was a good thing as well as a bad thing. It meant Dan could make a choice, that he might make a choice.

Clockwork watched, seconds slowing down to nothing and infinity. This would be the first choice of many. What would it be?

Would Dan strike Issitoq down? He hadn't destroyed him in the other timeline, the one that didn't exist, instead preferring to torment him. Clockwork supposed he had a right to it, considering that Issitoq had sent the ghosts that killed his family and friends in that reality. But he had done the same to any ghost that had even so much as inconvenienced him in life, while killing those who he had never met.

Would Dan cooperate with Issitoq, despite his hate? If he saw something he wanted, perhaps. He
was more than ruthless enough. He had done similar things in his past. He had done so with Fright Knight, all the while planning to betray him.

Would he flee? And where would he go? What would he do when he got there? There were places where he would never be found, should he wish it, places where he could build up power. Would he go after those he had killed before, those he had tried to kill before? He could do that, too.

He could do one thing, and then the other, even. That would be most likely, if Clockwork made his guesses based on his behavior in the other timeline, but he had changed. Clockwork just wasn't sure how much.

The blue-white light died down, Dan's fiery hair took over the task of illuminating the room. He looked down his nose at Issitoq. Without all the extra bulk, his resemblance to Danny was much more pronounced. He barred his teeth in disgust, and vanished.

Truly vanished. Dan had the ability to teleport. He was no longer in the Observants' Panopticon. Issitoq was left, furious, but alive.

The tension in Clockwork's body eased, slightly. Dan's motive for leaving had yet to be revealed, but he had left without violence.

There was hope.
Sorry for posting this so late in the day. I forgot to do it when I posted on FFN. It's been that kind of week.

Chapter 159: The Goblin Market

The Goblin Market was noisy and crowded. Ellie had expected that. Whether they were ghostly in nature or not, markets like this usually were.

She had, however, also expected that Iceclaw and the Elysians would be waiting nearby when she came out the other end of the portal.

They were not.

Ellie, urged by the crowds trying to use this end of the Architect's Gate, and what seemed to be a slight speed difference between the Market and the portal, floated away from the portal. She glanced back. On this side, there was only one portal, encased in glass, not a collection of them. She turned away, scanning the three-dimensional array of booths, kiosks, and stores.

Without the constraints of gravity or ground, the Goblin Market grew in all directions, colorful and full of variety. There were red-and-white striped warriors from the Glass City, selling rainbow-hued honey. There was a yuki-onna in flowing white robes, buying goods with crystal coins. An ordinary man sat in a stall festooned with living (un-living?) lanterns. A woman with midnight-black skin sat on a rug, surrounded by books. A perfectly empty stall was labeled bellek in red letters, and a long line wound from its counter into the depths of the Market. A man with a green hat and short beard argued with a rabbit riding a giant centipede, surrounded by wooden debris and purple cabbages.

No giant white yetis, though.

Ellie sucked in her lower lip. Where would they go? Why would they go? Had they been kidnapped? Already?

A very small merchant tugged on Ellie’s sleeve, and offered her a platter of tiny pots. She waved him off apologetically, and looked back at the portal.

The cursed thing was moving! She dived after it, not wanting to be separated from Pandora, too. It drifted deceptively quickly, and now Ellie could see the path it had cut through the Market, full of broken things and angry ghosts. Ahead of it, ghosts were pulling their stalls and goods out of the way. A few ghosts had looped ecto-ropes over the box in an attempt to slow it down or stop it. She looked behind her again, and finally spotted Iceclaw and the Elysians, also flying after the box.
Ellie slowed down so they could catch up with her.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I don't know!” said Cynosura. “It isn't supposed to move with respect to the rest of the Market!”

“It stops for a couple seconds when someone is about to come out, then it starts up again,” added one of the other Elysians. “It started after Abderus—”

“It could have started before me, too,” interjected Abderus.

“And it keeps getting faster!”

“Well,” huffed Cynosura, “it doesn't really matter, as long as Lady Pandora can come through properly.”

“Yes, it does! How are Enyeus and Meda to get my equipment to Mattingly without it?”

The glass building glowed more brightly momentarily and stopped. A second later, Pandora exited, looking somewhat bemused at all the ropes. In another second, the box jumped forward again, the ghosts pulling at it cursing in a dozen languages.

Pandora flew up to them. “Let's go quickly, before someone blames the portal's behavior on us,” she said, voice low and urgent.

They were several rows down from the destruction caused by the rogue portal before Ellie asked, “Why would they blame us?”

“The portal was sabotaged,” said Pandora. “Someone meant to close it, I think, to prevent me from coming through.”

“But it started acting up for Abderus?” said Ellie.

“Portals cut through both time and space,” said Cynosura.

“Quite,” Pandora agreed.

“Then someone knows we're here.”

“Sadly. That's why we must be swift. The sooner we reach Mattingly, the better.”

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Pain knifed up through Danny's chest. It was hot, fiery, inside him, and his sweat was freezing on his skin from all the cold Iceclaw was pumping out. He pulled himself closer to Iceclaw, even though there wasn't any point to that. He was already as close as he could be, without somehow burrowing into Dr. Iceclaw, and... just... gross.

He was getting worse, and it was loud in the Goblin Market. He pressed his hands over his ears, and suppressed a whine. He hoped nothing bad was happening out there, because between the noise, muffling effect of the sling, and not being able to see, he had no idea what was going on.
After a while, the sound began to drop off, then grow more distant. Danny risked poking his head out of the sling. The kingdom of Mattingly loomed high in the air, ringed by double-pointed guard towers that looked both up and down. Danny could see the twinkle of gas lamps in their windows, and from the parapets, the flash of highly polished musket muzzles.

It was good to see that the kingdom was still progressing forward in time, inching closer to the present. Danny wondered where they would finally decide to stop.

Dr. Iceclaw patted Danny. “Almost there,” he said. He sounded strained. They were going rather fast. Had something happened to force them to hurry?

Danny looked at the grim faces of his companions, and slipped back into the sling.

They were challenged by guards near the border, but once they recognized Pandora and Ellie, they waved them on, one of them even joining as a kind of honor guard. Danny felt Iceclaw relax, and felt himself relax in sympathy.

He was half asleep again, listening to a murmur of comforting conversation, when Iceclaw shook him slightly.

“You have to get up now, great one,” said the yeti.

Danny mumbled in protest, but pulled himself back into wakefulness. “Why?” he asked, sticking his head out.

“Oh, Sir Phantom, it really is you,” said the guard. He licked his lips and looked at another guard. They were standing in front of Dora's castle, in front of the big main doors, and had attracted a small crowd.

“Yes, it's really me. I'm sorry. I'm kind of sick.” He coughed slightly. He knew this person, but couldn't remember his name. It was 'Sir' something. Something with an 'L,' maybe. Sir Leo? No, no, Sir Leo actually looked leonine. Sir Luke? No, Sir Luke's skin was bone white.

… Maybe it actually started with an R. Or a Y.

“Is it contagious?”

“No,” said Iceclaw.

The guard looked apologetic. “Sorry, I had to ask.” He bit his lower lip. “You won't want the audience chamber,” he said. He looked around the crowd, and found someone he recognized. “You, Bernal,” he pointed at a boy wearing page's livery, “go tell her majesty that Sir Phantom, Dame Phantom, and Lady Pandora will be in the blue receiving room.” He turned back to Danny and the others. “I will take you there.”

The blue receiving room was painted the color of Earth's sky, and hung with gentle pastoral paintings. It was the very nicest of the private receiving rooms.

Danny hoped he wouldn't throw up on any of the furniture.

Iceclaw took off the sling, and arranged Danny on the couch next to him. Ellie squeezed in next to Danny, radiating as much cold as Iceclaw. Pandora sat down on another seat, and the Elysians stood themselves around as guards.
Dora came with her own retinue only minutes later, and the room became quite crowded. Dora fussled over Danny in a way that reminded him oddly of Jazz, and sent her servants to prepare rooms and fetch her own doctors.

“I was worried something like this had happened,” she said, once Ellie had told her the story.

“You were worried I’d swallow Aragon's amulet?”

“Well, no,” admitted Dora, wringing her hands, “that never even crossed my mind. But we noticed the amulet was missing. I check it every day,” she explained. “He has tried to steal it so often. But this time, we could not find how he had done it, or where he had gone. I am so terribly sorry that you paid the price for our inattention.”

Danny shook his head. “I don't think it's your fault. I don't think it's anything you did, I mean–” Danny broke off, thinking about how to express what he wanted to. “The person who did it, I think they can make portals.”

“Oh,” said Dora. “That is not good, not good at all. We will have to keep you under watch at all times, Sir Phantom.”

Danny shifted, uncomfortable at the thought, but didn't object. That sounded imminently reasonable. He shuddered to think that a portal might open up beneath him, and drop him in the Burning Lands all by himself, or somewhere even worse.

“Oh,” he said.

Dora nodded. “You said you needed my help to take it out. What can I do?”

This was, apparently, a somewhat complicated question. Iceclaw gave Dora a very short, simple, version of the answer, and then they all fussled over Danny some more, and put him in a room in a soft bed, with lots of ice, and told him to sleep.

“Are you sure you can't take it out now?” asked Danny, plaintively.

“I am sorry, great one. There are preparations we must make first, and I have to tell Danielle and Queen Dorathea what they must do to help.”

“Don't worry, Daniel,” said Pandora. “I will stay here with you.”

“You will?” said Danny, aware that he sounded just a little pathetic. That was fine, right? He'd been through a lot these past few days.

But he wasn't the only one, even if he was the only one stupid enough to swallow a ghostly artifact. This was his own fault and he should stop feeling sorry for himself. At least he was with people he knew, in places he knew, unlike his classmates and parents, who had been pushed into an entirely unfamiliar world.

“Now, now,” said Pandora, patting Danny lightly on the shoulder, “you are being quite unfair to yourself, Daniel. You have been forced to deal with a very many difficult things these past weeks. Most ghosts never deal with the kind of core injury you have sustained, let alone fighting off an assault on their lair, a Libran trial, a journey through the Digressed Tower, a mercenary army, and a fight with a dragon all right after one another. Not to mention, bring a group of powerless humans out of it all alive.”

Well, when Pandora put it like that, Danny didn't feel as bad. He pulled the bed-sheets up to his chin,
and wiggled into the pillows.

“They aren’t completely powerless, though.”

“Oh?”

“They’re picking up more powers. More liminality.” He paused. “Valerie shot an ectoblast.”

Pandora didn’t look particularly pleased about that. Danny understood. It was another unpredictable
element for her people to deal with.

“Well, I had something of a talk with young Miss Gray,” said Pandora. She shook her head. “What
you said to her in the Tower made an impression on her, apparently.”

“A good one?”

“I believe so.”

“Oh. Good.”
Chapter 160: Operation

When Danny woke, he felt better. Which was weird. He'd been expecting to feel worse. He blinked up at the dark canopy over the bed. Was he at Sam's house?

He shook his head. No. He was in Mattingly.

“How are you feeling, Daniel?” asked Pandora, from her position to the side of the bed.

Danny turned, his elbow sliding over a chunk of wet ice. He hoped he wasn't ruining the bed with all this water. He paused, frowning. Ghost ice, created ghost ice, shouldn't melt unless the creator willed it.

He pulled the chunk from beneath the sheets. “What's happening?” he asked.

Pandora raised an eyebrow. “Even ghost ice will melt when exposed to ghostly fire of equal or greater power. Especially when attention is taken off of it.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Danny had known that. He'd dealt with that effect in battle. He had just forgotten. He laid a hand over his hot stomach. “Am I on fire, then?” he asked, freshly disturbed.

Pandora hesitated. “I do not believe so. It is my understanding that the flames are confined to the amulet.”

Danny relaxed a little, and thought back to Pandora's original question, which he had not answered. “I think I'm feeling better, actually.”

Pandora nodded. “The others seem to be almost done with their preparations,” she said. “Would you like to go down and see?”

“Yes,” said Danny, scooting to the edge of the bed. “Enyeus and Meda got here okay, then?”

“Yes. Not as swiftly as we had hoped, but yes. This terminal of the Architect's Gate had broken free of the Goblin Market entirely by the time they got through, and it was going fast enough that they had some trouble matching speed with Mattingly.” She shook her head. “That's going to be trouble to bring back, if they bring it back at all. Would you like some help?”

Danny had been staring at his foot, flexing his toes. They felt weird. Actually, both of his legs felt weird, like they were sort of asleep, but not really.

“No,” he said, standing carefully. “I'm fine.” He looked around and found what he was looking for.
“Bathroom first, sorry.”

It turned out that Danny was too wobbly to walk long distances by himself. Long distances being, in this case, just down the hall. His legs weren't working properly. They didn't move the right way, and they kept tripping him up. It wasn't a lot. Everything was just half a centimeter off, if that, but it was enough.

He kept a firm grip on one of Pandora's lower hands, while she used the upper one to steady him by his opposite shoulder. He tried not to let this scare him.

They came to a room that had been made very clean and bare, with a high table as its only furniture. It had also been made bright, with lamps that burned blue and gold with something that definitely wasn't oil or gas. Dr. Iceclaw was there, directing the placement of machines. Dora and Ellie were there, wearing clean white smocks with short sleeves, listening to the instructions. The Elysians, and a number of Dora's people, were setting things up.

“Great one!” Iceclaw exclaimed when he saw Danny. “We aren't quite ready for the procedure. We need to get a few things into place yet.” He gestured at a machine being brought in through another door. “I could start some of the preliminary scans, though, if you don't mind all the, hm, activity.”

Danny knew Iceclaw was really asking him if he minded all the people listening.

“No,” said Danny. “It's fine. Let's start.”

Iceclaw nodded and indicated that Danny should sit on the table. Pandora lifted him up.

“So, first,” said Iceclaw, “has anything changed? Do you feel any different?”

“I feel a little better, actually,” said Danny, “except that my legs are weird.”

“Really? Weird how?”

“Like they're sort of asleep, and wobbly,” said Danny.

Iceclaw felt down along Danny's legs, and hips, and asked Danny questions to figure out where the effect started, and where it was strongest. He looked worried.

“I believe,” said Dr. Iceclaw, “that the reason you feel better is because you finally caught up on your sleep. That's good.”

“But?” prompted Danny.

“But,” said Iceclaw, “I think the reason for the odd feeling in your legs is damage to your silver cord. Don't worry too much, though. It should be able to repair itself once we remove the amulet.”

Danny didn't miss the 'should,' but nodded anyway. Iceclaw pulled over one of the machines, and started the scans. Ellie and Dora came over to watch, and distracted Danny by talking about what had happened in Mattingly since they had last visited.

“This cannot possibly be right,” muttered Iceclaw, pouring over the scan results.
“What is it?” asked Pandora, mildly.

Iceclaw looked up. “I would have thought it impossible,” he said, “considering how old and powerful the artifact is, but you have partially succeeded in digesting it.”

Danny knit his eyebrows together. “I thought that was the problem, though. That I unraveled some of what was in the amulet, and it got tangled up with my stuff.”

“Yes,” said Iceclaw, “but you hadn't actually consumed any of it, yet. Not any of its fundamental portions, in any case. Some of what it was radiating away, yes, but not it's actual structure... You had pulled some of that out of the amulet, the container, but I had assumed it would, ah, pull back in. Artifacts are often resilient. I do not think it will, now.”

Danny looked down at his hands in his lap. “I'm sorry I broke it.”

“It's fine, Sir Phantom,” said Dora. “Considering how many times Aragon has tried to steal it, I have been trying to find a way to destroy it myself.”

“Okay,” said Danny, feeling less guilty. “Is- Is this a good thing or a bad thing?” he asked Iceclaw.

“Neither,” said Iceclaw. “Simply rather unbelievable.” He shook his head. “What you are feeling in your legs is because of damage done to your silver cord. One of the strands from the artifact is completely wrapped around your primary strand leading to your legs. It has melted and deformed. Again, it should be able to repair itself once we get the amulet out, but I won't be able to see the extent of the damage until then.”

“Okay,” said Danny.

“As for your core, it has been able to heal some of the damage it took earlier. The portions of the amulet you have absorbed are energy-rich, so that might have actually helped, in that regard.”

Danny nodded.

“It is still significantly damaged, just not as much as it had been when I scanned you earlier. Even when we take the amulet out, you should not strain yourself. Minimize your power usage.”

“I know,” said Danny.

“He's just not sure that you'll remember,” said Ellie. “Or that you'll pay attention. We tend not to, you have to admit.”

“Yeah,” said Danny. “So, um... How are we going to do this?”

Ellie watched as Danny was lulled to sleep by the efforts of Pandora, and a rather foul looking concoction made by Dora's doctor. Dr. Iceclaw had stressed the importance of Danny being completely asleep before they started working on him. They waited a few minutes. Danny's breathing slowed to almost nothing.

Iceclaw attached a pad to the center of Danny's forehead, and feathery silver patterns appeared on his skin. Pandora put two of her hands on Danny's shoulders, and his body went transparent. Like this,
he looked like he was made of very clear, fine, glass, his organs spots of color, all shot through with curling silver lines. The amulet was clearly visible in Danny's stomach. Ellie couldn't see any of its ectoplasm, it just looked like a necklace to her, but apparently Dora could.

“Remember,” said Iceclaw to Ellie, “do not touch his core. We do not want to move it, or irritate it further.”

“Right,” said Ellie, nodding. She floated over Danny, so that she would be out of Iceclaw and Dora's way.

“Just enclose it, keep it from lashing out,” continued Iceclaw. He and Dora were pulling on special gloves that would allow them to touch Danny's and the amulet's silver cord, which was normally intangible. “Keep any stray strands from touching it.”

“Yes,” said Ellie. “I've got it, I've got it.” Intangibly, she dipped her hands into Danny's chest, and slowly moved them to cup around Danny's core. It felt small, and dense with power. She could feel it twitch, almost imperceptibly, anxiously. She sympathized, and tried to think soothing thoughts. Neither of them liked being trapped.

Iceclaw then touched Danny's side, and clear ice spread over him. This would keep him cool while Dora and Iceclaw worked. Dora would be coaxing the amulet's strands to loosen, and Iceclaw would be using a series of special tools (that all looked like forceps to Ellie), to manipulate Danny's silver cord.

Iceclaw was very nervous. He was worried that Danny would lash out at him, even unconscious, because Danny didn't know him very well, and ghosts tended to react poorly to people they didn't completely trust messing with the most intimate (and usually intangible) portions of their anatomy. Hence Ellie's job.

Dora slid in a wire from one of the machines, and when it touched the amulet, the amulet lit up with a golden aura. The aura spread out, and limned the otherwise invisible strands belonging to the amulet.

“Alright,” said Iceclaw. “Let's start here.”

In an effort to stave off the issues that boredom would bring, Mr. Lancer and Jazz conspired to volunteer everyone to help with repairs as soon as they were rested. It wasn't something that was widely appreciated, but they did realize that helping would get them back to Elysium faster, and everyone agreed that being in Elysium would be better than being stuck on the ship, so they weren't too upset.

Overall, most of them were spending their time piecing together their experiences in the Tower, trying to get as much information about the Ghost Zone from Jazz, Sam, and Tucker as possible, and talking about Danny. Jazz didn't mind any of these but the last, but, on the other hand, they also weren't causing any trouble.

They seemed to have finally processed that Danny was Phantom, and all that implied. This was a mixed blessing, at best. Some of them, like Rebecca and Dale, didn't seem to entirely grasp the danger Danny was always in, just because of what he was. Elliot kept grumbling about how people
called *him* a liar. Tiffanie had, for some reason, decided to blame Danny for both her failed relationship with Dash, and her father leaving Amity Park two years ago. Ricky had decided that *all* the ghost portals (and other weirdness) in Amity Park were Danny's fault. He wasn't really *wrong*, but he wasn't right, either, and he had gotten sort of hostile. Meanwhile, Dash and Paulina had gotten downright depressed. Paulina was barely talking to anyone. Nathan, Mikey, and Lester were half-convinced that they were in a comic book origin story, and were asking if Danny would like any more sidekicks.

(Sam and Tucker, despite occasionally calling themselves sidekicks as a joke, weren't particularly pleased with the implications behind that question.)

(Jazz was more concerned with what might happen if they were told no, and decided to try their hands at heroics by themselves.)

It was a mess. Jazz wasn't sure how she was going to untangle it.

Compared to *that*, the ropes she was currently working on were a piece of cake. Especially since she had a lot of extra hands to hold them with. Fine manipulation had been a bit difficult at first, but the Elysians had been more than happy to help her, especially the ones who had gone into the tower with her. They had experience with adapting to extra limbs. Most of them had been human once, and they had chosen to change their body plan.

“Hey, Jazz.”

“What is it, Dash?”

“Do you really think Danny doesn't hate me?”

“Yes, I really do.” In the two or three days since they'd been on the ship, Dash had asked the same question a dozen times. At least.

“But I beat him up so much...”

Jazz's hands stilled. She turned to face Dash fully. “What do you want me to say? I mean, he didn't *enjoy* getting beaten up, but he had other things to think about.”

“The ghosts?”

“Yeah. The ghosts.” Jazz started working at one tightly pulled knot.

“But, before that? Before the ghosts? Did he, he must have...”

Jazz thought back to the year before the accident, when Danny had been in middle school, and she had been a freshman. She hadn't really known Dash then. She hadn't been as aware of what was going on with Danny, either.

“I don't know,” said Jazz. “It was a long time ago.” She wasn't making any progress on the knot. Her fingers were too thick.

“Oh,” said Dash. “Yeah. I guess it was.”

Jazz abandoned the knot momentarily. “Please, just talk to him once we all get back. He'll appreciate the apology, but he really doesn't hate you, so stop worrying about it. Please.”

“I *can't*. I just found out that I've been calling the coolest dude ever a loser for, like, years. He's never
“I doubt that's even crossed his mind as an option. Dash, trust me when I say that what Danny wants the most is for all of us to be safe and happy, so just, I don't know, reflect on your actions, or something. Try to be nicer to people. Stop beating up Mikey. Don't beat yourself up.”

“I'm not beating myself up!” said Dash, offended. “I'm not some kind of wimp!”

Jazz flashed what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “I know. What is it you're supposed to be doing?”

“Oh, uh.” Dash looked down at the planks in his arms. “Yeah. I'm supposed to be taking these downstairs.”

“You'd better go do that, then.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Jazz sighed in relief as Dash left, and returned her attention to the knot. Maybe she could shrink one of her spectral hands small enough to get into the knot.
Chapter 161

Chapter 161: Where's Danny?

Danny woke up, and he was cold. He sighed in relief, a puff of cold mist curling above his lips, and sinking back down to his face. His core must be overcompensating.

He sat up and blinked slowly, muzzily. He was back in the room he'd slept in before. Apparently, the ice hadn't ruined the bed, because it was nice and dry now.

Ellie was in human form, sitting in a chair across from him, drawing with crayons on a lapboard. She looked up. There were dark circles under her eyes.

"Hey, you're awake," said Ellie. "How do you feel?"

Danny thought about it and wiggled his toes. "Better," he said. "My legs still feel weird."

"Yeah, Dr. Iceclaw said that would happen. Want me to get him?"

"No," said Danny, pulling a pillow behind him so he could sit up. "Not yet." He sighed and rubbed his chest. "Thank you, Ellie."

"What for?"

"Helping. Coming to get me, and doing the medical stuff."

Ellie laughed. "You don't have to thank me for that."

"You thank me for that stuff," said Danny, "and it's polite."

"I guess."

"What are you drawing?"

Ellie turned the lapboard around. "Just rainbows."

"Cool." He tilted his head. "They're backwards, though."

"They're ghost rainbows."

Danny blinked. "Is that a thing?"

"I don't know. I feel like it should be." Ellie sighed and put the lapboard to the side. "I'm going to go get Dr. Iceclaw."

"Okay. Um. Everything went okay, right?"

"Yeah, it was fine," said Ellie, waving a hand. "I didn't do a whole lot."

"I didn't, like, um... Dr Iceclaw was really worried that I would- That my core would shock you, or something."

"Nah. You just wiggled a whole lot." She frowned. "Well, I guess, not really. You wiggled a bit. Froze
one of my fingers. But, you know," she wiggled all of her fingers, "I do ice just as well as you do, and it was because I twitched and hit you, so don't go getting angry at yourself.

"I wasn't going to," said Danny.

Ellie gave him a look.

"Okay, maybe I was."

"Our clients are missing?"

Hemlock regarded the other advocate (who was very much his junior) with weary eyes. He had gathered together all the advocates for the human students (many of whom had only met their clients once) to tell them the rather disturbing news.

"I'm afraid so."

"But we can't properly proceed without consulting them. We won't know what they want!" This complaint stirred up a mutter of agreement.

"I'm aware. I called you together to propose calling for recess, until such a time as our clients can be located," said Hemlock.

"But that will give our opponents more time to plan," said the advocate, floating up so she could glare at Hemlock at eye level, and shaking back her pale blonde hair. "To collude! To, um, uh, Ivy, help me out here."

"Strategize?" suggested a woman with red hair.

"Yes, yes. That."

"I don't believe that we have any other options, Miss Nettle. As you said, we cannot ethically proceed without our clients' input."

"If we are going to ask for an extended recess, perhaps we could also ask for the others to be barred from speaking each other," said another advocate.

"Would we have enough support for that?" asked another.

"I don't believe so," said Hemlock. "I do invite all of you to ask around, of course, but I hope you will support my motion for a recess regardless, when the committee reopens."

This statement was received with reluctant nods.

Hemlock rubbed his nose. "Now, do any of you know where I could find Lady Pandora's advocate?"
"So, your suggestions were favorably received in the last sessions," said Azalea. "If things continue this way, we will be having an American-style trial. Or as close as we can get to one, anyway. There is quite a bit of debate occurring, of course, but the general consensus is that such a trial would be fair."

Wolfsbane nodded genially. "There was a short recess called for everyone to confer with their clients. As you were the ones to propose this course of action initially, we were hoping to go over— Wolfsbane broke off as there was a knock on the door.

Azalea got up and went out. Jack and Maddie exchanged glances.

"Now, as I was saying—" started Wolfsbane.

The door opened again, and Azalea stuck her head in. "Wolfsbane? I think you'd better come."

"Alright," said Wolfsbane. "Excuse me."

"What do you think is happening?" asked Jack.

"I don't know," said Maddie. "Nothing good. I don't think Azalea would have called Hemlock if it was minor."

"You're probably right, Mads."

Maddie reached across the table, and pulled over some of Wolfsbane's papers. She frowned. They were all Greek to her. Literally. Greek, in neat, short, graphite strokes. Maddie didn't speak Greek. Or read it.

She pushed the papers back across the table, frustrated.

The door opened. Wolfsbane and Azalea came in, followed by an incredibly ugly, balding, bearded man. He looked oddly familiar to Maddie, as if she'd seen a picture of him before.

"Madeline, Jack, this is Hemlock, my partner. He's representing Daniel."

Maddie's hands curled into fists on the table. Judging by Hemlock's expression, whatever news he was bringing was bad.

"Last time I spoke to Daniel, he asked me to tell you if anything significant happened."

"Significant like what?" asked Jack.

"I recently received word that Daniel and several of his classmates were kidnapped."

Maddie's heart dropped. "Kidnapped?" she said, faintly. "Kidnapped how?"

"That wasn't clear, I'm afraid," said Hemlock. "There are currently efforts underway to locate them, and I am confident that they will be found." He drummed his fingers on the table.

"Who took them?" demanded Jack, angrily. "Is Jazz okay?"

"Jasmine is fine. She is currently assisting the search. Who took them is, sadly, unknown." Hemlock took a step back. "That's all I know," he finished, apologetic. "I will, of course, send word when I hear more." Hemlock rapped once on the door, and was let out before either Maddie or Jack could
ask any more questions.

Wolfsbane coughed; an affectation, surely. "Well, that is going to change a few things."

Dan hadn't expected the random ghost he accosted to actually have any information about Danny. He'd been bored, really, and frustrated, looking for something to do. Shockingly, the ghost, a pale green thing with a smooth body, had actually been helpful. He had provided Dan with a number of rumors involving Danny. Apparently, little Danny had gotten himself into legal trouble of all things.

But beyond that... Dan had thought the ghosts screams of pain and fear would be pleasant, invigorating. They weren't. They weren't enjoyable at all, to the point where Dan had to wonder, had he ever found pleasure in screams? Or had he just grown used to them, had he just come to see them as a sign that he was getting closer to his goal, that he was was doing what he needed to?

He let the ghost go, frowning all the while. He felt... uneasy. There was no reason for a weak feeling like that. None at all. He wasn't human, after all. He was a ghost. An evil, unfeeling ghost. A powerful evil, unfeeling ghost. As soon as he recovered from his time spent in the thermos, he would be able to beat any ghost in the Realms.

His frown turned into a scowl. He shouldn't have let that ghost go. He could have destroyed it, and consumed its energy.

The thought made his core ripple.

Dan snarled, and began to pace back and forth on the little island he had claimed for his own. What was wrong with him? Had Clockwork done something to him? No, no, as much as he wanted to, he couldn't blame the meddler for this. This was older than that. He recognized this.

These feelings, these were the buried dregs of his morals. He thought he had destroyed them once and for all, replaced them with duty, with purpose, with the joys of jobs well done, and skills and talents put to use, with the pleasures of defeating opponents and solving puzzles, and the dubious delights of physical experience. He had thought. He had believed.

He forced them down again. It didn't matter what he felt. He had things to do. He had to do them.

(And why should he?)

He forced the thought down again.

This time, this time, this time. How would he do things this time? That was the question of the moment. He stilled himself.

This time, he would kill Danny first. He had already decided that, hadn't he? No reason to have doubts over letting one ghost go, he had already decided to do it. A mercy for little Danny, a mercy for another version of himself, a mercy he would have begged for, if only he had known. Danny wouldn't know the pain of being alone in the world, wouldn't have the terrible weight of knowledge on his shoulders.

(Never mind the very practical motive of absorbing Danny's power.)
So, where would Danny be, while he waited for the trial of his parents?

Not Long Now. The eyeball wouldn't have let Dan out. There would be no point. Issitoq also wouldn't have told Dan to 'find' Danny, if that was the case. Could he be at Libra? Dan didn't like the thought of fighting Themis and Dike in his current state, not to mention everyone else who had to be there. The Far Frozen? He had the same feeling about Frostbite and the yetis. Their security was too good, anyway. He wouldn't be able to break through without destroying someone. Several someones. Elysium? No. Pandora was there.

He shook his head. Whether or not Dan could break into a place was no indication of whether or not Danny was there. In fact, it was more likely for Danny to be in a place Dan couldn't easily get into.

What if they had managed to find Danny's lair? Dan would never be able to pry him out. Sure, he'd managed to scoop weak ghosts out of weak lairs, but too many stronger ghosts had managed to evade him by hiding in their own, personal little worlds. What a nightmare, if Danny had managed to find his. Dan had never even found it. He hadn't wanted to find it. He hadn't wanted to see the ruin a mind like his, a soul like his, would generate.

Frustrated, Dan slammed his fist down on the island, and it shattered into boulders, stones, and clumps of dirt. He snarled. It should be dust with how hard he had hit it.

… With how hard he had tried to hit it...

He was weak.

He closed his eyes. He hadn't gotten as far as he had in the original timeline by being stupid. He hadn't started off strong. He'd had to be clever, he'd had to be sly, and subtle, and sneaky. He had built his powers up slowly. He could do this. He didn't have to break through. He could sneak in.

Maybe.

It was like being fourteen and confused and alone all over again. It was like being confused and scared, because his parents had just died, and so had his sister, and so had his friends, and so had the only other adult he felt like he could trust at all. Except, it wasn't, because all those people that had died in his original timeline hadn't. Not yet. If he wanted to, he could go find his parents, his sister, his teacher. He could go walk the streets of his city.

He had done that before, when he had first come to this time, but he supposed it hadn't quite sunk in. It had been like an illusion to him, something easily pushed away, pushed past.

Not so much now.

But they weren't his. They weren't Dan's. They were Danny's. That was painful.

That was painful?

What was he thinking? He wasn't feeling anything so weak, so human as pain.

He was a monster.

He needed to be.
This was a disaster.

Issitoq had lost track of the monster entirely. He had lost it. It had somehow managed to disappear, beyond even his sight, and he simply didn't understand it. Even if the monster was a paradox, it was here, in this time, now. Issitoq should be able to see it.

But he could not. No matter where he looked, the monster wasn't there.

Issitoq slumped against the wall in a kind of despair. How could he have unleashed this monster, another monster, into the world?

He had to fix this. He had to expiate this sin. But how? How, how, how? What thing now in this world could ameliorate these terrible mistakes he had made? Who could possibly forgive him?

No- No. The thermos would have broken anyway. Clockwork had sabotaged it. There was nothing Issitoq could have done. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

And still, nothing was all he could do. Nothing was all anyone could do. As far as he could see, there was nothing that could stop either monster, either abomination. Nothing in this time.

Nothing... in this time.

His hand tightened around the hourglass. He wasn't limited to this time.

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Dan sat down on a new island. This one was much smaller than the one he had rested on before, barely wide enough to properly sit on.

He didn't know why he hadn't thought of this earlier. No, actually, he did.

He hadn't thought of it because it had never been useful to him in the past- No. In the future.

He hadn't thought of it because he was an idiot. A high school dropout who'd never gotten higher than a C.

He hadn't thought of it because he had a thousand insignificant and irrelevant scraps of ghostly knowledge locked up in his core, and so little occasion to use them.

Half of Dan's core was made of Danny's. His ectosignature was almost identical. Dan's ghost sense was not the same as Danny's, his core temperature had changed when he merged with Vlad, and it had lost some of its efficacy, its sensitivity, but it could still detect ghosts, it could still read
ectosignatures. It was enough to be able to find his own ectosignature on the ectoplasmic winds of the Ghost Zone.

Dan inhaled. Strictly speaking, Dan did not need to breathe. He was a ghost. He didn't even need to inhale to speak. There were other ways of vibrating the atmosphere. But inhaling let him scent the air, bring it closer to his core, so he could detect the ectosignatures it carried more clearly.

Danny's, thus far, eluded him.

He inhaled, exhaled. This was the only way he could find Danny, but it was boring. Almost as boring as being trapped in the thermos.

But, he reminded himself, unwillingly, that hadn't always been boring, especially once Clockwork had taken him up onto the main floor. More happened in Long Now than was immediately apparent. Clockwork had many visitors, the Observants, Danny and his friends, Nephthys, and the other Ancients. The Observants were boring when they weren't infuriating, but the others ranged from mildly interesting to fascinating.

When there were no visitors, Clockwork worked, unraveling paradoxes and adjusting the timeline towards what he thought qualified as 'happiness,' and he was more than willing- too willing- to explain his actions to Dan. When Clockwork had neither visitors nor work, he would lecture Dan, or, and this was oddly more common, play games with him. They were all mental games, chess and checkers on imaginary boards, and Dan had scorned them at the time, but...

Dan barred his teeth, and snarled. What was this? What was-

He tasted the edge of Danny's ectosignature. Good, good. He could go and he could do this, before he lost any more conviction, before he lost sight of why he was doing this. He would kill Danny, and the way forward would be clear again.

Danny bounced on the balls of his feet, smiling.

"I can feel my knees properly," he said, excited for that small thing.

"You're recovering faster than I thought you would," said Dr. Iceclaw, winding up one of his long wires. He had just removed the metal rod at the end of it from Danny's mouth.

"My ankles and feet are still kinda-" Danny almost fell over as he tried to balance on one foot. Pandora caught him. "Not right. Thank you."

"Do you think you're up for going outside?" asked Ellie.

"That's not a bad idea," said Iceclaw. "It would be good for you to walk around and stretch your legs."
Danny brightened, then wilted a little. "I don't think I want to talk to any other people right now. They're probably curious about why I'm here and stuff."

"I don't think you'd have to," said Ellie. "There are lots of different courtyards and stuff. We can ask Dora if there's one that isn't used much. Or we can ask someone else. I guess it doesn't have to be Dora. She might be busy. She's probably busy."

"I'm not busy."

"Hi, Dora," said Danny.

"Why did you want me?" asked Dora.

"We were wondering if there's somewhere outside we can go without a lot of people?" said Ellie, the lilt at the end of the sentence turning it into a question.

"Oh, of course," said Dora. "We can go to my private garden, and have something to eat. Do you take wine, Lady Pandora?"

Dora's private garden was contained inside an enclosed courtyard. It made Danny feel a little like he was in a deep well, except that the small spot of sky above was lurid green, and the plants below were pale blue, like Dora's dress; the opposite of what one would expect from a well.

In the center of the garden was a paved area, and in the center of that was a medium-sized pedestal table.

Dora began directing her attendants to set up a small meal on the table. Danny, meanwhile, began to make a lap of the garden. The plants were not, as he originally thought, all the same, despite their overall fairly uniform color. He wondered how they had been bred, to get this effect. When they were all in bloom they must be pretty remarkable.

He stopped. "Dora? Is this a vampire melon?"

"Oh, yes. Don't worry, they are completely tame."

"Cool," said Danny, wondering how that was accomplished. "Do you think-?"

Danny abandoned his question as a great howl filled the sky. At the edge of Danny's hearing, he detected shouting. One of Dora's escorts began urging the party back towards the doors. Something came hurtling down from the sky.

It was a dog.

Then it was two dogs. Then three. Then a great number of dogs were in, or floating over, the garden. Cujo then chose to ram right into Danny's chest, almost knocking him over.

"Hi," said Danny. He looked at the other dogs. He recognized them from the fight at the Tower. "I'm sorry I haven't been playing with you much the last couple of days," he said to Cujo, "but I've been sick."

He looked over at Dora, worried. She didn't seem angry so much as exasperated.

"I see you've made some new friends," she said, "but I would appreciate it if they left my garden. They are more than welcome to stay in the kennels or the yard, but this is too much for my little garden."
"I'm sorry," said Danny. "But they're more Cujo's friends, I think."

Cujo yipped. This was the cue for the other dogs to pile on, licking and cuddling Danny.

Dora raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

Dan stood in front of a door, cursing himself, past, present, and future. He had followed the wispy, uncertain trail of Danny's ectosignature, but instead of bringing him to Danny, it had brought him to Danny's lair. Really, it was just typical. The universe couldn't let him have his way even once.

He reached towards the doorknob, but then let his hand fall back to his side. Why torture himself with might-have-beens? With impossible fantasies that weren't even his?

He had half turned away, when the door opened.

Dan's eyes snapped to the figure standing there, then narrowed. "You aren't Danny."

"No, I'm not," agreed the young man, easily. "But I'm more him than you."

Dan's lips curled. "I have better things to do than talk to shadows."

"I know what you want," said the shadow, before Dan had gone very far. "What you really want, deep down inside, that you hide even from yourself."

Dan was in front of the shadow in an instant, only inches from his face. "What do you know about it?" he snarled. It was an effort to keep himself on the right side of the threshold.

"I know what Danny knows," said the shadow, "and he knows more than he remembers. More than he lets himself remember. You touched his core."

"And what is it that you think I want?" demanded Dan. If Danny knew, then he should have done the same thing as Dan. What was wrong with him?

(What was wrong with Dan?)

The shadow gazed at him. "You know, this isn't your second chance. It isn't even your third. Or your fourth. Or fifth. Or-"

"Your point?" interrupted Dan, fully aware that the shadow would keep going until it was stopped. He had a suspicion that it was just trying to stall him, to keep him from getting to Danny for even just a minute longer, and yet, he couldn't leave. He had to know what the shadow was talking about.

"My point is, that this is your last chance, and it's a chance most people don't get. This world almost a blank slate for you. All your sins are erased. They never happened. Mostly."

"You think I want to be redeemed?" asked Dan. He laughed. It was a cold, hard, laugh, entirely without humor. "You think it's about my sins? It was never about my sins. It was never about what I wanted!"

"Then who wanted it?" asked the shadow, head tilted.
"You don't know anything," hissed Dan. He lunged at the shadow, not caring what defenses might await him beyond the threshold of the lair, but the shadow slammed the door closed a moment before Dan could get in.

Blocked, Dan's rage subsided. Oh, he could probably batter the door down, it likely wasn't even locked, most lairs couldn't, but why bother? With Danny's death it would cease to be.


Mirage slid down the door, and buried his face in his hands. The other shadows crept closer, oozing along the ground and the walls to put pressure on the door, an unliving barricade.

"Okay. That was scary," said Mirage.

The lair had felt Dan's approach before he had reached the door, but had not had enough time to make a new shadow for the purpose of distracting Dan. Instead, it called on the ones that already existed. Mirage, as the shadow created mainly to lie to and mislead other people, had been the one chosen to speak to Dan. Well. That was probably the wrong way to put the decision. The shadows weren't their own people, after all. They were part of the lair.

"I think he's leaving," said Umbra.

There was a collective sigh of relief. Most of the lair's power was in its size. The shadows doubted they would be able to fight off Dan. If he had come in, all the people in the lair would have died. Their only chance was to bluff, to distract him until he left.

"Do you think I said the right things?"

"Like there are any right things to say with him," said Echo, bitterly.

"Yeah."

"Should we, ah, should we evacuate?" asked Fractal. "We know where he's going..."

"And send everyone where?" asked Umbra.

"There's no point," said Shade. "If Danny can't stop him, no one can."

The other shadows had followed his reasoning before he had finished his sentence. It was only the truth.

"That's a bit narcissistic of us, isn't it?" said Echo. "I mean, he shouldn't have to be the only one to fight that guy. What about Pandora? Or Clockwork? Or, heck, the eyeball freaks, since they're the ones that made him in the first place. They can't possibly want him running around, either."

"If any of them are going to beat him," said Mirror, "they'll do it before he gets to Danny."

The shadows sighed again, the sound of it curling eerily around the simulacra of the Fenton lab. "Maybe," said Mirror, "but that doesn't mean we aren't right."
Chapter 163

Chapter 163: Cinderellie

Danny felt his core seize in his chest, and gasped. The dogs froze, and slowly crept back, off of Danny. Cujo whined in confusion.

"Great one, are you-?"

"Something's wrong," said Danny, stumbling to his feet. "Something's wrong!" This time it was more of a cry than a statement.

Ellie caught him, just barely saving him from face planting.

"We need to bring him back in," said Iceclaw, "do some tests."

"No, no, no," said Danny. "No. Not here. It isn't me. It's somewhere else. We have to go. Something bad is going to happen."

"What do you mean?" asked Dora. "Danny? Is Mattingly in danger?"

Dora didn't call Danny 'Danny' very often. She preferred to tease him (very gently) by calling him Sir Phantom, even as she insisted that he call her Dora. It was an oddity that extended to Sam and Tucker, when they visited.

"Yes," said Danny. "No. I don't know. Maybe. It's- It's everywhere. Everywhere's in danger. We've got to go. We've got to." He reached for his core, and his rings sparked around his waist.

"Whoa!" said Ellie.

"Stop!" exclaimed Iceclaw. "Please, great one, you'll hurt yourself."

Pandora grew slightly, and picked up both Danny and Ellie.

"In we go," said Pandora. Danny was breathing heavily, trying to get himself back under control. "Something is wrong," he insisted.

"Yes, love," said Pandora, "and we'll find out what it is together."

They went in, Dora trailing behind the two larger ghosts, barely deigning to notice all the dogs that had come in with them. The servants they encountered retreated in confusion, staring at their princess's odd retinue.

Panic crept up Danny's throat, choking him. All these people here, they were in danger, Danny was sure of it. He didn't know what they were in danger from, but they were definitely in danger, and he didn't know what to do. He was scared.

"Hey," said Ellie, "it's okay, you don't have to cry or anything." She sounded confused, which was fine, because Danny was confused.
"This could be a side effect of your core healing," said Iceclaw. "It could have caused a surge through the area that regulates your Obsessions."

They got to the room Iceclaw had taken over. Danny was shaking his head.

"No," said Danny, absolutely certain. "It isn't just me. It isn't in my head."

"I should hope not!" said Iceclaw. "Your core should be in your chest."

"What?" asked Danny, confused. "No, I mean, um..." Why did he have to stumble across the one idiom that didn't work across cultures? "I mean, this is real. Something is happening. Or is going to happen." He furrowed his eyebrows. "Has happened?" he said, faintly.

Pandora put Danny down on the table, and Ellie down on the floor.

Danny inhaled, shakily. "What's- What's happening?

Iceclaw pulled a kind of wand, like a TSA agent might use at an airport, off of one of the machines, and waved it over Danny. He peered closely at a screen set into the wand's hilt. Danny watched with trepidation, and wished that the Far Frozen's medical gear weren't so esoteric.

"That's odd," said Iceclaw.

"What?" asked Danny, voice just a touch too soft to make it a demand.

"It's hard to see with a scan like this, I should take a more in-depth one..."

"Dr. Iceclaw," said Danny, "what's happening?"

"Well, it seems that there is a flare in your core activity, but it's not in the area governing your Obsession. It's in the area that regulates your connections."

"Connections?"

"Yes, like your connection to your lair, or your haunt."

"My- my-" Danny was panicking again. "My lair? My haunt? Is something- Is something- It's something bad, we have to go."

"Great one, you aren't in a state to go anywhere," said Iceclaw.

"It's at my lair. Something is wrong at my lair, please." He slid off the table. "We have to go."

Iceclaw picked him up and put him back on the table. Danny made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat.

"Ellie," said Dora, "you said you and Danny share a lair. Do you feel anything?"

Ellie looked back and forth between Danny and Dora. "I... I don't know..." She shrugged, nervous. "Maybe? Nothing like you're feeling. I'm, ah..." She shrugged again. "I'm pretty worried about you."

Danny groaned. "Do you guys really think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," said Iceclaw. "Power surges can be a normal part of core healing. And it may be possible that something is happening, but we cannot just go. Your lair is too far away, and you aren't well yet."
That was... reasonable. Very reasonable. Danny still didn't like it.

"Would you like me to give you something that will help you calm down?" asked Iceclaw. "It won't get rid of what you are feeling entirely, but it will let you take a step back, and analyze those feelings."

Danny bit his lower lip. He wasn't fond of drugs. They never seemed to work properly for him.

"It's a variation on a compound you have been given before," said Iceclaw. "It shouldn't have any negative effects, except, perhaps, for making you drowsy."

Okay, his earlier thought had been unfair. He had been given medicine that worked before, but the times medicine didn't work for him still stood out more.

"Fine," said Danny. "I'll take it."

Iceclaw looked relieved. He poured the medicine out into a tiny cup from a black glass bottle. It was thick and bright green, and, when Danny drank it, it tasted strongly of ash. Iceclaw immediately after offered Danny a large glass of pink juice to wash away the taste.

"How long until it works?" asked Danny, hugging himself.

"Just a few minutes," said Iceclaw.

Danny nodded. "I'm sorry," he said. "I keep screwing everything up."

Everyone started to deny that, except for Ellie, who hopped up onto the table next to him.

"It doesn't matter if you screw stuff up. You fix way more stuff than you mess up. It's a net positive, or whatever."

That made Danny laugh. "Okay," he said. The sense of wrongness was receding, little by little, but there was still a tension, the sense of anticipation. Something was coming, he was sure of it.

But was that really so different from before? He'd known for days that someone had it out for him enough to hire all those mercenaries. He couldn't imagine that they would just stop, whoever they were...

Wait.

Hold on... Hadn't..?

Heck. They had.

"Hey, Ellie."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"The gangsters, after we fought Aragon. Do you remember what they said?"

"Not really. I mean, Vlad and I only got there right before they all ran off."

"Right, right."

"Why?"
"It's just- They said who had hired them."

Everyone's attention had been on Danny to begin with, but now that attention felt much sharper.

"Who?" asked Pandora.

"Issitoq," said Danny. "They said that Issitoq had hired them."

Dora let out a little gasp, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Issitoq? The Judge Issitoq?"

"They called him 'the big eyeball,' so unless there's another Issitoq that's an eyeball..." Danny trailed off. "I'm sorry. I should have said something earlier, but I only just..." He shrugged, helplessly.

"You were ill," said Iceclaw. "It is no wonder you didn't remember, between that and that battle." He shook his head. "But these 'gangsters' were probably lying. I can't imagine that someone like-"

"No," said Pandora. Her face had taken on the aspect of a storm cloud. Lightning was flashing in her eyes. "He would do something exactly like that."

"He's done it before," added Danny. "He tried to make Clockwork kill me."

Iceclaw's mouth had fallen open. "That's disgusting! Who would even think of trying to make a parent destroy their child?"

“Well, he wasn't really," said Danny, trying to explain, "we hadn't met yet. It's complicated. The Observants don't like me." He looked down, and sniffed, remembering all the harassment, both minor and major, he had suffered at their hands since fighting Dan. "But what I don't understand, is why all this? And why now? Not that they don't take every opportunity to beat me up, but I mean..."

"This is a bit much, yeah," agreed Ellie. "More effort than they usually spend on us."

"Yeah." Danny looked back up, and noticed that Pandora's face had twisted from just angry, to angry and something else. "Pandora? Do you know something?"

She looked at Danny apologetically. "Nothing useful," she said. "Something we discussed at the last meeting of the High Council may have set him off, but considering how irrational he always was when it came to liminals..." She shook her head. "I need to send word to the other members of the High Council. This is clearly a violation of the prerogatives of the Council of Ancients and his own oaths. If we can get the High Council to interdict him, and put him under the power of one of the other courts for investigation, he won't have the freedom to keep up this ridiculous campaign against you. May I have access to your couriers, Princess Dorathea?"

"Of course, Lady Pandora," said Dora, clearly surprised that Pandora had even asked. "Anything that may help, I will put in your hands."

Pandora nodded. "I must go write."

"I will direct the couriers to find you."

Both ladies left the room, but went their separate ways at the door.

Ellie frowned after them. "One sec," she said, and rushed out after Pandora.

Danny looked out after them, sadly. "They're keeping something from me, aren't they?"

"I don't know," said Iceclaw. "But they all love you very much. If they are keeping things from you,
"It is to help you."

"I guess," said Danny.

"Now, as long as we're here, I want to run a couple tests..."

Ellie ran after Pandora. Then she realized that flying would be faster, and did that instead. She pulled up when she reached Pandora's side.

"What is it," she asked, "that set Issitoq off, exactly?"

"It isn't important," said Pandora. Ellie frowned. "Does it have anything to do with why Aragon seemed to think Danny had a crown? Or with how neither of us changed on the nobility floor?"

"I believe Dora knighted Danny," said Pandora. "Knights are typically considered to be a kind of minor nobility."

"Yeah, sure," said Ellie. "That explains Danny. But Dora never knighted me. I should have changed."

"If the change was sufficiently small, you may not have noticed."

"Forget that. I noticed while we were there that I didn't have anything making me nobility in my past. Don't try to bring up Vlad's Dairy King thing, either. It didn't count for him."

"Dairy King?"

Ellie made a face. "Long, stupid story. Don't try to change the subject. What's happening?"

"A great many things, Danielle, but I'm not sure what you are implying."

Ellie put her hands on her hips as she floated down the hallway. "I'm not stupid. Neither is Danny, but he's in denial, I think. I know what the Council of Ancients does, and there's only one thing that you all could have done to make it so that Issitoq was trying to violate your prerogatives by trying to kill Danny."

Pandora pinched the bridge of her nose. "I knew saying that was a mistake."

"Wait," said Ellie, incredulous, "I was right?"

Pandora shook her head, but in exasperation, not negation, and pulled Ellie the rest of the way down the hallway to the suite of rooms Dora had set aside for her. "Do you really want to know this?" she asked, once the door was firmly closed behind them.

"If Danny or I could get killed over it? Yeah."

Pandora nodded, and gestured Ellie towards a pair of chairs. Ellie sat. Pandora didn't. She started to pace.
"When Daniel challenged and defeated Pariah Dark in single combat, Pariah lost the right to rule the Realms. The defeat in and of itself wasn't what did it, but it was the last in a long series of events, the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. Simply losing a duel isn't enough to strip a king of kingship."

Ellie crossed her arms, and leaned back. She was half-certain that Pandora was stalling, but only half.

"Similarly, winning such a fight isn't enough to gain kingship."

"I know that," said Ellie, a little cross.

Pandora sent her a quelling look and folded her own arms. "You may, but I will tell this story as I will. I was merely attempting to reassure you that, in any event, Aragon will not become the King of All Ghosts."

"Okay, sorry."

"Do you know what is necessary to become Ghost King?" asked Pandora.

So this was going to become a teaching moment, huh? "There needs to not be a King," said Ellie, "and the Ancient Council needs to agree on a person."

"There's more than that," said Pandora, "and it's related to what Pariah Dark lost- But you aren't interested in that, I see. A candidate for kingship must either defeat or gain the approval of all the Ancients, and they must do at least one great service for the Realms, thereby gaining the approval of the Core. Daniel is the only one who fulfills those conditions. The Core will have no one else. He also has the added benefit of generally being liked and respected- or at least tolerated- in most of the Realms. We named him King at the last meeting of the Council of Ancients. Although some might prefer the terms king-in-waiting, or prince. You remained unchanged on the nobility floor because you are effectively his heir." She paused. "Not in the matter of the throne, of course. You don't fulfill all of the conditions."

"Okay. Wow," said Ellie. "Wow. Yeah. Okay. So, um." Ellie spread her hands. "Why? Pariah Dark had been shut in the Sarcophagus of Forever Sleep for, well, forever. The Zone hasn't really had a king since then. It doesn't need a king."

"Sadly, that's not true," said Pandora. "Without a king, the Realms would fall apart, and with them, the Earth. A king is necessary. As is sometimes said, the king and the land are one."

"But Danny's really the only one? Really?"

"He's really the one the Core asked for," said Pandora. "There aren't any others that could fulfill the requirements of the Council of Ancients. I believe that you would be our next choice, except that you haven't defeated Vortex or Undergrowth, and they would never support you."

"And you guys were going to tell Danny..?"

"After the trial. We thought he had enough to deal with."

"Right," said Ellie. She looked away and bit one of her knuckles. "If the Zone needs a king, and Danny's the only option, or else the world- worlds- end, then why is Issitoq trying to kill him?"

"I don't know what is going on in Issitoq's core, but it isn't quite that simple," said Pandora. "We don't want the worlds to end, either. We would find another candidate, even if we had to beat them into shape, or make them from scratch."
"Okay, okay, just, what about you, or Clockwork, or one of the other Ancients. You guys are all really strong, right? You could beat up Vortex and Undergrowth if you wanted to."

"We can't. Oh, I've fought both of those idiots and won before, and I can't imagine, say, Nephthys, or Clockwork, losing to either of them. That's not the issue. We would not be acceptable to the Core, and our oaths as Ancients forbear us from taking the throne. We would have to be released from them, before we could do so, and that won't happen. The Judges would have to agree to release us, for one, and you see the problems involved in that."

"Yeah. Okay, I can see how the eyeball jerk wouldn't let you do that." Ellie shifted in her chair. "But you can't just not tell him. This is a big thing."

"We had agreed that Clockwork would tell him. We thought that the news would be... easier to take, coming from Clockwork."

"You thought he would take it that badly, huh? Gosh, this is so messed up. I really can't imagine Danny as a king."

"If it helps, he would not fully come into power until he completed the Rite of Ascension, and he is unlikely to be able to do that until he is a hundred years dead."

"It doesn't really help."
Chapter 16: Ergotism

Ergot and Daughters was one of the largest law firms in the Infinite Realms. They had also taken the task of representing many of the human witnesses in the trial of Doctor and Doctor Fenton, as assigned by Libra. Ergot was hoping her daughters could also represent any human witnesses retrieved from the human world, it would be good practice and good exposure, but Libra hadn’t made a decision on whether or not to retrieve additional human witnesses.

So, in the meantime, the only clients Ergot and Daughters had were inconveniently missing.

They weren't alone in this. Nettle and Ivy, advocates at arms, had a similar problem, regarding their client, as did Hemlock and Wolfsbane, and the other firms and single advocates who had the misfortune of losing their clients.

Ergot frowned at her papers. She didn't know any of the clients well enough to guess where they might be. In fact a few of them, particularly a Miss Valerie Gray, had been quite resistant about talking to their assigned advocates at all, when they had all been at Libra, before being sent to Elysium.

They still had to look for them. They were their clients, after all. Well, perhaps this would give her daughters some extra experience in investigation.

The ship was as repaired as it could be, with the supplies the Elysians had had on hand. That didn't mean it was going any faster. In fact, now that they were out of the 'Grinder' and in the safer intervening area between it and Elysium, they were going more slowly. The ship's captain didn't want to push the ship too hard, too fast, and have it fall apart underneath them all.

Jazz was stressed.

She thought that was reasonable. Most of the other students were alternating between pumping her, Sam, and Tucker for information about Danny, making up ever wilder theories about what was going on, and learning various forms of gambling from the sailors and soldiers. Jazz wasn't sure which of those three contributed more to her stress.

She missed Danny. She missed sanity. She missed doing things. If she could fly under her own power, that's what she'd be doing right now, even if it meant leaving all of Danny's classmates.

Apparently, she wasn't as good of a person as Danny.

There was a knock on the door. Jazz looked up. She had wedged herself into a little broom closet, for a moment of privacy. She was tired of being hounded by Dash, and she'd hoped for a little longer
to recover her mental stamina.

She sighed, and stood up, brushing sawdust off her clothing, before she opened the door. "Tucker?"

Tucker made a face. "Sorry, I know you just ducked out, but, uh, Sam has a problem."

"Okay," said Jazz. She couldn't imagine what Sam's problem could be. Except- No, that probably wasn't it. They had picked up plenty of those supplies when they were in Elysium. "What's wrong?"

"You'd better see."

"Okay, sure," said Jazz, squeezing out of the cupboard and into the corridor. "Where is she?"

"Uh, she was cleaning up the room we had before," said Tucker, gesturing.

They walked down, to their former room, which had been half-destroyed in the battle back at the Tower. The door was slightly ajar- something that took up a significant fraction of the narrow hallway. Jazz pulled it open, and found that it had been propped open by a furry green tree branch.

The room as a whole was stuffed full of greenery.

"What?" she said, more as a shocked statement than a question.

Sam's answer came faintly from the depths of the foliage. "Help."

Things had calmed down in Mattingly. Not that there had been any real excitement, just Danny freaking out. It had been a couple days, and while Danny couldn't completely shake his anxiety, the feeling that something was coming, he hadn't had a full-on panic attack for a couple of days.

By Iceclaw's estimation, Danny could start using his powers, and his ghost form again in a few days. Danny had maybe jumped the gun on the powers bit. It wasn't his fault. His powers were reflexive, literally second nature to him. High emotion and emotional fatigue made them harder to control, too.

Today, Ellie, Dora, and the others had embarked on a transparent, but sweet, distraction campaign. They were sitting on a balcony (a relatively new addition to the castle), having lunch and playing with the dogs. Dora had, despite protestations, taken to the dogs after all. Right now, they were playing a kind of game where Ellie would present Danny with a dog to be named, Danny would name the dog, and everyone would (justly) mock his naming abilities, and Danny would defend his choice.

"Here," said Ellie, lifting up a three-headed dog that was easily the same size she was, "he needs a name."

"Spot," said Danny.

"You can't name a three-headed dog 'Spot.' It's undignified," protested Ellie.

"It worked for Hades. Kerberos means 'spotted.'"

"Well, Hades is a nerd."
"It's true," said Pandora.

"Well, I'm also a nerd, so there."

"Glad I'm not a perfect clone, then."

"Hate to break it to you, but clone jokes are nerdy. I don't make the rules."

Ellie looked like she was about to reply, then paused, as if uncertain, or troubled. She looked away. Danny looked at the back of her head. Had he said something wrong? Was the clone comment too harsh? But she had said something harsher, hadn't she?

Spot walked over, and sat down next to Danny, clearly expecting to be petted. Danny obliged.

"How about this... guy?" asked Ellie, turning back and offering up a dog creature with three wagging, fish-like tails and no hind legs.

"Hm," said Danny. "I think I'll call you Greg."

"Oh my gosh, you can't name him Greg."

"Just did."

A sharp crack echoed in the air, interrupting the game.

"Lightning?" asked Danny, uncertainly.

"No," said Pandora. She pointed out over the town of Mattingly. "Look."

Danny followed her finger to a floating guard tower. It was smoking.

Dora shaded her eyes. "Did the cannon powder get set off...?" she wondered out loud, concern lacing her words. "Oh, I shouldn't have approved those cannons! I am going to go see if they are alright."

"No," said Danny, hushed. Then, more loudly, "Wait!" His eyes were locked on something smaller but closer than the unfortunate guard tower. It was black and white and teal and fire, and it was coming straight for them.

Dan had been excited when he discovered Danny was in the 'Kingdom' of Mattingly. He didn't know why Danny would be there, Dan had never visited the place before the explosion at the Nasty Burger, but it made things so much easier for him.

He'd demolished the pathetic castle and town in his original timeline. They had lacked all but the most basic and medieval technologies, and they had been disorganized, a rabble, really. The prince and the princess had put up quite a fight, with their shape-shifting. But once Dan had discovered the secret to the ability, they had lost quickly. The magic necklaces had added nicely to his power. When he was done with Danny, he would eat them again, and let their power restore his.

But things had changed, apparently. In his timeline, Mattingly had been one of the Time-Locked Lands. Here and now, Mattingly had moved beyond the borders of that area of the Zone. Dan had
actually been surprised to spot it all the way out here, while tracking Danny's ectosignature.

Their guards were also much more effective. Dan had intended to sneak into the kingdom, kill Danny, take the necklaces, and retreat until his power was back up to what he was used to, but the guards had the truly terrible idea of challenging him. Dan had plowed straight through the guard tower, and a satisfying explosion had echoed behind him as it crumbled.

The sound would alert Danny that something was wrong, though. Dan doubted that he would run away - it was much, much more likely that he would run towards danger - but Dan didn't want to take any chances. He wanted to get this gruesome, but unavoidable, task over with as soon as possible.

Oh, butter biscuits. That was Pandora. Dodge!

The dragon princess launched herself off of a balcony. There was Danny, sitting nearby, and a girl with white hair. That must be Danielle. He had heard her voice while imprisoned in Long Now. She really did look like Danny. The cheesehead really had gone through with the cloning thing. What a weirdo.

Well, Dan hadn't come to fight Pandora, and he couldn't dodge her spears and lightning forever. He was already tiring, and her attacks were getting closer.

Why wasn't Danny joining the fight? Was he so scared, that he couldn't face Dan?

And what was with all the dogs?

This fight was evolving to be more difficult than expected, but Dan was making use of the terrain. Neither of the women wanted to do damage to the town beneath them.

Dan looked back to where Danny had been. The little coward had fled. Dan frowned, even as he parried the dragon's fire with his own. That was unlike Danny.

Unbidden, the thought crossed his mind: *Was something wrong?*

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Issitoq was giddy.

He had not hoped for anything quite so fortuitous. With the monster here, he could get rid of both it and the abomination. He could even say to any who happened to see him that the monster had been the main target, and that the abomination had just gotten in the way. Yes. That was perfect. No one would blame him for destroying the monster, even Clockwork would attest to the destruction it had wrought.

He just had to wait for the right time, when both of them were in the same place.

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So, *this* was what Danny had been having premonitions about. This is what caused him to freak out,
and why he was so anxious.

Ellie didn't blame him. She had never met Dan, personally, but she knew him from Danny's memories, and he was bad news. The worst news.

Ellie was scared. Danny was scared. They were both scared, and Danny kept wanting to turn around and fight, even though he was still sick. He was absolutely convinced that Dan would kill Pandora, Dora, and everyone else in Mattingly-

-and he might have been right.

But Ellie couldn't let him kill Pandora, Dora, everyone else in Mattingly, and Danny. So she and Danny were flying through the castle, raising the alarm. Danny had forced himself into ghost form, and was actually keeping up with Ellie pretty well. She had to keep a hold on him, to keep him from running off, but she wasn't having to drag him.

Presently, they were working together to convince a group of maids to flee. The maids were collectively more concerned about their sewing than their continued existence, which was pretty much par for the course for ghosts, so they weren't making a whole lot of progress.

The wall disintegrated.

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Danny was separated from Ellie by flying debris, and the room as a whole was dark and dusty. Danny couldn't see, but he knew Dan was close. Too close.

Fingers brushed over his face. Dan's fingers. He could feel Dan's desperation, his confusion, his need, and he sparked with anger. How dare Dan feel so- so lost? He wanted to kill Danny.

Danny jerked back, went human, and dropped himself sideways through the wall. Dan was just there for him. He would follow.

Pandora caught him, and swept him up against her body. Danny squeaked, surprised.

Dan burst out of the castle wall, causing another spray of stone debris. His red eyes caught on Danny's, and he snarled. Pandora threw a bolt of lightning at Dan, and the evil ghost dodged narrowly.

Dora lunged at Dan from below, and snapped at him, sharp teeth and blue scales flashing. Dan split himself into five. One duplicate allowed himself to be caught, while two others went after Dora's eyes. The remaining two went for Danny and Pandora.

The dogs made their presence known, attacking the two duplicates as a pack. One of the duplicates vanished as Cujo's teeth closed around its leg.

The other was taken out by a crossbow bolt. Mattingly wasn't an empty place, and the soldiers weren't for show.

Dora shook off the other three, and they all disappeared in puffs of ectoplasmic vapor.

So where was Dan?
Danny looked around wildly. He didn’t see Dan, and clearly no one else did, either. Dan must be invisible, and more invisible than even powerful ghosts could see.

That was bad, but Dan couldn't stay so deeply invisible for long. Danny knew from experience. It was tiring, just like pushing any other ghost power. Dan had to show himself soon... Danny hoped. The question was, when was he going to show himself, and where?

The answer to the first, was immediately. The answer to the second was, two inches in front of Danny’s face.

Dan wrapped his clawed hand around Danny's arm, and Danny felt the unmistakable swirling, spinning, pull of teleportation. When Danny's vision cleared, he was far above Mattingly. The island was thumbnail-sized beneath him.

Beneath him... and Dan.

Danny phased from Dan's hand- But that would only work once. Dan would expect it now, and counter it. He went ghost, core stinging.

Dan threw a bolt of ectoplasm at Danny, and Danny caught it and absorbed it, a trick he'd picked up in fights with Vlad. His core was not pleased with the sudden influx of energy, and pulsed painfully. But it was a move Dan hadn't anticipated, and Danny needed the energy if he was going to put up any kind of fight.

Fire sparked off of Dan's fingers, pale and silver-white. He threw two handfuls of it at Danny, and Danny countered with a slanted shield, the fire glancing off harmlessly.

But Dan had experience, much more than Danny. The fire had been a feint, a way to block Danny's vision, and get closer without Danny retreating.

Too close.

The shield shattered like green glass, and Dan's hand constricted around Danny's throat. Danny tapped his ice powers, hoping to freeze Dan's fingers into fragility, but that was a forlorn hope. Dan simply countered Danny's ice with his fire.

Danny looked down, desperate, to Mattingly. They have to have spotted him and Dan by now. They had to be coming.

(He didn't want to die again.)

But it would take time. Danny didn't think any of them could teleport.

"Why?" demanded Dan.

"Why what?" Danny forced out, voice made small and scratchy by the pressure Dan was putting on his throat.

Dan snarled, and plunged his hand into Danny's chest. Danny couldn't even scream as Dan's hand closed around his core.
Hey, since the last chapter ended on a cliffhanger, I decided to post a extra chapter today, which... also ends on a cliffhanger. Sorry.

This will likely be my last surprise Sunday update for a while, since Ectober and NaNoWriMo are coming around. I will still be doing regular Friday updates, however.

Chapter 165: A Better Place

Ghosts with sufficiently similar ectosignatures could share memories, thoughts, feelings. Sometimes, like with Danny and Ellie, who were similar in all ways, and liked each other on top of that, this sharing could occur over great distances. In the past, Danny and Ellie had picked up each others' experiences despite being on opposite sides of the globe.

The situation with Dan was different. Danny wanted nothing to do with Dan. He didn't want Dan's memories. Consciously or otherwise, he shut Dan out. Dan, similarly, didn't want anything to do with Danny's disgusting feelings.

However, it was hard for Danny to shut out these things when Dan's hand was wrapped around his core.

So he knew. He knew what was going on in Dan's mind, and-

Dan had intended to kill Danny right away. Intended to destroy him as soon as he saw him. That had been his intention, really, truly. That would have been mercy. Death, with no inkling of what Dan was going to do next.

But then Dan had seen him. He had seen Danny, there, with Pandora, Ellie, and the dragon princess, and he had wondered.

How could Danny go on, making friends, letting people live, knowing what Dan knew? Because he had to know what Dan knew, even if didn't actively remember. The shadows in his lair had said as much. How and why didn't Danny act? Why didn't he do exactly what Dan did, once he knew?

He needed to know, before he killed him.

So he grabbed Danny's core and forced him to know. Forced him to remember, and asked:

"Why?"

They had died. They had all died. His mother and father. His sister. His best friends. His teacher.
He had known that what he did was dangerous. He had *half-died* before they'd even started. Danger was a given. But other than that, none of them had ever gotten seriously injured.

Even if they had, nothing could have prepared him for this. Mr. Lancer hadn't even been on the radar. The worst thing that had ever happened to Mr. Lancer- The closest Mr. Lancer had gotten to the chaos that was a part of the half-ghost's half-life- was getting possessed when Walker took over the town.

_Dying..._

That hadn't been an option. Not for any of them.

But it had happened.

It had happened, and he was alone.

---

The funerals were awful. The explosion hadn't left much for the coroners and morticians to work with. The coffins were mostly empty.

He cursed the ghosts that had caused the damage to the Nasty Burger. He cursed them again and again and again. He had never seen them before, didn't even know their names. There had been no reason for them to be so vicious. But they had been out for blood- his- and even if he had driven them off, they had done enough damage to the Nasty Burger and its *stupid* high-explosive secret sauce to make it explode.

He cursed them, and he would have liked to blame them, but he knew. It was his fault. It was his fault, for letting the ghosts do so much damage, for taking the answer sheet for the CAT when he found it somehow stuck to his back, for using it, for cheating, for not owning up to it until after the test, for asking Sam and Tucker to come with him to the parent-teacher conference Mr. Lancer called, for showing up late, for not being able to shield anyone but himself. He was the only one he could blame.

One closed coffin after another passed in front of his eyes. Tombstones rose up from the ground. Madeline Fenton, beloved wife and mother. Jack Fenton, beloved husband and father. Jasmine Fenton, cherished daughter. Samantha Manson, loved by all. Tucker Foley, called to heaven before his time. William Lancer, *nothing of him that doth fade.*

They put up a monument, statues, where the Nasty Burger had been, where they had died.

It was terrible, terrible, terrible, like walking through a nightmare. His mind barely registered anything that happened around him. Why bother? Everything, everyone, that mattered was gone.

And the priest said,

And his aunt said,

And the principal said,

And Sam's grandmother said,

And Tucker's mother said,

And Star said,
And Valerie said,

"They're in a better place."

He doubted they became ghosts. They would have come back by now, if they did. He didn't have that hope, it's beyond him.

But if the Ghost Zone exists...

If one afterlife exists...

Why not more?

He can believe that, as Vlad comes to take him, as Vlad takes him away from his haunt, from everything and everyone he's ever known, from the graves of his loved ones. He can feel parts of himself pulling apart, fading and falling. It isn't soft. It's an agonizing atrophy in his core.

He went anyway.

He can't stand to leave. He can't stand to stay. He especially can't put together the mental presence to fight Vlad.

The thought that, somewhere, there is an afterlife, a good afterlife, that has welcomed his loved ones with open arms (and they deserve a heaven, if anyone does) sustained him. He knew it was true, because it had to be true. He held on to it, desperately, with both hands. It was a lifeline. His only lifeline. It might have been enough.

(He knew Vlad was trying, but...)

(But Vlad wanted control.)

(He always wanted control.)

(He pushed too hard.)

(He didn't understand.)

But then he turned on the news. He saw what was happening in Amity Park. The ghosts didn't just go away. They were still coming. Amity was still under attack.

It needed a hero.

And-

He can't. He can't do it.

He was in Wisconsin with Vlad, but ghosts were still attacking Amity Park. He should go back. He should help. He wanted to, but the fear, the guilt, the pain all weighed him down. He just. Couldn't. But he had to. That's what he's for, what his powers are for, what his Obsession is for, to help people.

If only he didn't have these human emotions, these human fears and guilt.

He went to Vlad.

There had to be a way to separate him from himself, a more permanent, stable way than what
happened with the Ghost Catcher. That way, his ghost half could go back to Amity, his human half could heal without the added weight of Obsession, and they could both be normal for once.

–

It didn't work out that way.

Vlad pulled him out, and he's scared and confused. Worse- He's rejected. The one person who should be on his side no matter what-himself- had abandoned him, cast him out, *shed* him, like the trash he is. Trash, trash, trash that couldn't even protect the people he loved the most.

And he saw Vlad.

He saw Vlad, who had done so many terrible things to him, and he ran.

It took him hours to calm down, to realize how stupid he was being. He had asked for this, after all. Both sides of him.

He went back. He knew now, that this wasn't going to work. He needed to be whole, if he was to heal. A shortcut wouldn't work. He couldn't fight ghosts like this.

He went back, and saw himself lying dead on the operating table.

*No.*

His body was so still. It wasn't merely lifeless. It was soulless.

*No.*

This wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible. He couldn't have lost even himself.

*No.*

Vlad walked into the room, arms full of vials, jars, and bottles. The man looked up, and saw him, saw the ghost hovering over his own body. His load spilled from his arms, glass containers breaking.

"Dan-" Vlad started.

But he wasn't having any of it. Not with his own tortured corpse lying there. His eyes darted around the room, and he spotted the Ghost Gauntlets.

He dove for them. Vlad had stolen his other half, so he would take Vlad's. He would make sure that Plasmius never hurt anyone ever again, that his human half was the last one who would suffer at Plasmius's hands.

He must have surprised Vlad by coming back, because he didn't put up any fight at all. He tore Vlad's ghost half from him, easily.

Two halves make a whole.

–

Phantom was more emotional than Plasmius. He was full of rage and grief, and, in the fight to dominate the new mind, these things made him stronger. Phantom came out on top.

But he wasn't Phantom. He wasn't Plasmius. Not really. He was neither. He was both. But, mostly,
he was Phantom.

But he received things from Plasmius. Dark and deadly gifts. Fragments of personality. Knowledge. Obsession. Madness. The need to control, to have control.

Plasmius's Obsessions reacted poorly with Phantom's, and all of them were starving of loss.

He couldn't control what had happened to his parents, his friends, his teacher, his other half. They were all gone, all dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. He was loveless, and alone, and useless.

"They're in a better place."

They came back to haunt him, those words, that platitude, that comforting phrase.

"They're in a better place."

He had to believe it. He had to believe it or he would lose what was left of his mind.

"They're in a better place."

But if they were in a better place, then wasn't it a good thing that they had died?

"They're in a better place."

If they were in a better place, wouldn't it be great if everyone could go there? Wouldn't he be helping people, if he helped them get there?

—

It was weeks and weeks before he acted on that thought. Part of him, a withered and dying part, knew that it was sick and wrong to even think something like that, let alone act on it. But he also knew that, as a ghost, his chances of getting to that better place were essentially non-existent. He was trapped. And he was so, so tired of seeing all these people, these happy people, when his world was in ruins, when his Obsessions were eating themselves alive.

Even if it was hard, even if he didn't like it, he had to do it.

It was the suffering, at first. The sick, the injured. He was a perfect angel of death. Silent. Swift. All but undetectable. He was releasing them from pain he himself was unable to escape. Then his range expanded. He killed the lonely, the grieving. He knew what that felt like. It was mercy.

He stayed far away from Amity Park. It was their fault his family was gone, their fault he was like this. They didn't deserve his help.

—

By the time he was discovered, and recognized for what he was, he had begun to enjoy his work. He was good at it, and the challenge was nice.

When the GIW tried to stop him, he didn't kill them. He didn't like them enough. They didn't deserve to die. They didn't deserve the better place. They can't stop him.

They weren't the first to try and fail.

They weren't the last.
The armies of the world recognized him as a threat, then. But he had grown powerful. They realized too late that though he was a threat to them, they were not a threat to him. 

He had killed so many times.

The little piece of him that had objected in the beginning had long since grown silent. He had buried his emotions so deep that he was no longer sure that they existed.

He no longer felt any animosity towards Amity Park. That was, he supposed, a good thing. A hero had to be forgiving.

But he wasn't a hero anymore. He was a villain, a terrible, evil, villain. Not that it mattered. He was only doing what needed to be done. He was sending people to a better place.

He attacked Amity Park.

But they had taken his parents' technology, and forged it into a shield. They drove him away, his old friend Valerie at the forefront. He was impressed. It was the greatest challenged he had in years. It was almost fun. Almost.

To get through the barrier, he needed more power.

He went to the Ghost Zone, and laid waste. He collected power and knowledge, victory and vengeance.

Ghosts, a small part of him reasoned, must also go to a better place when destroyed, and if they don't, well... Considering his own torment, he was just freeing them. They should be thankful. Non-existence is better than being trapped here.

He spared his enemies. Ember, Skulker, Technus, the Box Ghost, Johnny. He hated them too much to kill them. It was their fault he was like this, anyway, and their attempts to kill him were educational at times.

He took an especial pleasure in blinding each and every one of the Observants once he had discovered they had sent the ghosts that had caused the death of his family.

He went back to Amity Park, and was repulsed again. Again, and again, and again. He grew stronger. He told Valerie who he used to be. He conquered the Ghost Zone, and acquired the uncertain loyalty of the Fright Knight, and other bloodthirsty ghosts. Soon, there was little resistance to his rule.

The conquest of Earth had fallen to the wayside in the meantime. He knew he had only killed the tiniest fraction of the population of the world, but once he had gotten rid of Amity Park, no one could stand against him. He could pick off the other humans at his leisure. He had nothing but time. They would all die eventually.

Then his hard work paid off. He received a new power, the Ghostly Wail.

It had been ten years since he set foot in Amity Park.
It would all be over soon. That was what he had thought, what he had believed, but when he entered Amity Park, intending to put it out of its misery once and for all, he found himself face-to-face with himself.

Not just himself. Sam. Tucker.

He knew what this had to be. Clockwork, the meddler, was a principal member of the resistance against him.

He knows this is a distraction.

Yet-

If his younger self was here, now, then what would become of him? Is time a closed loop, an infinitely branching series of paths, or does it follow rules he could never even guess at?

And could he-?

Was there even a possibility-?

The combination of temptation and threat was too great to resist. He trapped his past self (had he really been that weak, back then?) and returned to the past.

His emotions stirred when he saw his old friend, his old family. But he had spent too long on his task to turn away now. It will be painful, but he was going to send them to a better place. He would make sure that his past self would follow the same path he had, and make sure that everyone he had helped was helped, even if he had to become everything he despised.

So why, if Danny knew, wasn't he doing just that?

The thing about these kinds of connections was that they didn't work just one way.

As Dan pushed memories into Danny and demanded an answer, Danny pushed back repudiating every one of Dan's points, throwing Dan's excuses and 'reasoning' back in his face.

Yes. Yes, Danny knew all this, even as he locked it away, forced it out of his waking mind. He didn't care. What Dan had done wasn't excusable, wasn't forgivable, and Danny didn't want to think about it.

Dan wanted to know why.

He was making everyone safe and happy in that better place. So why?

It wasn't Dan's choice. That's why. It wasn't his choice and it never had been, and he was stealing
choices along with lives. If people chose to be unhappy, then, no matter what, *that was their choice.*

Sometimes things were just out of Danny's control, out of anyone's control, and he had to accept that. He had to understand that, no matter how much he sometimes wished otherwise.

—

He pushed back at Dan.

It was just after he had gotten his ice powers, and there had been a car accident. People had been hurt. Badly. Cars were dangerous. He had always known that, but he was just now understanding it.

If only people didn't use them, they would be safer.

People didn't drive in a blizzard, if it was bad enough.

—

It took a week for Danny to reign in his powers and stop the freak snowstorm.

People had been safe and warm inside their houses, but they had also been trapped, and miserable.

It wasn't right to trap them. It wasn't right to steal their choices.

People weren't happy when their choices were taken.

—

(Even if Dan was right about the other, better, places, it was wrong.)

—

(Even if Dan was right about the other, better, places, all humans would go there anyway, when they died. *He wasn't helping.*)

Dan had hurt people. He had separated families. He hadn't just 'spared' people from pain. He hadn't just killed people who wanted to die. He had stolen the pain people had chosen, the minutes that they had fought for.

He had maimed people. Ghosts. They didn't deserve that. Danny wouldn't even do that to Spectra, let alone Johnny, Ember, and the Box Ghost. Those three even helped him sometimes.

No, he shouldn't say just those three.

Technus had felt so bad about what had happened to Danny as a result of his attack on Casper High that he had turned himself in to Libra. Skulker had risked his suit and possibly even his skin to warn Danny of the bounty hunters.

The world wasn't black and white.

They deserved peace in their afterlives, if they wanted it.

Both humans and ghosts deserved freedom.

—

Dan separated families. Then he put them back together by killing the survivors. Couldn't he see that
there were always survivors? A friend, a relative, an acquaintance, a coworker, a
colleague, devastated. There was always grief.

(A stone was thrown into a pool, waves rippling outward.)

(A donor killed too fast, organs unharvested, others countless dead who could have lived, and the
grief and the pain, and the people they loved, and the people they could have saved or helped, or
hurt, even, and all of it rippling outward without end.)

(Utilitarianism didn't work.)

Lost lives always had a price attached to them.

–

He could have kept everyone in his lair. Could have kept them there, as safe and happy as anywhere.
It was a better place.

He didn't. He didn't, because they didn't want to be there.

He tried to convince them, yes, and he would have been so, so happy if they had stayed, but they
hadn't. It was their choice. And his.

It was for the best, too, because he had to leave to stop the GIW.

–

People weren't happy without freedom. It was part of the reason Danny never went with Vlad, the
other part being the whole "I want to kill your dad and marry your mom" thing. Thank the Ancients
he had calmed down, recently.

–

Dan was like Vlad, like the parts of Vlad Danny hated. He wanted control. Always, control. Power
was just a means of control. Fear was just a means of control. Killing was just a means of control.

Dan didn't care about helping people. He cared about control.

(And control was just a way of protecting himself. No one else.)

–

Danny hated and feared Dan. He was unforgivable. He was all the mistakes Danny could have
made, and missed so narrowly.

Danny would have understood if Clockwork had killed him. Killed him, to prevent Dan.

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(Danny understood Dan far too well to have any sympathy.)

–

(Danny was terrified.)
(But he would make Dan understand.)

–

(Dan never had to do the things he did.)

–

Danny came back to himself with a strangled gasp as Dan pulled his hand from his chest.

His green eyes darted through the air and found Dan's bright red ones. But Dan wasn't looking at Danny. He was looking at something behind Danny, over his shoulder.

Dan snarled, and tossed Danny roughly away. Danny, not expecting that at all, tumbled through the air. He had the very briefest glimpse of a portal zooming towards him, and then-

-nothing.
Chapter 166

Chapter 166: When One Door Opens

Dan released Danny's core and pulled his hand from his chest. The younger ghost gasped. Dan wasn't sure if it was in pain, relief, or fear.

Dan didn't care, he felt-

He felt.

He felt, and it was too much. Danny, with his injured core, hadn't been able to project quite as much as Dan; Danny's memories and thoughts had been disjointed fragments, not a complete narrative, like Dan had fed to him. Even so, those thoughts had been powerful. Pointed.

True.

He felt sick.

Had he really let his need for control (he wasn't going to lie, he knew he had that need, that Obsession) overcome everything else? Had he let his other Obsessions starve while he fed that one, only that one? And imperfectly, at that, because there were always things he couldn't control, no matter how powerful he became.

He was sick. He was sick and wrong and-

He had done all that for nothing. He had killed all those people for nothing. He had betrayed his Obsession for nothing.

That was unforgivable. He was unforgivable.

Who could have forgiven something like this, anyway? Who could have forgiven something like him? God? Dan doubted he had a soul.

Danny wasn't even convinced that there was a better place for people to go, if they didn't become ghosts. Oh, he didn't outright think that there wasn't, but he didn't believe blindly. It had never been knowledge for Danny, not like it had been for Dan.

(But Dan had only wanted it to be true. He had never had any proof.)

Dan could never atone for this.

He wanted to end. At least then he couldn't do anything worse.

It took time for a ghost to tear itself apart for the sake of its Obsession. This was good. If Dan had destroyed himself right away, he wouldn't have seen the portal forming behind Danny, and then rushing forward, towards them.

He threw Danny to the side, out of the portal's path, but the portal changed direction, as if chasing Danny. It swallowed Danny, who was clearly disoriented and made no attempt to evade it. As soon as it had done so, it winked out of existence.
Dan stared, then his mouth twisted. He knew who had caused this, who had done this. There were only a few people who could even make portals, let alone manipulate portals like that. Clockwork wouldn't interfere. He would have seen Dan's intention. Lady Nephthys wouldn't know. She didn't have Clockwork's precognitive abilities. That left Issitoq.

(Issitoq, who had killed Dan's family once already.)

There was no question in Dan's mind that Issitoq had nothing but bad intentions towards Danny. Issitoq would want to destroy Danny, kill him.

That had been Dan's goal only seconds ago.

He narrowly dodged the spear thrown at him from below. He looked down. Pandora had almost reached him, and she was the first of many. Some part of him wanted to continue the fight, to lose himself in battle-frenzy and be destroyed by the hand of another. But he hadn't come here to fight Pandora.

It was time to go. He warped space around himself, and reappeared, even farther from Mattingly than before. His aura flickered as he scanned his immediate surroundings. He had managed to go where he wanted, but wouldn't be able to teleport again for a while.

Pandora had already spotted him. As undignified as it was, it was time to run. He wouldn't be able to outpace her, but there were places he could shake her, if he maintained a lead.

Maybe he'd even be able to figure out what he wanted to do, what he should do, on the way.

He was unable to avoid the portal that opened in front of him.

Clockwork leaned away from the viewing lens, shaking. He had seen it, just for a second, the choice Dan had made, and its result. He had seen, with tortured clarity, the ghost born of paradox tear himself apart, disintegrate, fade and end as his Obsessions rebelled against his existence.

It wouldn't have been a pleasant end, a slow and quiet fading from being, but a paroxysm, violent and painful. Such a thing wasn't a fate ghosts wished on each other, but Clockwork knew it would have been the closest to peaceful Dan could get.

Clockwork couldn't know for sure what Dan and Daniel had exchanged, not now, not yet, with timelines fraying into timelines, into timelines, into timelines with every choice and chance, but from that future he could guess. He could understand. Dan had seen himself from Daniel's perspective, had seen his mistakes and his sins, and his moral compass had lurched into motion once again.

Dan had seen, and he had made a choice, a decision, to trouble the world no more. It was, perhaps, not the very best choice Dan could have made, but it was far from the worst, and it was his choice, to exist or not. Even if he could, Clockwork would not have interfered.

But Issitoq did.

His portal, made by the hourglass, sped at Daniel and Dan. Dan threw Daniel away, out of its path—another choice, another step towards good—but the portal veered towards Danny, its true target, and
Daniel was gone.

Clockwork pushed himself up, intending to fly around the room (the ghostly equivalent of pacing), but something in him gave out, and he collapsed to the floor. He was having trouble pulling in ectoplasm and energy, which was ridiculous. He was in his lair.

Clockwork hadn’t seen this.

Clockwork hadn’t seen this?

Clockwork had... seen... this?

Daniel was gone.

(Everything was the way it was meant to be.)

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The abomination was gone. One of them, anyway. The more important one. The other, Issitoq could order Clockwork to deal with. It was a paradox, after all. Clockwork was supposed to get rid of those. He would have to be watched closely, of course, treasonous wraith that he was, but that was what the Observants were best at. They had given him too much freedom, honestly. That was what had set this whole catastrophe off in the first place. It was a good thing Issitoq had been able to stop it.

The hourglass was empty.

Issitoq had known that would happen. It wasn't a trivial thing, to open a portal to so many years in the past. Still, it was a great loss to his order.

He tucked the empty hourglass back into his robes. It may no longer have the power to warp time and space, but it had contained the dried ectoplasm and power of an Ancient. That was a power in and of itself.

Issitoq turned to Long Now. He would not be able to rest until the other monster was undone.

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Dan wasn’t able to pull up in time to avoid the ground the portal deposited him inches from. He ate dirt, literally.

*Sam would be pleased.*

(She hadn’t crossed his mind like that in years.)

He dragged himself from his self-created crater, fully prepared to do battle with Issitoq, and- And
something. Probably not save Danny. That couldn't possibly be what he was about to think. Beating up Issitoq was enough. The murderer had it coming. Dan could feel him, waiting, just beyond the edge of the crater.

But what he saw, once he cleared the rim of the crater, wasn't the bottom of an Observant's robe and a sickly green tail. What he saw was a pair of bare, dark-skinned feet, and the hem of a butterfly-patterned robe.

He looked up at the woman they belonged to, and she looked down at him, arms crossed. He had never met her, even in the other timeline, but there was only one person she could be.

"I am Nephthys," she said, as if she could read his mind, "Ancient Master of Death and Change."

Danny groaned. That had been a bad portal, one of, if not the worst he had ever been through. He didn't think he had ever passed out from just going through a portal before.

Unless he counted the one he had made when hit by the Mortifier. He didn't. That wasn't just the portal.

Maybe this wasn't, either. Maybe it was his earlier injuries and whatever Dan had done to him combined with a turbulent portal.

Either way, that didn't really matter right now. What mattered was that Clockwork had taught him that one of the main contributors to how bad a transient natural portal felt was how far it traveled through space and time. If the portal really had been that bad, and it wasn't just Danny, he was probably far from home.

On the other hand, that was a really convenient time for a portal to show up. He wasn't convinced that it was natural, in which case the turbulence was just because whoever made it was bad at making portals.

Thing was, Danny didn't know anyone who was bad at making portals. He knew people who couldn't do portals, and people who were really, really good at them. There was no middle ground. Except maybe Cujo. Had Cujo saved him?

Probably not. If Cujo had saved him, the dog would be with him right now, or he'd be in a bed, with his friends fussing over his injuries. He wouldn't be lying on rock, listening to the whistle of a particularly angry ectoplasmic wind.

Speaking of which, he should probably open his eyes and get up.

Every muscle and bone in his body protested at the move. He felt like he had been dropped into a barrel with a boulder, and rolled down hills until the boulder was pounded into powder. In other words: bad.

Danny forced his eyes to open and immediately shut them again. Even the dim light here was enough to give him a pounding headache.

He would just take another couple of minutes to review his situation, before opening his eyes. Yeah.
That sounded like a good idea, and not at all like stalling. Dan hadn’t been as strong as he had been when Danny first fought him, so his friends probably weren’t in immediate danger. Dan would want to find Danny first, anyway, and so he could make Danny watch as he killed them, because that was what Dan did. Because he was an evil jerk.

It was what he had tried to do before. Except, Dan had seemed different.

Danny shifted, and opened his eyes for real this time, his hand pressing on his chest above his core. It fluttered in response. Dan had been different, this time. The memories and thoughts he had pushed into Danny were different. There was just something off about the whole encounter.

Dan was still an evil jerk, though. Ancients, trying to make Danny think Dan had done everything because he believed in heaven... What a joke.

(Danny would never admit he understood Dan entirely, that he empathized, that he pitied the ghost. He would never dare to understand. It was too dangerous. Even recognizing the reasoning was dancing too close to the precipice of madness. Danny would not, could not, let himself have thoughts that would put his people, put both worlds, in so much danger, even if his human side and thought processes stabilized him and held him back.)

But back to more pressing problems. Even if Danny's family, friends, frenemies, and various acquaintances weren't in immediate danger, they were still in danger. If not from Dan, then from Issitoq, because the Observant didn't have any more scruples than his jerky future self. In fact, Danny would bet that Issitoq had something to do with Dan getting released in the first place. Heck, Danny's understanding was that Issitoq was, like, twenty percent responsible for Dan existing in the first place.

Danny needed to get back to his friends.

Yes, they might be in danger partly because of Danny, but Danny didn't think that danger would go away just because Danny wasn't with them anymore. Especially for Ellie, Jazz, and his classmates who had picked up enough liminality to gain powers, considering Issitoq's prejudice against liminal spirits. He couldn't forget Harmony, either. Everyone living (or unliving, whichever) in Danny's lair would be killed (or ended) if he was.

Well. If he and Ellie were, since it was her lair, too. Still, his death couldn't possibly have a positive effect on his lair.

His friends would probably be pretty upset if he died, too.

Wow. Jazz would be proud of him. This was the most rational he'd been about himself and his relationships with other people for, well, a while. Probably because it was really easy to shove all of his self-hate and negativity off onto Dan, but, hey, it was better than using Dan as another reason to hate himself, right?

Another reason to get back: He needed a nice, long talk with Jazz. He'd never take one of her nosy psych questions for granted again.

So. First things first. Where was he?

He pulled himself the rest of the way into a sitting position. He was sitting on, not a rock, but some kind of brick. Stone? Or clay? He rubbed his hand on one of them. He couldn't tell. It was worked, in any case, not natural.

On Earth, that might suggest the present or past presence of civilization in the area. In the Zone,
however, it might just be the result of something falling through a portal, so it wasn't nearly so helpful.

Danny looked around more, and breathed deeply, trying to gauge the energy levels and ectoplasm density of the area. He might be able to rule some places out, if he knew that, and his core needed all the advantages in reading that it could get, considering the beating it had taken over the past weeks.

The area, as Danny had noted before, was fairly dark, though that didn't prevent him from seeing. There was a nasty-looking forest hanging upside-down above him (or maybe Danny was hanging upside-down above it). To one side, there was a collection of dark, floating blobs. Danny couldn't tell how big, or how far away they were. To the other, there was something that might have been a town of some kind. If Danny had been on Earth, he would have said it was too geometric to be natural, but then he had also encountered predatory buildings that were actually carnivorous plant things in the Ghost Zone, so that wasn't a given. Also, it was far enough away that he could have covered it with his thumb. The ectoplasm on the air was sweet and thick, so he was probably relatively close to the Core. There probably were other places near which the atmosphere was like this, but he couldn't recall them at the moment.

(There was something else. Something that triggered a sense Danny rarely used, but he couldn't identify it. It just niggled the back of his mind.)

He didn't recognize anything.

Well, if he was right, and he was near the Core, then at least he was still in Earth-equivalent space, and not floating through the flip side of the Andromeda Galaxy or something.

(Even if that would be kind of cool.)

The little town would probably be his best bet (again assuming that it wasn't some kind of sham, or a ruin), even if it was far away.

Then again, there was always below... Or whatever he was sitting on. He floated up, and away, towards the town, then turned. He frowned, tilted his head, and flew around the object. It was a partly enclosed portal; natural, but stable, and built around. The Architect's Gate wasn't the only travel route to take advantage of portals. There were a lot of them, and, usually, the stuff built around them was used to mark them, since they did tend to move around, and often had independent paths.

Danny squinted.

If he looked at it like this, it looked like one of the Tantric Gates. A lot like one of the Tantric Gates. The violet Tantric Gate, in particular. Except, almost all of the decorations were gone, and so were the ceremonial doors. He frowned, and moved again. The purple stone set in the lintel was still there, at least.

He crossed his arms, earlier plan of going to the town forgotten. The gate's state was... disturbing. He didn't know much about the Tantric Gates, Clockwork had shown them to him once, and the Ghost Writer had talked about them a bit, during one of his culture lessons. The Tantric Gates were the focus of a religious pilgrimage thing some groups did. The pilgrimage had something to do with symbolically going through 'chakras,' or spiritual states. Danny hadn't really been paying attention at the time, but he had gotten the impression that it was quite important to those groups.

What else did he know about them? There were seven Tantric Gates (if you counted both sides of the gate as one, fourteen if you didn't). They more or less hung out around the Core. Except for the ends, they came out pretty close to one another, so you could do them all in a day. They had really
long subjective 'travel times' compared to other stable portals, and were kind of rough, so there wasn't a lot of fighting between the religious people and people who wanted to move them to use as trade routes (Danny had gotten involved with a dispute about something like that, once. It was how he met the Feathers of Ma'at.). Oh! And they were probably the gates Neti used to confuse and delay Inanna, when she tried to invade the Zone. At least, that's what Ghost Writer had said. Clockwork had done his whole 'I will neither confirm nor deny' act.

They sadly didn't go anywhere Danny wanted to be. Not this one, and not the ones this one led to.

On the other hand, Danny knew the general location they were in (thanks, Clockwork!). Sure, he hadn't thought there was a town, or any ghostly community, this close to them, or a giant, creepy, upside-down forest, but it wasn't like he was an expert on the geography of these parts of the Zone.

It didn't matter, anyway. Between his general location, and knowing which direction was which, he could get to somewhere he knew.

Problem: He didn't know what direction was which. Other than the sadly defaced gate (and, Ancients, was someone going to get in trouble for that), there weren't any landmarks that he recognized.

Whatever, he could just orient himself with his ghost homing sense...

… which he really needed to find a better name for...

… which wasn't working.

He couldn't feel Amity Park. He couldn't feel home.

Amity Park was gone.
Chapter 167

Chapter Notes

Hey, sorry for posting this so late. I got distracted by Ectober thoughts and NaNoWriMo thoughts. In other news, I will have limited spare brainpower this month.

Chapter 167: All Aboard M. Bersback!

Wes stared at the ghost in his living room. Amity Park had always been— he shouldn't say infested. That term felt too GIW-ish to countenance. Amity Park had always been haunted. There, that was better.

Amity Park had always been haunted, but Wes had never expected to find a ghost sitting peacefully in his living room, drinking tea, and talking peacefully to his mom. He also hadn't expected for any ghost he saw to be the ghost of someone he knew. Well, there was Fenton, but he hadn't expected that either, he'd just been able to see it, unlike literally everyone else in town.

"Mrs. Stadler!"

The woman turned and smiled, green shining on her lips, and through her thin skin. "Wesley, dear, do come down off the stairs. And I go by Aunt Ravel now." She put her teacup down. "Speaking of which, I never did finish that blanket you ordered, Wanda, the one with red trim and stars? For your cousin's baby shower?"

"Well, I didn't expect you to," said Wes's mother, a little faint. "You had, um..."

"Oh, you can talk about my death, I don't mind. It is a little hard to dance around the subject, isn't it? With my being a ghost and all. I hope I didn't frighten you, showing up like I did, but I couldn't use the door, with all those nasty men on the streets, you know, the ones in white?"

"We know."

"That's actually what I'm here about. You see, those fellows in white, they aren't exactly friendly, are they? I'm sure you've noticed. We've noticed, of course."

Wes finally descended the last few steps into the living room. "When you say 'we,' who do you mean, exactly?"

"Why, all of us. All the ghosts in Amity Park. We'd like to do something about it, wouldn't you?"

Wes wished his dad was here. He'd always wanted people to listen to him, and take him seriously,
especially since he figured out that Fenton was Phantom, but brokering an alliance with ghosts? That was too much. And people still didn't believe him when he said, when he showed _evidence_, that Fenton was Phantom! It was infuriating!

… And he was off track.

"Does that include Phantom?"

A frown passed over 'Aunt Ravel's' face. "Well, no, he's not in Amity right now, and more's the shame. If he were here, none of this would have ever happened. He wouldn't have allowed it." She put her hand over her heart. "That poor child. Those people are so cruel to him."

"He _is_ Fenton, isn't he?"

"Wes," said his mother, a little strained, "I don't think it's the time for that."

Wes sat on the couch, gingerly, and his mother returned her attention to the ghost.

"So," she said. "Why you? And why us?"

"Well, it's because you know me, isn't it? And you're the ones organizing everything, aren't you?"

"How do know that?" asked Wes, aghast. They had been trying to keep their little rebellion on the down-low. Sure, ghosts could be invisible, and overshadow people, and go through walls, but there had been GIW all over town with their scanners, the meetings were secret, they didn't talk about what they were doing outside of the meetings, and a good number of Amity Park citizens had picked up the trick of telling if there was an invisible ghost nearby.

"Oh, it's a funny story, really. Or, maybe, not so much of a _story_ as a _description_. You see, the ravens told me. They can speak, you know."

"The... ravens."

"Oh, yes. The ravens told me. And the cats told them." Aunt Ravel smiled. "I'm told Inky is very excited about what you're doing here."

"Inky. Our cat?" asked Wes's mother. She sounded lost. Wes was lost, too.

"Yes. She's been dead for a while, you see. You didn't know?"

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"Ship ahoy!"

The call echoed down through the ship, reaching Sam, Jazz, and Tucker. They had just managed to pull Sam out of her self-created prison, and were brushing pine needles off of her.

"Should we go up?" asked Jazz. "Or should we be asking what just happened here?"

"I don't know," said Sam, aggrieved.

"Well, what were you thinking about?" asked Tucker.
"You think I caused this?"

"Maybe?"

Sam shrugged. "A bunch of things. I was thinking about my plants that were in here, and about how I kept trying to make them grow, and how that didn't work out, and about fixing the ship- Oh, jeez, what!"

The boards beneath Sam's feet had started sprouting. She pointed at them, sharply.

"I'm just not going to think about that for a while, then," she announced. "We'll work out what's going on later, when I'm not going to make this ship uninhabitable."

"Sounds good," said Tucker.

Jazz had been frowning at the ceiling. "I think we should go up."

Sam ran her hands down her clothing again, dislodging a few more needles. "Yeah."

"I don't know," said Tucker. "Do you think they'll want us up there? I mean, we don't want to get in the way."

"It'll be fine," said Sam. "We're good in combat situations."

"We don't know if it is a combat situation, though."

"Then there isn't a problem. We can just phase through the deck if we need to get out of the way in a hurry. Aren't you curi-?" Sam cut herself off. "Yeah, no, never mind. Oh, jeez. I can't believe I-" She shook her head. "I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to."

"You came real close to jinxing us there, Sam. And you call me bad luck."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jazz.

"Later," said Tucker. "It's complicated. Let's go see what's happening."

They made their way to the upper decks, dodging running crewmen as they did. They tried to get more information, but none of the sailors had any. All they knew was that there was a ship coming into view. They hadn't made out the flags yet, or if there was a name written on the side.

They chose a relatively out of the way ladder to climb and went up. The deck was busy, but not nearly so much as it had been in the heat of battle. There was room from them.

A good number of the sailors were hovering at the port railing and pointing. Sam caught snatches of conversation, arguments about whether or not to avoid the ship, prepare for combat, or see if they could signal it for help. They didn't recognize the ship. Sam, Jazz, and Tucker joined them, squinting into the distance.

Sam spotted the ship everyone was talking about, and sighed. Well, there was one thing that wasn't going to turn into a problem. She turned to shout to the sailors. "I know that ship!"
Dan floated to his feet, ready to fight. "What do you want?" he demanded, harshly. He had never met Nephthys, but he had heard her, during his captivity in Long Now. She was friend and sister-by-choice to Clockwork. No friend of Issitoq's, and no friend of his, either.

"At the moment, you," said Nephthys. "I require your aid."

Dan scoffed. "You want my aid? What is this? Some kind of redemption thing? Don't you know I'm irredeemable?" He punctuated the sentence with an attack, which splashed harmlessly off the air around Nephthys, without even so much as a sign of a shield.

Nephthys was unamused. "By human standards, perhaps, but let's not confuse ourselves with illusions. We aren't human."

"What are you talking about?"

"We aren't human. I am thousands of years old. Even allowing for the uncertainties inherent in time travel, and the ages of your component parts, you've not seen a hundred years." Her voice was cold. "You killed, what, a thousand people who had never harmed you or did you ill? Beyond that, a million or two who had? You can't imagine how many lives Clockwork and I have ended between the two of us."

"I haven't just killed people. I've ended ghosts," said Dan. He didn't like how uncertain he sounded.

"So have I, and from the way Clockwork tells it, you didn't destroy nearly as many people as you think you did."

Dan didn't know where this was going. He didn't care. It was time to get out of here. It didn't look like Nephthys was going to attack him, so- he shot off, only to run into another portal, and plow right back into the crater.

He shot right up, fire in his hands.

"What do you want?"

"I want to destroy the Observants. I assume you do, too?"

"Why?"

"Do you mean why I want to destroy the Observants, or why I want you to do it with me?"

"Either! Both!"

"Well," said Nephthys, drifting up to Dan's level, "the first is obvious, if you think about it."

"It's about Danny."

Nephthys's eyebrows went up behind her veil. "Tangentially. But, mostly, it's about Clockwork. They've harmed him once too often. Issitoq has also been playing with portals, and points of transition are mine. As for the second, you're changing. You're in my sphere of influence, now."

"So it is 'redemption,'" snarled Dan.

"No. It's change. You don't need redemption. All those things you say you did, they never happened here. Hardly anyone knows what could have happened. Most who do are Observants." She tilted her head. "But what I think you're more concerned with is forgiveness"
Dan didn't have to stay here and listen to this nonsense. He flew away. Right into another portal. Maybe he did have to stay.

"I don't want forgiveness."

"Don't you?"

The two ghosts stared at each other, Nephthys's gaze much cooler than Dan's. Did Dan want forgiveness? Hadn't he been thinking about that before?

"If no one remembers, there's no one who can forgive me, is there?" asked Dan, tone biting and sarcastic.

"There's Daniel."

"He's not going to forgive me. He can't."

Nephthys shrugged. "Things change. I can't see the future or read minds. Maybe you aren't looking for forgiveness. Maybe you're looking for self-respect, or a new start, or a purpose, or any number of other things. But you have changed, and you are changing. I can feel that as surely as I can feel my own skin." She paused. "Clockwork believed you could change for the better. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, a last-second chance, and a last second chance. Will you take it?"

"Take. What," ground out Dan. He'd hated this inscrutable nonsense from Clockwork. He wasn't at all prepared to take it from someone else.

"This chance. It won't be for nothing. You'll change, and change again. Change is the only constant in this world or the other. Those who seek to stay the same rot from the inside out."

"You're offering to pay me?" Dan couldn't quite believe what was going on.

"I'm offering to give you the change you desire. I can do that as easily as Clockwork can peer through time. As I said, you are in my sphere of influence."

Dan couldn't believe he was even considering this nonsense, but it wasn't like he had a choice. If he tried to leave, Nephthys would just portal him back into the crater. He understood that now.

"If I don't agree to whatever it is you want me to do?"

"You're in my sphere of influence. I can change you to something less threatening, if it becomes necessary."

"Blackmail seems beneath you, Ancient Master."

Nephthys shrugged. "The carrot and the stick. But, as I said, I think you'll enjoy what we'll be doing."

Dan smiled, sickly. "Like I enjoyed killing hopeless, helpless patients at hospitals?"

"If you're trying to scare me off, or disgust me, you'll need to try harder than that. I've watched all the horrors of human history and then some. Your sins don't measure up."

"Then you haven't seen them! You haven't seen what I've done! I have! What I did. For no reason."

The force had gone out of his argument, along with its point.

There was a long, silent moment. The air seemed to vibrate.
"You could forget, if you wanted," suggested Nephthys. "The Lethe exists for just that reason. That, too, is a kind of change."

"But if I forget-" If he forgot what Danny had shown him, he might do it all again, all those terrible things.

"You can change before then, and stay changed."

Dan felt small and trapped, as he hadn't been since he was a teenager. If he was as powerful as he had been, he would have been able to get out of this. He could have made his own portals. Nephthys hadn't even faced him in the other timeline, hadn't dared oppose him. He could have fought her. He could have won. He was sure of it.

But not as he was now. His core twitched and pulsed and burned. Nephthys was right. He was changing.

(He was scared. He might have been scared for a while. He wasn't sure.)

"Alright," he said. "I'll do what you want." He paused. "Which is?"

Nephthys smiled. (Her teeth were like razor blades.)
Okay, Danny was done with the panic attack. There were other reasons for his ghost homing sense to not be working. Actually, even if Amity Park had been destroyed, Danny would still be able to point to where it had been. One contributing factor to Danny's internal compass pointing towards Amity Park was that he had died there. Just because the place had been trashed, that wouldn't change.

Now, he had to figure out what had changed it. The Fenton portal being closed might do it, since he had died in the portal. That might have thrown his homing sense off-kilter. Might. It would be reasonable for the Fenton portal to be shut off, considering that all the Fentons were in the Ghost Zone. Except, of course, that even Danny's parents couldn't figure out how to do that without a side effect of massive destruction. Or other ghost-related weirdness. His parents weren't sure which. The portal was self-sustaining.

The other thing that could have happened was something he had experienced before, something a portal could do. He could have traveled into the past. Usually he had a little more warning than this before he time traveled. Enough warning not to freak out because his town was gone.

( Maybe he should endeavor to find out if his homing sense was really connected to Amity Park, or just to the place he died, once he got back home. He had never been quite sure, and now he was thinking that would be pretty useful information.)

He was probably in the past. That would explain why the gate wasn't decorated. It hadn't been defaced. It hadn't even been decorated yet. Probably. He didn't know how far back he was.

He half closed his eyes. Maybe that had been that weird nagging little feeling in the back of his head. Time. He had time powers. Tiny little baby time powers. Sort of. Ish. He had some time sense. Yes. That seemed about right. He was far, far in the past.

So, what he should do now was find Clockwork. Clockwork, even if Clockwork didn't know him yet, would be able to see that he wasn't from 'now' and send him back to his home time. Heck, Clockwork probably already knew that he was here. Now. Whatever.

He just had to find Clockwork. That would be... hard. He really wasn't sure where he was, and he didn't know if Clockwork had moved Long Now at some point in the last however long.

On the plus side, he wouldn't have to worry about changing history, since he'd gone through a portal, rather than one of Clockwork's time windows. If he was going to cause a paradox going through a portal, Clockwork would have already 'solved' him. At least, he thought that was how that worked... He wasn't entirely sure. Time travel was confusing. Anyway, going through time via portals didn't cause paradoxes. Via normal portals, anyway. Usually. Mostly.

Oh, jeez, he had no idea. Maybe that hadn't been a normal portal. Maybe he was grossly misunderstanding Clockwork's work with paradoxes. Maybe he should avoid interacting with everything and everyone, just in case. He didn't want to squish any butterflies.

(He needed to learn more about time. Clockwork had shown him so much, but he was still so useless when something time-travel related came up and Clockwork wasn't there.)
All he knew for sure was that there were paradoxes, which caused branches, bulges, or breaks in the timeline, and stable loops, which didn't cause any harm, and were sometimes even necessary. And he didn't know which one he was in. That was for sure, too.

Well, he'd never find Long Now while avoiding everyone and everything. He probably couldn't even survive while avoiding everyone and everything. He still wasn't well. He was honest enough with himself to admit that. Actually, he probably couldn't navigate through the Zone avoiding all other people, period. It wasn't possible. There would be too much stuff, too many people. Heck, he might have already changed something. He'd been here and unconscious for a while. He didn't know how long. He could have changed something already and not even know it.

Danny groaned. He'd have to assume that he was in a stable loop. That would make things easier.

(If not for the crippling fear that he'd accidentally erase the future he'd come from. He was pretty sure that wouldn't happen, but clearly he didn't understand enough about time to know.)

He'd go to the little town. Yeah. See where he was, see what era he was in, see what landmarks there were, see what supplies he could get. Then, maybe, find a safe place to rest. He was already wearing out, but he didn't want to let go of his ghost form. He wasn't sure he could get it back if he let it go, and he needed it to talk to whoever was at the town, since humans probably weren't exactly common around here.

He turned to the little town.

It exploded.

Danny stared.

(He hoped those people were alright, but with that kind of explosion, they couldn't be.)

(Part of his heart broke.)

(A more selfish and practical side of him, however, reminded him that this had happened ages ago, from his proper perspective in his proper time.)

No way was his luck that bad. Well. It was. But, seriously. He had been here and awake for maybe fifteen minutes, and the first place he wanted to go exploded? Really?

The shockwave reached him before he could react with anything more than incredulity, the ectoplasm screaming around him. He tumbled backwards, and hit the side of the gate. Ancients! The town must have been utterly disintegrated. No wonder he didn't know what it was, it hadn't survived to his time.

Something came shrieking, zooming out of the blast zone like a flash of lightning. Towards him.

Maybe he should run.

He took off, as fast as he could. It wasn't fast enough. He was cut off.

It was a woman. She rode a yellow-white lion with electricity in its mane and flanks streaked with deep, bleeding gashes. She wore a crown on her midnight-black hair, a necklace made of blue stones close around her throat, a longer one against her chest, a long, flowing dress of closely-woven cloth, a breastplate, and a single golden bracelet around her wrist. In her hands, she held the reigns of the lion and a blue stone rod.
She *burned* with power. Her eyes flashed as she wrestled the lion into submission. The air sparked with it, boiling and wrinkling. Her skin shimmered and glowed.

She was human. Entirely, completely human. She didn't have even the barest shadow of a core on a her heart. Danny didn't know how he knew, but he did.

Danny shrunk back. He knew when he was, now, and perhaps a little too well.

A heartbeat later, all his indecision about acting and disrupting the timeline went out the window. This was here. This was now. This was happening in front of him.

This was Inanna, Queen of Heaven, destroyer of Ebih, destroyer of Kur, most holy priestess, the Morning and Evening Star, foremost in battle, giver of law, bearer of the *mes*. She had cut a bloody swath through the Infinite Realms in her quest to conquer them and become Queen of All Ghosts. She was a sorceress without equal. She had been worshiped as a goddess.

By some accounts, she had very nearly succeeded. She had certainly devastated dozens of contemporary Realms, and carelessly destroyed a countless number of ghosts and humans. She had even made it to the Core, according to Ghost Writer's books, and a disaster was only averted by delaying actions on the part of Neti, the gatekeeper. The Ancients had barely arrived in time to defeat her.

Danny's presence on her path might have destroyed that chain of events. It might have diverted her, accelerated her, sped her along.

He had to do something, he had to fight her, distract her, delay her. He'd be destroyed, of course, but he still had to do it. He had to protect the Realms, the Core, his timeline, everything he knew. Or-Had anyone sent word ahead yet? What if he had moved Inanna out of the path where she was seen, and the Ancients were alerted? Did the Core even know? Did the Ancients? *Clockwork* *had to* know, right? Except, he hadn't in the original timeline. Inanna had used her *mes*, her seven weapons, to bend away the Ancients' senses... Or was the story that the Ancients had been in council, meeting to decide the next king, the correct tale? In any case, the Ancients hadn't arrived to stop Inanna until the last minute.

The lion was struggling against Inanna. Danny was glad; it kept the brunt of her attention away from him, it delayed her. But it was horrifying, what was happening to it. Its ectoplasm was coming away in ribbons, streaming in the general direction of the Core. The lion was ending, right in front of Danny's eyes, and Danny couldn't do anything about it.

He hadn't thought that they were close enough to the Core for this kind of dissolution to happen. Unless it was because of its injuries.

Danny's mouth was dry. That was what was going to happen to him.

Inanna cursed under her breath, and threw her reigns down, into the void as the lion completely dissolved.

Ancients, if only he could speak to the Core, if only he could touch it, like it had touched him, when he fought the GIW.

*Tell us what?*

That Inanna was here. That she was coming. That she had destroyed that town, and the lion, and she wanted the throne that Gugulanna had so recently vacated. That he would fight, or delay, or anything he could, but he would lose and she would come, juggernaut that she was.
So, you would defend us, little one?

What was that?

Pay attention.

He was. Promise.

(Something wound around his core, softly, gently, distant.)

(He didn't know what was happening.)

Inanna was looking at him now, surveying him, up and down. He wouldn't be surprised if she could see right through him. Her eyes were so bright.

She pointed at Danny with her rod, and he got ready to lunge out of the way. Inanna grew in Danny's mind. He felt the tug on his thoughts, but not from the rod, from the blue necklace. His consciousness shifted rapidly between his multiple brains, throwing off the influence. He had learned since Freakshow. He wasn't going to be controlled again.

"You," she said, "gatekeeper. Where is the Core?" Of course, that wasn't exactly what she said. She was speaking in Sumerian, after all. "Where is Ereshkigal?"

Danny blinked. On one hand, he was stunned he wasn't dead already. On the other... Could she not feel it, glowing with power to her left?

He was stunned to realize, no, she couldn't. She didn't have a core of her own, and whatever protected her must keep her from feeling it any other way (and she had to be protected, or else she would be succumbing to the same fate as the GIW agents who had torn their suits). She must not know where the Core was, not exactly.

But, that wasn't the only thing that bothered him about her questions. "Gatekeeper, great lady?" he asked, in the same language. Gatekeeper, in Sumerian, was Neti. Being called by that name, at this time, in this place, it felt... ominous. The real Neti had to be around, somewhere, close.

"That is your gate, is it not?" She jerked her chin at the violet gate.

"Y-Yes," he said. Time to play dumb. "But, great lady, why should you wish to know such a thing?"

Inanna rolled her eyes. "I have come to your people in your time of need, when your king, the Great Bull Gugalanna, has passed away, to take the empty throne as is my right and destiny." The speech sounded rehearsed. Perhaps it was. "Would you rather your lands fall to chaos forever, and become sundered from itself?"

"No, great lady, but I know not what you want from me." He could only hope to stall long enough to come up with a plan. He'd have to misdirect her, somehow, but in a way she wouldn't see. She must know that the core was around here, somewhere, in this general direction, otherwise she wouldn't be here.

"You are a gatekeeper. Do you not know these lands? Tell me the swiftest path to Ereshkigal, and the throne."

Swiftest? No, he needed something slow.
Oh! The gates! The Tantric Gates! That was it! Maybe. He could only hope they were as much of a walkaround now as they were in his time.

They are, little one.

That would be a good idea, then.

When she passes through, take her weapons.

That—Oh. That wasn't his thought. He might cry. Did the Ancients know?

Gently, child, little gatekeeper. Focus.

The voice was faint. They probably didn't know. If he could take the weapons while leading her through the gates, the Ancients would be able to see her again... Or defeat her more easily, if the other stories were true.

Wait. If he could take her weapons? If he could lead her through the gates? Had he inadvertently usurped Neti's role?

There is no one who has taken Neti as a name. No one who keeps this gate. You may have it, if you wish.

Oh. Well. No pressure, then.

"Great lady, great lady, I beg you, do not strike me down, but the throne of Ereshkigal is far, far from here. I know not who has told you else-wise, but they have lied."

Inanna's face twisted. Maybe he should have led with saying he knew a way to the Core, instead of trying to build up a buffer against her latter ire. Oh, jeez, he didn't want to be vaporized.

"I should not have trusted so easily... When I claim the throne, I will destroy them for their arrogance. You know the way, gatekeeper" You know the way, Neti. "You will lead me."

Danny bobbed in what he hoped came off as pathetic agreement. Truly, it was closer to that than he would like to admit. "Yes, great lady." He swallowed. "The way is long, and strange, and hard, but I can show you."

Inanna nodded very slightly. "Lead on."

Danny floated backwards, not daring to take his eyes off of Inanna.

Inanna flicked the rod at Danny, and a spark of electricity leaped from its tip. "Lead on, I say. I have dawdled enough."

Danny flinched, and turned, flying as quickly as he could to the violet gate. Inanna had no trouble keeping up with him. He had to wonder how she did it. Danny had seen humans mimic flight in the Ghost Zone by falling and shifting their perception of gravity. He had done that himself. This, what Inanna was doing, it wasn't that. She was hovering. She was gliding. Maybe some of Danny's classmates could do that, eventually, but they were more ghostly than Inanna was. They had cores that Danny could feel. Inanna did not.

Maybe one of her weapons gave her that power?

Okay, that didn't really matter. Well, it did, but more as an academic proposal, a thought experiment, than anything practical. He was absolutely sure Inanna could destroy him weapons or no weapons.
But, he had to get *rid* of the weapons. How could he do that?

Well, the Tantric Gates were supposed to have a long and bumpy ride. That was supposed to be especially unpleasant for humans. The Core, Lady Ereshkigal, she had told Danny to take the weapons when they went through the gates. That might work - But, of course, the Core had suggested it. She wouldn't say things that couldn't work, not here. Danny wasn't sure how a human pretender on the throne would affect the Realms, but he didn't imagine it would be good.

*It would not. Should she be able to claim the throne, however falsely, the connection would be empty, hollow, one-sided. She would not hear our voices. The Realms would crumble, the lands be sundered. You would be better.*

So, about what Danny thought. Good to know.

Although, there *was* something he didn't like about that last part.
"Oh? Who is it?" the ship's captain asked Sam.

"Ah, well," Sam looked back over the railing. "I think it's Youngblood. I'm pretty sure it's Youngblood."

"I'm not familiar with that name. Is he likely to help?"

"Well, he's sort of a pirate. Sometimes. Usually." She made a face. "He's a kid. 'Piracy' is his favorite game. So, I mean..."

"He's not predictable," interjected Jazz, "but he isn't cruel on purpose. He'd attack as a game, not as anything serious. His ship is mostly crewed by thralls. I don't think he would attack if he knew we were in real trouble. Whether or not he'd help, I don't know."

"Precious child," said the captain. "I've seen the type. Do any of you know him?" he asked, looking at the crew.

"I've come across him," said one of them, a woman. "He's not quite harmless, but he just wants to play. I've never seen him, mind you. He has a glamour against most adults. It doesn't work against animals. Thing is, he doesn't come out this way much."

"So, why is he here now?" asked Tucker. "Think he knows about us?"

The captain sighed. "Trying to outrun that rig would shake us apart," he said. "We will prepare for whatever comes. I don't suppose I could convince you three to go back below decks?"

Jazz copied the captain's sigh. "I'll go. Someone needs to keep everyone downstairs calm, and you two know Youngblood better, anyway."

"Good call," said Tucker. "See you later."

"Bye," said Jazz, waving over her shoulder as she left.

They watched as the ship drew closer, its sails and flags growing clearer. It was a bit strange, how the pirate flag didn't elicit any fear or unease from the crew, like Sam half-expected. Maybe it was because they were ghosts. Maybe it was because Sam had given them warning. Maybe they were just really used to pirates.

Whichever, whatever. It was definitely Youngblood's ship.

It pulled up alongside them, but kept what the sailors apparently regarded as a respectful distance. If Sam was going to do a lot of riding around on ships in the future, she should probably invest some time into learning more about them.

Ember hopped up onto the rails, her hair pulled back into a bandanna. She was wearing her pirate ensemble, her guitar and microphone in hand.

"Hey!" she shouted. "We heard you losers needed some help!"
Danny and Inanna reached the violet gate.

"We have to go through, great lady."

"Is there not some other way?" she asked, eyeing the gate with distaste.

"Not- Not as quickly, great lady, nor as safely."

"What care have I for safety? How long would it take?"

Danny swallowed. How long would sound reasonable, and still be too long for Inanna to bother with?

*An season. Say a season.*

"A season," said Danny, "a whole season, great lady. At least."

Inanna pulled her lips back in a grimace. "And how long for *this* way?"

"Perhaps, perhaps a day? A little more? I have not gone the whole way. Little ones, like me, we fade if we get too close to the core."

"This is why your people need me," said Inanna, haughtily. "You people are so easily swayed from one side to another, from one state to another. You have no concept of permanence, no physical existence." She sniffed. "And so we go." She glanced sideways and down at Danny. "You go first."

Danny dove into the portal. A portal like this felt a little bit like a water slide, if the slide was the fabric of reality, the water was pure energy, you were also made out of water, and the pool was a sentient dimension that worked half on dream logic and wishful thinking.

Actually, it wasn't really like a water slide at all.

*Anyway,* the moral of the story was that, like on a water slide, if you braced yourself right, you could manage to get yourself stuck. Sort of. In theory. Danny had never actually done it himself, just heard about it from other ghosts. He had good reason to not mess around with portals unnecessarily. He rather suspected it would hurt a lot.

Surprise, surprise, it did.

Danny held on until he felt Inanna slide past him, and then he let go. As Danny had expected, Inanna wasn't completely aware of what was going on. Her eyes were closed.

Danny snatched the crown off of her head, and realized he didn't have any plan about what to do with it once he had it. If he just dropped it, it would come out with them.

There was a white moment of panic, and he thought of Aragon's amulet, and the time with Dan and Clockwork's medallion, and he phased the crown into his chest.

Oh. Dear. Oh boy. That did not feel good.
He tumbled out of the portal and took a few stabilizing breaths. Inanna was doing the same. Danny looked around. Where was the next gate? It should be the blue one, if he remembered correctly, and it shouldn't be too far away.

He felt a tug on his mind.

*This way.*

He looked, and found the distant speck that signified the gate. *Thank you,* he thought back, as hard as possible.

His nose was bleeding. He licked his lips and tasted salty, spicy, sweet-sour ectoplasm. He had just gotten one ghostly artifact pulled out of his body, and he just *had* to stuff a new, even more powerful one in. Ancients, he was an idiot. He really hoped he could figure out a different way to get rid of the next six, because he didn't think his body could handle that.

*You will be fine, Neti.*

Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but no thanks. He'd figure something else out by the time they got to the next gate.

"Where is my crown?" demanded Inanna. His attention was back on the incredibly powerful human invader.

She pointed imperiously at Danny. He didn't know what the crown did, but clearly it wasn't what was supplying her mind-control powers. He bet it was the beads, for that ability.

"You, where is my crown?"

Danny shrunk back. "Great lady, I do not know. Please, I beg you, I do not know. Sometimes the gates, they take things. It is just how things are."

"And you did not tell me?"

"It does not always happen. I did not think it would happen to you, great lady."

Inanna regarded him through narrowed eyes, then hit him, casually, across the face. Danny squeaked, and flipped all the way over. Twice.

"On this path of yours, are there any other gates that 'take things'?"

"Y-yes, great lady. Six more. But- But when you are queen, great lady, when you take the throne," it might have been the ectoplasm, but the words tasted sour in his mouth, "then you will have a crown beyond crowns, and all the jewelry and good things you could ever want, and the regard of all people." Yeah. Yes. That was it, imply that he didn't know that the crown had any power in itself.

"I will," said Inanna. "That is my right." She seemed to have an argument with herself.

"Take me to the next one," she ordered.
Dan frowned up at the doors of Long Now. He had spent years trying to escape Long Now, and now he had come back, and to help his jailer, of all things. It was ridiculous. It was insane. He didn't know what he was doing here.

"What are we doing here?" he asked. "I thought you wanted to destroy the Observants."

"I do," said Nephthys. "But if they see us coming, we won't be able to do that."

"I did it before," grumbled Dan.

"Yes," said Nephthys, "and you still didn't get all of them. You didn't break their organization."

"What are you talking about?"

"A weakness they have is that they can't see past their own destruction." Nephthys pushed open one of Long Now's tall doors. "If they could see what you were doing up until your final attack on Amity Park, and they had, if they were browbeating Clockwork with it, you hadn't destroyed them. I want to destroy them so completely that tales will be told of their folly a thousand years from now. For that, we begin our work here."

The main hall of Long Now had an empty quality to it that Dan had not expected. From his interactions with Clockwork, he'd expected to feel something... more. He scowled. Talking about feeling... disgusting. How had he fallen so far, so fast?

"Where is he?" muttered Nephthys. There was a sound. She stopped, and changed direction. "His workshop, of course."

Dan followed her to a room stuffed with esoteric and often glowing equipment, mirrors, lenses, and odd-looking tables. Nephthys turned to one side, and snagged a pair of amulets from a rack. She handed one to Dan.

"Wear it. Don't eat it," she said.

"How much did that old meddler tell you about me?" asked Dan, much more annoyed than he would have believed.

"Enough."

Nephthys seemed to know her way around as she threaded expertly through the tables. Dan followed her, not sure what she was doing. Clockwork would have already shown himself, if he was in this room. He ought to have revealed himself if he was in the building.

They turned the corner, and Dan was shocked to find that Clockwork was there, tucked into a corner. He looked terrible. His skin was translucent and spotty, and he was fidgeting.

This was not at all like the image of Clockwork Dan had in his head.

"Nephthys!" exclaimed Clockwork. "I can't- I can't see him. I can't see him. I could see, I saw all of it, all those futures, everything, and then he was gone! Do you have him? Please, sister. I can't lose Daniel."

Nephthys took a deep breath, something unusual for a ghost of her age. "No, I do not. You told me this would happen."

"You... You've... You've done well. But I didn't- I didn't see this."

"It was a few thousand years ago," said Nephthys, "and you told me that this would happen to you, when you lost the child. I hardly believed you, of course. I didn't think that the Observants would ever allow you a child, but here we are."

"No," said Clockwork, shaking his head. "No. I didn't see this. I didn't see this."

"But you did. You spoke to Mnemosyne- She called herself Nisaba in those days, and had her brew you a tincture of Nepenthe, from the Lethe. You said it was the only way. Otherwise, you wouldn't react properly, and you would be slave to the Observants forever."

Clockwork blinked, then shook his head again, more slowly. "No," he repeated. "I wouldn't have. I couldn't have."

"You did," said Nephthys. "It is the best way to break the contract, making them default on their end of the bargain. The contract depends on them continuing to guarantee your sanity, so if you lose your mind... But there are very few things that could drive you mad, once you were stable. That's why we're here. I will fight you, keep you from doing anything regrettable while you're in the throes of insanity, and Dan, Dan will make sure the Observants do not pull you out of it, keep them out of Long Now, until you are ready to come out on your own terms." Nephthys tipped her head to one side.

Dan gazed at her, confused and impressed. A plan lasting thousands of years? And that convoluted? Vlad certainly couldn't have conceived of it. His planning was much too short-term.

"Oh. And to give you this final push. You were very specific-"

"No! No, I wouldn't have done that to Daniel! I wouldn't have used him like that!"

"What's more likely, that you missed an entire this entire group of futures, or that several thousand years ago, you decided that a little ghost you'd only know for handful of years was expenda-"

"NO!"

Clockwork leaped at Nephthys from where he was crouched, and they both disappeared in a flash of green and blue light.

Dan quickly blinked the spots out of his eyes. A darkness laid on his core, as if it wasn't dark enough on its own. Danny was gone, really gone, and as part of Clockwork's plan? That old meddler, he had no right. Dan wasn't a pawn to be pushed around and played with as Clockwork pleased, and neither was Danny. If Danny had joined Dan-

Dan pushed away the reminder that he hadn't only been Danny Fenton, but Vlad Masters as well, and shoved down the resurgence of an Obsession he hadn't thought of since then.

For now, he would do what Nephthys wanted, and fight anything the Observants decided to send. Then, when the dust settled, he'd pummel that heartless old man, and teach him a lesson or two about making Dan care.
Okay! I've fixed things and posted the real chapter 169. Please check and see if you read 169, since I posted two chapters today.

Chapter 170: Burn

Issitoq felt the contract burn like it was his own skin, and not ancient stone.

It was burning. The act of breaking it released enough metaphysical power to have a very physical effect.

The Observants had written the contract to be as one-sided as they could manage, considering how powerful, brilliant, and insane Clockwork had been at the time. They had not included any penalties for themselves should the contract be broken on their end, except for the ending of the contract itself, and, with it, all the benefits they derived from it.

Issitoq found that was more than enough. It was like going blind, after having perfect vision.

He had forgotten how much of the Observants' powers derived from Clockwork's.

The contract chamber was crowded when he got there, and he had no recollection of deciding to go. One moment, he was recognizing the horror of what had just happened, the next, he was there, in the chamber.

The contract was kept in a public area, but under heavy guard. True, the physical, stone contract was all but meaningless, in terms of the contract actually being enforced, but it was useful for other reasons. Reminding the rare visitor to the Panopticon who was in charge, for example, or humiliating Clockwork.

The flames licking at the contract died away as Issitoq watched, leaving the stone no worse for wear. Issitoq sagged in relief. Other Observants in the room were wailing. Some were weeping, giant, fat tears falling from their eyes. One moaned that this was the end of the Observants.

"Quiet!" shouted Issitoq, sharply. He was soothed, somewhat, to see that his orders were followed promptly. "This isn't the end! Clockwork has only," only, he said, as if this weren't a disaster, "managed to drive himself mad. He's like a toddler, throwing a tantrum because we took away his favorite toy. We will go to Long Now, and cure him, as we have done before," once before, and when he had begged them to do so, "and all will be as it has been."
A young woman in a dress that instantly put Sam in mind of pilgrims floated from Youngblood's ship to the Elysian ship. She landed lightly on the deck, and curtsied. Her eyes were almost human, but there was no distinction between her iris and her pupils. They were both entirely black. Her skin was oddly pink.

“Hello,” she said, “I'm Baneberry Ergotsdaughter of the advocacy firm of Ergot and Daughters. I'm representing a Miss Star Thunder, of Amity Park. I believe she's on board?”

“And if she is?” asked the ship's captain.

“Then I am the first to find you, and my firm's missing clients,” said Baneberry, “and that I didn't charter this ship for nothing.” She gestured behind her. “There aren't a lot of people who will sail out here. It's too close to the Grinder, apparently.”

“What did you pay Youngblood with?” asked Sam, curiously.

“She paid me with bedtime stories for the brat,” said Ember, touching down next to Baneberry. “She can't see him. I have to babysit him, anyway. Hey goth girl, geek.”

Sam was fairly certain that Ember had to do nothing of the sort. It wasn't like there was anyone out there to make her babysit Youngblood.

“Hi, Ember,” said Sam. “Where's Youngblood now?”

“Oh, back there, somewhere. He's halfway decided that he wants to be a witch next.”

Baneberry's smile looked forced. “He shouldn't,” she said.

“Anyway,” said Ember, “we're going to take you all back to Elysium, and then on to Libra.”

“Ah, not quite that quickly, I think,” said Baneberry. “I don't think they've quite finished building the facilities for the humans yet. But soon, definitely.” She nodded decisively. “Now, I really must see my client. If you would?” She nodded at a nearby hatch.

“We'll send someone down to get her,” said the captain.

“Please do.”

“Hey,” said Ember, “so where's the dipstick? I thought he'd be out here, acting all protective in case we decided to attack or whatever.”

“You've done that before,” said Sam.

“Yeah, sure, I didn't mean that it was a bad thing, or whatever. But where is he? He didn't get himself beat up again, did he?”

To Sam's right, Tucker failed to stifle a snort.

“Ancients,” said Ember. “Well, I didn't get him a 'get well' card this time, so he's gonna have to suck it up. You know, his guy, that Hemlock dude, is really freaking out.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. But he isn't here.”
“Well, yeah, he's not here. Youngblood and I were only going to take one advocate aboard, and it wasn't going to be some weirdo old guy.”

“She means that Danny isn't here,” said Tucker. “He got seriously hurt, and Pandora, Ellie and some others took him on to Mattingly.”

“Mattingly? Where's that?”

“It's where Dora's from,” said Sam.

“Oh, yeah. That's pretty out of the way from here, isn't it? Why there?”

Sam and Tucker shrugged.

Ember rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, I get it, not my business. Whatever. Let's get a march on, and get everyone over.”

Danny hadn't figured out a better way to get rid of the weapons.

It wasn't that he hadn't been trying, but all he could come up with was variations on 'throw it really hard into the void of the Ghost Zone and hope Inanna doesn't notice.' That wasn't a plan. That was an absence of a plan, especially since if (when) Inanna did see one of the weapons sailing away through green-tinted space, she'd lose whatever little trust she had in Danny, and Danny would lose his one advantage in this situation.

In his defense, Danny had been distracted.

The primary distraction was the crown phased into his torso. It wasn't hot, like the Amulet of Mattingly had been, and it didn't really hurt, but it was... It was... Danny had a hard time describing it. It definitely had a flavor, just not a real one, not something humans would recognize, not something they could recognize. For some reason, it made Danny think that the crown had something to do with portals.

The other distraction was Inanna complaining about losing the crown, how it was going to be difficult for her to get back, and the disloyalty of people who had no reason to be loyal to her in the first place. It was annoying. It was more annoying because it was all in Sumerian, which wasn't Danny's best language, so he had to pay close attention so he could nod in appropriate places and answer her rhetorical questions. He had a feeling that screwing up and saying 'yes' when she wanted a 'no,' or vice versa, would be unpleasant.

So, when they got to the blue gate, Danny had no choice but to shove whatever he grabbed next into himself as well. He really hoped it wouldn't react badly with the crown.

The blue gate looked much like the violet one, except the stone in its arch was blue, not purple, and someone had made an abortive attempt at painting it with blue daub. Inanna curled her lip at it.

“No keeper for this gate?”

“No, great lady. I am the only one who tends these gates.”
“Hm. You first.”

Danny nodded. “Yes, great lady.”

Danny had to phase the blue beads off of Inanna's neck before he phased them into himself. It was tricky, but not impossible.

That done, he hovered at Inanna's elbow, hoping she wouldn't notice how Danny was radiating energy. Or how he once again came out of the portal after her.

Maybe he wasn't as conspicuous as he thought..?

Inanna inhaled sharply when she noticed her beads were missing, her hands feeling all over her neck, and her eyes casting around wildly. She seemed much more upset about losing the beads than losing the crown. Maybe it was because it was the second weapon she had lost, maybe it was because of what the beads did.

Because Danny was now entirely sure the blue beads were what had given Inanna the bulk of her mind-control powers. Because that *was* 'had,' past tense. Now that they were in Danny, they weren't working anymore.

“Gatekeeper,” said Inanna, sharply, more sharply than before. “How often is it that your gates steal things from your betters?”

“I- Not often, not often, great lady. I do swear. But not many come through them, and I am not in command of what they do, great lady, please. It is sheerest chance. Surely, you have traveled far and wide, and know how portals are. They are like goats, great lady, always doing as they please.”

Inanna's gaze was suspicious. “Should you betray me, gatekeeper, I shall ensure that you will wish that I merely destroyed you.”

Yes, Inanna was very aware that she had lost her ability to control others. She thought she had lost her ability to control Danny, but she had never had it. She was overcompensating with threats.

The threats were more than enough. Danny shrunk away from her, every line of his body screaming, *don't kill me."

“Where is the next portal?”

_Left,* whispered Ereshkigal, *and up.*

“There,” said Danny, pointing, not bothering to find the gate with his own eyes, blindly trusting the Core's directions.

Inanna glared regally in that direction. “I see it,” she announced. “Lead on.”

Danny nodded, and started off.

More to the left, little gatekeeper.
Danny adjusted his course. They were flying towards the Core, he noticed, and the air was starting to feel sharp on his skin, the not-gravity of the Core tugging on his component ectoplasm.

_Hush, now, you are not nearly close enough for that._

What about the lion?!

_Already fading, and more than happy to have his core join me, here, at the center of all things. He despised Inanna, and wished for his end to inconvenience her, if he could do nothing else._

Well, that was somewhat comforting. Still, he wasn't ready to abandon his individuality for cosmic oneness, he liked being himself, and people would miss him.

Something like a curious hum curled around the edges of his mind, and Danny had the feeling that the Core was looking through his thoughts and memories. He hoped she didn't think he was crazy.

_Not at all, little love. But you had best keep an eye on the witch-queen. She does hate being ignored._

Danny turned to look at Inanna, apprehensive. She hadn't seemed to notice his inattention. Yet.

He hoped the Ancients were on their way. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. He had already been in a bad way before being thrown into the past, what with Dan... and recovering from the amulet... and the Tower... and everything else.

_Brave little Neti. You have endured much, but stay steady. We watch you, always, but we must be silent now, reach farther..._

The presence in the back of his mind faded.

Well, heck. Hecking heck.

Danny looked back over his shoulder, at Inanna, and smiled nervously. She'd stopped talking. “It isn't much farther to the next gate, great lady.”

“I have eyes.”

Danny swallowed, and fixed his gaze forward again. Oh, this was scary. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be far, far away from this woman. He wanted to pull her weapons out of himself. He wanted his friends. He wanted Clockwork. He wanted his sister. He wanted his parents. He wanted his lair. He wanted Amity Park. He wanted to cry. Not necessarily in that order.

It wasn't that he didn't want to save the world. Again. He wanted the world to be safe. He needed the world to be safe. It had all his favorite people in it. He just would like it if someone else saved it for once. He needed a break. It just wasn't fair, that, after everything else, he had to get sucked into the past to deal with an issue thousands of years old. It could have waited! Time travel was involved!

The cyan gate was approaching. Rather, they were approaching the cyan gate. It was really the same, in the Zone, excepting air resistance.

Danny licked his lips. Was it this gate or the next that had an _actual_ toll? Or both?

He should have asked Lady Ereshkigal when he had the chance.
Good news! It wasn't the cyan gate, and Danny had been able to snag the other necklace and stuff it into his rapidly-filling chest. He wasn't sure how he'd take care of, say, the breastplate, but that was a problem, for, well, later. Hopefully.

Bad news, it turned out that Ereshkigal had 'stepped away' so she could call up an army.

Or was it good news? It would distract Inanna, and slow her down, it was doing so already, as she surveyed the little army down her nose. But that little army would be dust and more dust by the time Inanna was through with them. Well. Scattered ectoplasm and more ectoplasm.

Their afterlives would be over, in any case.

Danny twitched, an aborted reflex to stop this from happening.

*But happen it must, gatekeeper, said the Core, coldly. We need more time. Do not interfere. Stay back. Stay safe. You are important, here.*

The words sat heavy in Danny's mind. He wanted to stop this.

*More will perish if you do. They have chosen this. They know they will come to their ends. Let them make their choices.*

Danny looked up. Bright banners snapped and flared, pinks and pale blues. A woman with deep lines in her green face and mist-woven hair sat on a clouded leopard. Two younger-looking ghosts stood to either side of her, mounted on scaled and winged horses. One of them carried an abacus. Behind them, was a forest of spears, held by ghosts not quite so clearly defined. Danny thought he spotted bows and arrows behind the spears, but he wasn't sure.

*Bilulu, her sons, and the other people of the Counted Desert.*

Danny thought he *might* have heard of Bilulu, somewhere, but definitely not the 'Counted Desert.*' He supposed he shouldn't be surprised.

The Core prodded him back, and he pressed against the solid brick side of the gate, then crept around so he was behind it, with it between him and the incipient fight.

The army let out a scream. Bright green ectoblasts converged on Inanna from the army, followed by a rain of arrows.

Both parted around Inanna, like a river around a stone.

She gestured with her left hand, the one with the bracelet, and yellow-red fire streamed from her fingertips. She raised her rod, and a constant ghost ray shot from its tip, followed by wreathes of lightning. She looked almost bored.

Then she began to advance.
Chapter 171

Chapter Notes

Hello. Just to make sure everyone knows, last week I posted two chapters because I posted a chapter out of order. If you didn't read two chapters last week, you should go back and make sure you read chapter 169.

Chapter 171: Heroic Deeds

Danny couldn't bear to watch after Inanna began her glide forward. Not when he knew what would happen.

He couldn't bear to watch, but at the same time, he had to. These people, in his time, their sacrifice, their act, so much more heroic than what he had done and what he was doing, had been all but forgotten. Someone should remember.

What you are doing is plenty heroic. You had no more expectation of survival then they, at the beginning, and you are but a child.

Danny peered out from around the side of the portal's frame, and ducked whenever an ectoblast, fireball, or arrow came his way. He got his fingers singed, and a few strands of his hair. The battle was like a storm, with Inanna as the fiery, star-bright eye. Ectoplasm of ending ghosts streamed away, towards the Core.

Inanna would see that, surely. She wasn't stupid. She would know it for what it was.

… She hadn't, with the lion.

But that was just one ghost.

She may notice, but she will not know what it means. You will lie, and misdirect, and grovel, if you must, and she will be none the wiser. For a time. This is necessary.

But, why?

Watch.

Danny watched.

There were a lot of Observants. Dan, admittedly hadn't realized how many. In his timeline, he had just collapsed their giant stupid building, and assumed that had taken care of them. According to Nephthys it hadn't.
Dan wasn't so sure he believed her. She didn't have Clockwork's ability to see through time, and she
had reason to lie to him. Many reasons. They weren't exactly friends.

He wasn't sure he wanted what she was trying to sell to him, either. Change. Part of him thought it
sounded nice, but, really, how much could a thing like him change, anyway? Lethean waters,
tinctures of Nepenthe, or no?

Did he want to change?

What had been, it wasn't pleasant, not beyond the detached, intellectual challenge, but it had been...
safe was probably the wrong word.

Eyeballs were surprisingly satisfying to pop. Or perhaps not so surprisingly. He despised the
Observants. They had killed everyone he cared about. Almost.

(And Dan would have done the rest.)

(And he didn't want to be like that anymore.)

There was an odd shriek behind him, and Dan turned. He had been focusing too hard on this side of
Long Now. He flew around the lair, not trusting it enough to go through it, not with Clockwork out
of his meddling little mind.

This was, evidently the correct choice, because the scream had been Observants being impaled,
skewered, really, with giant, filigree minute and hour hands.

It was... interesting to know that Long Now would fight the Observants.

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Tucker squished a ball of wax between his fingers, and stuffed it into his left ear. It wasn't
the best makeshift earplug, but it wasn't the worst, and if Tucker didn't want to be deaf by the time he
was sixty, he needed ear protection. At least, that was what his mom always said about concerts.

The thing about Ember? She liked concerts. A lot. They weren't technically the focus of her
Obsessions, but they were part of them, and they were how she fulfilled them. A big part.

She was already starting one up on the top deck, happy to have a captive audience. The soldiers, and
about half the crew, had come with the students. The rest of the crew was staying with their original
ship. They didn't want to leave it behind.

The captain had said something really weird about the ship eventually growing back. Well, Tucker
would have thought it was weird, except that... Well, everything. Sometimes Tucker had a hard time
shaking a 'normal earthling' perspective.

(Other times, it just fell right off.)

To his right, Sam, looking as bored, set the candle back into its holder, and separated her own glob
of wax into two parts. Jazz was interviewing one of Youngblood's thralls near the stern. At least,
Tucker thought it was a thrall. Tucker knew there were some actual ghosts in Youngblood's crew,
other than Bones, but he wasn't sure which they were. He'd never really hung out with Youngblood.
At all. He'd rarely even directly fought Youngblood.

Sam sighed deeply, loudly enough for Tucker to hear.

"Yep," said Tucker, his voice raised. "I know this isn't ideal, but aren't you-?"

"Are you kidding? I'm just relieved to be on a ship with people we can sort of trust. That was my relief sigh, not my annoyance sigh."

"Oh. Okay, yeah, I get it. Yeah. I guess I'm pretty drained, too."

"Yep."

Mr. Lancer dropped down next to Tucker, right on the deck.

"I can't believe everything that's happened," said the teacher. "I keep thinking about it, but nothing makes sense." He leaned back. "It hasn't all caught up with me yet." He sighed. "Will it?"

"I mean, maybe?" said Tucker. "I'm not sure it's all caught up to me yet." He bounced his PDA back and forth between his thumb and fingers. "My battery is dead."

"Weren't you able to charge it with your hands now, or something?" asked Sam.

"I'm trying that. It's possible I might have cooked the batteries. Or I'm just tired. Just... everything catching up to me."

"It really isn't abuse, is it?" asked Mr. Lancer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Daniel, and his parents. It isn't abuse, is it?"

"I mean, Danny never thought of it that way? If anything, I guess it would be neglect." Sam shrugged. "Do you want some wax for your ears?"

"For my..?"

"This is going to get loud. It's already getting loud."

"Oh, sure."

Sam handed Mr. Lancer the candle. "You see, they really didn't ever know. I think that should count for something. Is that really all you wanted to know?"

"Of course not. That's just... That's the most pressing bit." He swallowed. "There are so many ghosts."

"Yep," said Tucker.

"These aren't called the Infinite Realms for nothing."

Mr. Lancer was silent for a moment. "Do you think that Shakespeare is here, somewhere?"

"We met him once," said Tucker.

"You're joking."
"No, no," said Sam, "this was around the end of last year. You made that joke about how if someone brought you a signed copy of one of Shakespeare's plays, you'd give them an A?"

"I suppose. I make that joke with all my sophomores. But Danny did fine, if I recall correctly. He got a B. Didn't he?"

"Oh, yeah. But he was convinced that he was going to fail. He'd had another falling out with Ghostwriter, who tutors him, and he gets, uh. Test anxiety."

"Sure, call it that," said Tucker. "So, one weekend we went on a Shakespeare hunting expedition. We even got him to sign a play. It's under the floor in Danny's room."

"I thought it was in the wall?"

"It isn't in either," interjected Jazz, who had come back from her 'interview' with the skeletal ghost without anyone noticing. "It's on the bookshelf in my room. He gave it to me for my birthday." She shrugged. "I thought it was interesting."

"No, we know about that one, we're talking about the other one. Danny got two, since he thought you might like one."

"Okay," said Tucker. "Anyway, it turns out that Shakespeare is still doing plays over in Logres-Prydain, which is kinda like fantasy Britain. But, cool fantasy Britain."

"Isn't there another one called Albion?" asked Jazz.

"Yeah, but we've never been there, so that's uncool fantasy Britain. There are a few, I think. For really old countries like that, there are sometimes a bunch of different versions hanging out here in the Zone..." He trailed off when he saw how overwhelmed Mr. Lancer looked.

"Thing is," said Sam, taking over, "once we had the thing, we kind of realized how stupid it was. I mean, how were we going to explain that to you?"

"I don't know. I think I might have liked to hear you try."

"Danny will probably give it to you, once we all get back, if it makes you feel better," said Tucker. Mr. Lancer sat up slightly straighter. "I think it might. How did he manage to, um, get his grades up if they were so bad?"

Jazz rolled her eyes while Sam answered. "Well, first off, they weren't, but secondly, he made up with Ghostwriter."

"Ah," said Mr. Lancer.

"Was there anything else you wanted to ask about?" asked Tucker. "I mean, we can't have the whole," he waved his hands, "thing right now. Not with that about to start," he gestured to the stage on the other side of the boat, which had formed straight from the ethereal mists of the Zone (Ember could do impressive things, sometimes). "But if there's something..."

"I think what he's trying to say, is that you probably weren't looking for an explanation about Danny's academic weirdness," supplied Jazz.

"No," said Mr. Lancer. "Jasmine, I've had some time to think about this trial, with your parents, and I was, well." He paused, looking up at Jazz. "What are you going to do?"
"What do you mean?" asked Jazz.

"It's just that," Mr. Lancer gestured helplessly in the air, "between everything, I think even a human court would find your parents guilty of something." He looked at Sam. "Neglect, at the least. If they had all the facts. It was my understanding that ghosts look on these things even more harshly. I don't know what that means for you or Danny. To Kill a Mockingbird, I don't know what it means for any of us."

Jazz hesitated. "Well, that's sort of complicated, and-

Ember's concert started. It was, as Tucker had predicted, loud. But, dang, Ember could play.

"- I think that's going to have to wait for later," Jazz shouted at the top of her lungs, hands over her ears. She hadn't put any wax in.

Mr. Lancer nodded in miserable agreement.

Tucker wondered if Ember had this song on an album, and if copies were for sale.

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Danny could feel Inanna coming closer. She smelled of ash, hot metal, and burning ectoplasm.

With the end of the battle, he had stopped watching, and started cowering. If he hadn't already been utterly terrified of Inanna, that would have convinced him to be. Definitively.

He had, however, seen what Lady Ereshkigal had wanted him to see, the reason she had called so many ghosts to their end.

Bilulu and her sons were powerful, very much so, although he hadn't been able to quite tell which powers belonged to which ghost at this distance. They seemed to have multiplication and heat abilities, along with some very strong shields. At least one of them was a strong telekinetic, and focused enough to use the ability in battle. He thought one of them might have raised an illusion. Their steeds were strong and nimble, clever fliers.

The battle was still terribly one sided.

But-

But!

Inanna's breastplate had been damaged, her dress had been torn. Just a little, where the first fastened at the shoulder. Considering the power invested in each artifact, they would repair themselves with time.

*But you won't give them that time, will you?* the Core purred.

Danny wasn't intending to do so, no.

But Inanna was scary, so he was hiding. She would expect him to hide, anyway. She would expect him to be scared. Wouldn't she?
Danny pressed himself closer to the brick. Inanna rounded the gate.

"Get up," she demanded. Then, in a very slightly less harsh tone, "I will not harm you, for as long as you are loyal, and honest, and you shall be rewarded according to your deeds."

No comfort there. Danny peeled himself away from the gate, and Inanna nodded in approval.

"Take me to the next one."
“Go,” said Inanna.

“I cannot, great lady,” tried Danny. Again. He was wondering if he was pronouncing something wrong. “This gate has a toll. Look.” He gestured at the anemic, sputtering portal framed by the gate’s arch. “Not even I could go through that, as it is, small as I am.”

“I see that,” said Inanna, sharply, through gritted teeth, “and so you have said. I say to you: pay it, and go through.”

“Great lady, if I were to do that, you could not follow.”

Perhaps if they had been farther from the Core, or if Inanna hadn’t been demanding answers about why the destroyed ghosts' ectoplasm had all streamed one way, or if the Core wasn't urging him on, Danny would have been just fine with that. Sadly...

“Do you mean to say that you may pay this toll, and I cannot?” The way Inanna stressed the ‘you’ and ‘I,’ and the Sumerian words she used for them, denoted the relative positions and power of Inanna and Danny- or at least the way Inanna perceived them.

Danny thought she wasn't that far off.

“Not at all, great lady,” said Danny, trying to be diplomatic, “but the toll here is one of power, of magic. It is of the body and blood of my race, of us in the great below. You are of the race of heaven, great lady, and your power, while greater, surely, does it not have its differences? I am not a wise man, nor am I very learned. I beg you, if I am wrong in this, forgive me. I only thought to speed you on your way.”

“As you should,” said Inanna, somewhat mollified.

Danny was only beginning to pick up her moods behind all her power. The later had at first blinded his less-than-fully-recovered supernatural senses. He was glad they were working at all, given all the strain he'd been under since his core was first damaged; he needed all the advantages he could muster.

“Now, show me how this 'toll' works.”

Danny nodded. This would be unpleasant. How unpleasant, he wasn't sure. He'd never done this before. He floated to the gem set above the gate. This one was dull green. After a split second of hesitation, he put his left hand on the stone, and felt around the edge.

He found the sharp ridge quickly, slicing open two of his fingers. He hissed. It was sharp enough to cut, but not so sharp that it didn't hurt. He felt ectoplasm, drip from the wounds for a moment, then the green stone brightened as it drank the ectoplasm, and, with it, a portion of Danny's energy. The
portal grew. He took his hand away, and, only a heartbeat later, it flickered, and shrunk again.

“This is the least stable portal on this path,” explained Danny. “It must be fed, to make it usable.”

Inanna clicked her tongue. “Stand aside.”

Danny floated to the side. Inanna approached, and tapped the gem with her rod. The gem flashed, and the portal grew again.

She smiled proudly. “Learn from this,” she said. “There is nothing in the lands above or the great below that is impossible for me. When I say something shall be done, it is done. When I say to the wind to blow, so it does, when I say to the mountains to move, so they do. When I say to a gateway to open, it shall. Now, I say to you: go, and do not think to flee.”

Danny nodded, and ducked through the gate. The ride was even rougher than the gates before, Danny felt like he was a ball in an uneven tube, bouncing and scraping off the walls.

He caught on one part of the tunnel, and held on tight. He waited, and waited, until Inanna bounced by, just as undignified as he had been. His fingers caught on the breastplate, and he smoothly phased it off. With the damage it had suffered earlier, he was able to collapse it enough to squeeze it into himself.

He was getting full.

It took him a few minutes to catch up to Inanna again, but he managed to eel past her. When he finally emerged from the other end of the green gate, he felt beaten, sore, and scraped raw, even though there weren't any new marks on his skin.

He sighed, and looked for the next gate, the yellow gate, while he waited for Inanna to come out. It was nearby, easily visible, the distance between them shorter than for the others. That was good. Interestingly, it was also upside-down with respect to the orientation of the green gate. He tilted his head. It felt weird, but didn't really matter, just like in space in the material world, 'up' and 'down' were local concepts in the Infinite Realms

*The bracelet next.*

Ereshkigal's voice was faint. He was farther away from the Core, now. He nodded in agreement, even if he didn't understand why the bracelet was more important than the lapis rod.

*It is easier. You will have to take the dress as well, eventually.*

The last was tinted with amusement, and Danny cringed, embarrassed. Danny didn't really want to take Inanna's dress. He was fairly certain she wasn't wearing anything underneath. He was well aware of the tactical and practical considerations, of the need to get rid of all Inanna's weapons, and he wasn't about to ignore that, or let his culture's nudity taboos get in the way.

Inanna tumbled out of the portal. Danny waited quietly while she regained her bearings, and then as she discovered that her breastplate was missing.

Was it just him, or did he detect some fear behind her annoyance? Regardless, she covered it up well. She was also much more suspicious. It was, Danny supposed, too much to hope that she was so careless, or gullible that she would trust him without question.

“We are more than halfway there, great lady,” said Danny, hoping to appease her somewhat. “There
are only three more gates, and then we will be as close to the Core as one such as myself can go.” Danny could hardly believe it himself. He had four artifacts, four weapons of unbelievable power, inside him. His torso was actually rather crowded. He would need to find a different place to hide the next one.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, great lady.”

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The ‘flavors’ of the four artifacts were swirling uneasily inside Danny by the time he and Inanna got to the yellow gate. Or were they colors? He might have been getting a little overwhelmed. A little. The wisps overloading him, and the effects of the amulet might have been good practice for this.

Which made Danny wonder, was everything that happened to him truly a matter of chance, of coincidence, and bad luck, or was there some kind of design in there? A plan, a hand of fate?

Well, that last would most likely be Clockwork. So... Maybe? Maybe not?

Probably not. If Clockwork had actively planned for this, he probably would have made sure Danny was more prepared. Because one thing he wasn't, was prepared.

*You are doing fine, little love.*

“Is there any special thing wrong with this portal?” asked Inanna as they drew close.

Danny looked at her, quizzically. “No, great lady. It is just like the first one. It, ah-”

There was a prod on his mind.

“It is just a little more... hungry, I suppose? It, um, I have noticed that I lose more things when I go through here.”

Inanna made a sour face.

“I will go through first, this time,” she decided, and immediately matched her actions to her words.

Danny dove after her, and streamlined himself to keep up with her. He kicked off his boots. They'd dissolve away from his body. He thought he understood what Ereshkigal had wanted him to do, by telling Inanna that this portal was greedy, and it was a good idea. It would be better to show her that he had lost something, too, that it wasn't just her things.

But he still had to take the bracelet from her, before they got to the other end of the portal. He reached out, just far enough to touch her trailing hand. He willed himself to go faster, and, at last, his fingertip brushed the gold bracelet, and he phased it off. He almost fumbled it, but he caught it, and phased it into his thigh. It only just fit, and it felt odd when he flexed his muscles. It was also hot, like the Amulet of Mattingly had been.

They came out of the portal. As before, Inanna took a few minutes to recover from the journey, then she noticed that her bracelet was gone.
Danny thought she had been angry before. He was wrong. She was angry now. She was furious. It burned within her, and it was strange, so strange, to see that kind of incandescent anger and no brightening aura, no flaring eyes, no fangs, no claws, no warping of the air with power, no flicker of ice, or fire, or swirl of ectoplasm. It wasn't that he had never seen humans get angry before, but this was the wrong context. Inanna had too much power, and, despite himself, despite what he knew, intellectually, emotionally, he read the sorceress more as a ghost, than a human.

Inanna was about to turn that anger on Danny. She had her rod raised up, pointed at him, her eyebrows drawn down, into a deep scowl, and her lips drawn back in a snarl.

Then she saw his feet. She hesitated, pressed her lips together, and lowered the rod.

“When I rule this country, I shall have these wretched things destroyed and replaced,” she announced. “This is no way for a civilized person to travel.”

Getting the rod would be tricky. Inanna had a direct hold on it, and it tended to be just slightly harder to phase things out of someone's grasp than off of their bodies. People had more attention on things they were holding than things they were wearing. Normally, Danny wouldn't worry about it, the effect was negligible, barely noticeable. But Inanna was an outlier.

Danny was worried. Maybe it would be better to go for the dress first, even if he didn't want to.

No, this is the best place to take the rod.

Okay, but why?

The orange gate, as you think of it, is associated with lightning. The stone it uses was mined from the Mirror Mounts of Lei, which lie beneath the Great Storm That Has No End. Thus far, you have chosen the best order. The most auspicious, some might say. Your instincts are good, little gatekeeper.

And the rod generated lightning. He wasn't sure how the orange stone's origin would help, exactly. He wasn't entirely sure how the stones in the gates were connected to the portals themselves. Maybe the stone would absorb the lightning, if Inanna chose to use the rod?

They got to the gate. Inanna once again went first, this time without warning. Danny wondered, did she think that the order she went in would change whether or not she lost something? Did she think he had something to do with it? She must suspect that last, at least. She wasn't stupid.

Danny once again dove after her, as quickly as he could. She had more of a lead on him than before. He would be hard pressed to catch her. Still, he grew, closer, closer, his hands were almost on the rod, just one more reach and-

-and they tumbled out of the portal. But Danny was too close, too committed, his hand closed reflexively around the rod, and the difference between his momentum and Inanna's ripped it out of her hand. Danny spun end over end, stopped himself, and, before Inanna had finished gasping, he rocketed back through the orange gate.

He came out of the portal at speed, and turned around again, just in time to see Inanna emerge.
skirted her grab, she was too disoriented from the portal to catch him, and went back through.

This time, he managed to stick the rod into his leg, phasing it into his femur. He came out of the portal, found the next one, the last one, and flew towards it, putting on as much speed as he could.

The red gate, the last of the Tantric Gates, hung in front of him, impossible to miss. It would be impossible for Inanna to miss, too. He'd have to use it to get the dress off of her, and then hope there was something near its other end that he could hide in, or behind. There was nothing near either end of the orange gate.

Danny looked over his shoulder. Inanna was just coming out of the orange gate, and she was mad. Her face was blank, but Danny knew she was mad, he could feel it. He kept flying. He had to get to the red gate before Inanna. To do otherwise would be death, he was sure of it.

He had to get there, he had to get there, he had to get there, oh, Ancients, he could feel her getting closer. He was so close, but so was she. Desperation let him put on another burst of speed.

He almost made it.

Almost.

Inanna collided with him when he was a hair's breadth away from the portal, and they tumbled through, tangled with each other.

This wasn't what he had planned, but Danny's plans often (always) fell apart, so he usually was not particularly attached to them. He took advantages and disadvantages as they came, and did the best with what he had.

What he had right now was several handfuls of a loose, flowy dress that was largely attached to a very angry person who had conquered several countries and could do magic. He shoved as much of it as possible into himself, sometimes pushing it through the other artifacts. That would probably come back to bite him later. But for right now, he was only focused on getting Inanna's dress off of her.

Okay, that sounded wrong.

The dress tore at Inanna's shoulder, where the fight with Bilulu had put a rip in it. Danny tugged harder, evading Inanna's grasping, but confused, hands. He put out his feet, and sunk his toes into the 'edge' of portal's 'tunnel.'

Inanna, still at the mercy of the portal's current, was swept on, her dress still in Danny's grasp. He tried to push the rest of the dress into him, but lost his uncertain grip on the side of the portal. He fell out of the portal, only to be seized by Inanna.

She held him up by the neck, and looked him up and down.

No, she had grabbed his neck, but she was hanging by it, not holding him up. He was holding her up. She was no longer flying under her own power. She was falling, using Danny and various mental tricks to stay in place.

Danny immediately stopped flying, turning himself into dead weight, not wanting to give Inanna any help. He succeeded in dropping down a few feet, but Inanna quickly compensated. She then grabbed an edge of the dress Danny hadn't been able to get inside himself, and pulled. Danny shrieked, his scream edging into the inhuman harmonics of his Ghostly Wail. He wasn't strong enough to pull that attack off, however, especially not past the pressure of Inanna's hand. It didn't even make Inanna
wince.

The scrap of dress tore, but the majority of it stayed in Danny. Inanna stared at the scrap of cloth in her hand as it disintegrated, then returned her attention to Danny. She shook him, hard, and shouted something incomprehensible.

Well, it probably would have been perfectly understandable to a native speaker of Sumerian, but Danny wasn't one of those. He just wasn't good enough at Sumerian to keep track of what she was saying under these circumstances.

It didn't really matter. It was probably all curses and threats anyway.

She shook him again.

“Traitor! Where is the Core?” she demanded, harshly.

Danny, naturally, knew exactly where the Core was. Just as naturally, Danny pointed in the exact opposite direction.

“Now, what should I do with you, little traitor? Hm? I have a special death already playing in my head.”

Danny twitched his head minutely. He wasn't going to beg. What was the point?

At least, that was Danny's intention. The Core had other ideas. They were close enough here for it (for her?) to reach out, and not just touch Danny's core, but hold it, envelop it, as it had done when he fought the GIW and fell too close. This time, it was gentler about it, but it was no less thorough.

Danny was already struggling, but his motions grew more desperate. He began to shake. He began to cry.

“Don't-” said the Core with Danny's mouth. “Don't- Please, don't. Don't take me to the Core. Anything else. Anything, please, but that end-” he choked as Inanna tightened her hand.

She had looked surprised for a split second, and then intrigued. Danny knew what a person revising plans looked like, and that's what Inanna was doing. She was changing her mind, changing how she wanted to kill him.

Her smile was nothing but cruel.

“I had heard things about how most of your race is too weak to even approach the throne of your own country. You were not my first traitorous guide, and, oh, how they all whimpered and complained, and made excuses, that, oh, no, they could not go near, lest they be boiled away into steam and mist. Perhaps you shall be dissolved, and I shall have my mes back after all.” Inanna drew Danny towards her, so their faces were close. “And did you think that I was fooled by your little lie? My eyes are sharper than the desert hawk's, my ears more discerning than the hare's. I know the Core does not lie where you point, that Ereshkigal, my sister-queen, does not wait for me in that direction. No, I see the way you move, I see the direction you fear me to take, and that is the way we shall go.”

With that, they began to fall towards the Core.
Chapter 173: The Brier Patch

It was like falling into a cloud, if the cloud was also a comforting embrace. The Core was cushioning
his shock. She was still controlling him, making him thrash, and cry, and struggle. She was having
Danny put on a very nice brier patching act.

She wanted Inanna to go this way. She wanted Inanna to go to her.

That meant the Ancients must be on their way. They might even already be there, setting up an
ambush. Danny was relieved.

He was relieved, also, that Inanna wouldn't be torturing him to death. Being overwhelmed by the
will of the Core, losing his sense of self, and dissolving into his constituent ectoplasm might not be a
particularly pleasant way to go, but what was? Besides, he might be able to hang on for longer than
he expected. He'd gotten closer to the Core than most ghosts were able to when he was fighting the
GIW. His half-human nature gave him an advantage, there.

Even if he didn't, even if that wasn't enough for him to survive, he should look on the bright side.
He'd succeeded in delaying Inanna! He'd saved the Infinite Realms from a foreign dictator! Further
delay could only help the Ancients, so he should fight as hard as he could.

Maybe Inanna would even get bored with him, and leave him somewhere far enough from the Core
that he could fly out. Maybe if he bit her hard enough, she'd drop him.

(He wanted to go home.)

The Core ran what felt like a calming finger down the back of Danny's mind. It could have only
been mercy, a kindness, on the Core's part. A hysterical Danny, a truly hysterical Danny, which he
was well on his way to becoming, would have helped convince and distract Inanna, without the side
effect of distracting the Core as well.

He really hoped he wasn't distracting the Core. He hoped he wasn't wasting her power.

Nonsense.

Ereshkigal's voice was sharp, clear, and clipped. It was also oddly smug. Pleased.

Danny supposed she should be pleased. Everything was going to plan.

They grew closer to the Core, and closer. The air around them was bright and thick with energized
ectoplasm. There wasn't a lot of oxygen here. Even taking Inanna's continued grip on his throat into
account, Danny was having trouble breathing.

It was strange. He felt so strange. His human mind was running laps in panic, and his ghostly one
was icy calm in Ereshkigal's metaphorical hands.

They were getting closer.

(Were they there yet?)

Reality rippled. Pulsed. Green light so bright it was nearly white parted like a curtain.

This... This was an illusion. There was little else it could be.

No, it could be real. It could be a setting, a structure, brought into being by the will of the Core. An ectoplasmic construct, like one of Vlad's swords or hammers, or Danny's shields, but on a grand scale. A lot of the Realms were made mostly of ectoplasm anyway, they just held themselves together. This, the Core had to be holding it together actively, otherwise, the sheer pressure and energy of this place would have blown it apart. Holding it together was a massive feat of power.

It would be easier if it was only in his head, if it was only his mind's way of coping with an unbearable reality, with something he couldn't process. It would be easier if it was an idea the Core had inserted, a way to let him know what was going on, even though he normally wouldn't be able to interpret it.

It was a throne room. More accurately, it was a throne hall. It was long, and straight, with columns on either side. All the stone was white, with shiny black, green, and crystal clear traceries on the walls. They were almost abstract, and Danny longed to turn his head to study them more closely. A long, dark, soft carpet lay on the floor, leading to the dais and throne at the end of the hall. The throne was glassy, clear, and shot through with threads of black and green, and draped with a shroud.

The throne was also occupied.

A woman sat there, one hand resting on the arm of the throne, the other supporting her chin, her legs crossed. She wore a calf-length dress and a long black robe. Her hair was long, straight, and dark. She looked remarkably like Sam.

Danny's vision blurred. No. She looked more like Paulina, or Valerie. The woman blurred again. She looked like Jazz, or his mother. No, she did look like Sam.

Danny would have whimpered, if he had retained any ability to move. As it was, he couldn't even blink.

The woman, she was Ereshkigal, the Core, or at least her representation in this place.

Inanna strode forward, still dragging Danny.

“I have come to you to claim your throne, my sister-queen, by the laws of your own country,” she announced, “and by the right of conquest, which is the right of those with strength, and by divine right, which is mine by birth, as I am descendant of An, who encompasses the highest and outermost heaven.”

Ereshkigal seemed to consider this for a few moments.

“Tell us then, Inanna, daughter of Nanna and Ningal, tell us, how is it that you claim to come to us by the laws of this land?”

Inanna stopped, only a few steps from the throne, and inhaled deeply, through her nose. Her
shoulders were set back proudly, her chin tilted up.

(It occurred to Danny that he was seeing much more of the room than his field of vision would normally allow.)

“It is written that your rulers must do a great service for the land, and so I have, by bringing together all your scattered city-states beneath one flag. It is written that your rulers must gain favor or defeat the most ancient of your inhabitants, and so I have, by going to the deepest dark, and slaying the monsters I found there. It is written that your rulers must come to you, and ascend to the throne by their own power, and so I am here. I say, rise, and remove yourself, for where you sit is my place by all rights and rites. Make yourself at home at my feet, for I now have dominion over you, and you are part and portion of my domain.”

Ereshkigal's smile was as bitter as poison. She stood, impossibly graceful.

“Well then, Inanna, granddaughter of Ea, Ninkikurga, Enlil, and Ninlil, great-granddaughter of Enki, come, and take it, if you may.” She stepped to the side, her palms out in invitation.

Inanna's smile was victorious. She dropped Danny, carelessly, and quickly went up to the throne. Still smiling, she sank into it, and rubbed her hands on it. Ereshkigal watched dispassionately.

All at once, Inanna's smile fell, and she leaped up from the throne. She spun. “What is this?” she demanded. “By what trickery do you seek to keep me from what is mine?”

“Not by trickery,” said Ereshkigal, “by right. You have done us no great service. You think that the poor Realms you despoiled and ravaged are all there are? This dark country is enough to make all the lands beneath your stars seem small. Its precincts are infinite in number, its citizens countable in theory alone. Those places you put under your banner have torn it down, and burned it. And what great service is it that is a disservice to our children?” Ereshkigal gestured to Danny.

Inanna flicked her fingers in dismissal. “All your lands are under my banner now. I have conquered you. It is enough. You need no other service, save to be put in your place. The land serves the ruler.”

There was a sound like seven great doors opening and closing, and from between the pillars in the hall stepped seven figures.

Ereshkigal raised up her hands. “And may we present to you, our Anunnaki, our most Ancient of Ancients, this woman who would rule as Queen of All Ghosts. Does she have your approval?”

Clockwork- No, he didn't go by Clockwork in this day and age. He went by his Egyptian name. Heh. Lord Heh. Ancients, Danny had teased him about that, when he found out.

Lord Heh stepped forward, putting himself between Danny and Inanna. Lord Heh was... layered. Superimposed over himself. That was the best way for Danny to put it. One part of him, one layer, was exactly the same as Danny had always known Clockwork. Robe, hood, staff, watches, clocks, blue skin, shifting from age to age. The other layer was darker. More severe. Grimmer. Colder. Blue-gray skin carved with ancient astronomical symbols, a notched reed and ring in his hand. His eyes were black and bottomless.

“She does not have mine,” he said. His voice was like the sand that wears away mountains. Infinitely patient, and always victorious in the end.

Nephthys stepped forward. Her clothing was different than it usually was, more Egyptian, to match her name, but, otherwise, she looked the same. Except angrier.
“She does not have mine,” said Nephthys. The promise of calamity and cataclysm lurked behind every syllable. Danny reminded himself to use the proper Egyptian version of her name, Nebet-Het, not the Greek one she used in his time. He didn't want the promise in her voice to be turned against him.

The next Ancient glided forward. The edge of his robe whispering against Danny's skin. Danny thought it might be Nocturne, but he wasn't sure. His clothing was dark and full of stars, yes, but it was of a different cut, clinging to his too-lithe form, and another Ancient, who was yet to step forward, wore an open cloak with the same pattern. If it could be called a pattern. Neither of the two wore a mask, though this one had horns.

“She does not have mine,” said the Ancient that might one day become Nocturne.

A fourth Ancient, one who clearly would be comfortable in the Burning Lands and the City of Dis, should they exist in this day and age, came forward. Danny smelled smoke when the Ancient moved, and could see his clothes were woven of fire and brass. This would be Nergal, Ancient Master of Fire. He'd gotten himself ended in a dispute between the Burning Lands and the Lands of Ice, if Danny remembered correctly.

“She does not have mine,” said Nergal.

The fifth Ancient, the other one who wore stars, did not step forward. He merely appeared in front of the group, not having traveled the intervening distance. It was one of the smoothest, neatest, teleportations Danny had ever seen. So that Ancient had to be Nu, who would come to be called Sojourn. Around the time William the Conqueror was doing all his conquering, Sojourn had laid down the mantle of Ancient in order to travel. Then, some time in the 1300s, he'd disappeared, never to be seen again. The Digressed Tower's properties supposedly were derived from an artifact of Sojourn's.

“She does not,” said Nu, with just a little extra flair, “have mine.”

The next Ancient came forward. This one was a woman who was, in comparison to Inanna, almost nymph-like, thin, and graceful. Her hair was pulled back in waves, and tied with forget-me-nots and red Lethean blossoms. She held a thin tablet and stylus in her hands, and a roll of paper was pushed through her belt. She looked like she had been taking notes on the proceedings. She could be Nisaba, later called Mnemosyne, Ancient Master of Memory, Accounting, and History. She'd had a lot of other positions besides, including stewardship of the spring of the River Lethe. She'd faded peacefully, leaving her daughter, Memento, behind to pick up most of her tasks, an event that was still talked about in some circles of the Zone.

“She does not have mine,” said Nisaba, her voice as dry as paper.

“Nor,” said the final ghost, a woman clad in truly impressive-looking armor, “does she have mine.”

All the Ancients were now standing between Inanna and Danny. He wondered if that was on purpose, or just a side effect.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Inanna. “Who are you, to say whether or not you approve of me? Who are you to judge me?”

“These,” said Ereshkigal, “are our Anunnaki, our most Ancient of Ancients, our Masters of Truths Both Hidden and Apparent. These are Heh, Nephthys, Zaqar, Nergal, Nu, Nisaba, and Neith. And you have not faced them. You have not defeated them, for here they stand, to negate you.”
“They are defeated by my presence here. I have risen, and they have been unable to stop me. I say, I have completed all rites, and it is so.”

“Such hubris! You are here only because I allow it. My beloved Lord Heh, prophecy to this heretic what she might expect.”

Clockwork- Lord Heh- nodded gravely. “You will be struck down, and held up as an example of high foolishness. Your country will forget you, until you are remembered only as a myth, your deeds given to your peers, and slaves, and enemies. Here, you will be remembered and reviled, your name a curse. In both countries, your monuments will be desecrated. You shall be struck down. You shall be eaten, your powers consumed from your flesh. Should you go out, it will be as a shadow among the living, a shadow against your past, after the mourning has been done, and your husband has forgotten your embrace. You will die, a mortal, and be dead forever, never to rise as the Dead of this country. This is what you have won for yourself by your actions.”

Inanna laughed. “Who shall strike me down? None of your kin have stood against me and survived. You are weak, your flesh unsteady. Do not think that because you have sent a thief to steal my mes that you may stand against me. Stand back, and you may still be forgiven.”

Danny didn’t see what the Ancients did, but Inanna fell to the floor, and did not move. Ereshkigal stepped over the body, and sat in her throne. She leaned back, comfortably, stretching her fingers.

“Now,” she said, “tell us, who does have your approval?”

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