when the sun burns out

by anthrop

Summary

“Storm?” Vlad scoffs. “This is no mere storm bearing down on us. He has opened a door, and He’s stepping through it now. He will reach down from beyond the stars to pluck you and I out of our weak meat with neither fuss nor flair. Don’t you see it, Daniel? We’re finally going to die.”

(Or, Death comes a-calling.)

Notes

A very delayed crossover fic I’ve been wanting to write for ages but shelved again and again until a bit of fanart caffeinechick drew for me over on tumblr (nine months ago, dang!) reminded me about it. So here we are, finally finished! I'm posting this on a shoddy old laptop while visiting my in-laws, so once I'm home again I'll probably do a little more poking and prodding. I really wanted to get this out before the new year though, so I hope what's here now is (relatively) issue-free!

Title comes from VNV Nation's Further.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Dinner is spaghetti and meatballs, an easy but filling meal with almost no ectoplasmic contamination to speak of. Danny eats three helpings and Dad laughs and says it’s good to see his growing boy
eating properly. Jazz smiles at him too, but he doesn’t miss the way her eyebrows furrow. He knows. He spent three hours chasing Skulker and being chased by Skulker today, almost non-stop. He’s exhausted and he’s starving, and he’s glad tonight’s been quiet on the ghost front so he could enjoy a solid meal with his family.

It’s his turn to do the dishes tonight, so once he’s eaten his fill he hops up from the table, gathering empty dishes and silverware and dumping them all with a clatter into the sink that makes Mom bark a warning without lifting her head up from the clutter of wires and circuit boards Dad brought up from the lab. Danny rolls his eyes but shifts the dishes more carefully after that all the same. Over the sound of running water he listens to Jazz go on at length about one of her advanced classes, Dad asking questions or beaming with pride whenever she pauses for breath. Even a few months ago that would have driven him up the wall with irritation and yes, jealousy too. Now, Danny is happy for her, and happy their parents have one kid that’s guaranteed to have stellar grades.

He hums as he scrubs at a stubborn spot, and is glad he’s going to have time to finish the last of his homework before going to bed at a decent hour. He doesn’t know why there’s been a lull in the ghost attacks—minus Skulker, and that had been more aggravating than dangerous—but he’s not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. All his homework done! A full night’s sleep! Funny, how little things like that seem downright magical to him now.

“You missed a plate,” Jazz says behind him. He turns at the waist to accept it from her outstretched hand and the world lurched. Danny's vision tunnels as the heat is sapped from his limbs as if he's been dumped into a frozen lake. He tilts on unsteady legs, the plate slipping from his nerveless fingers. A roaring, like wind battering against a window, fills his ears and masks the sound of the plate shattering against the tile. Roaring, like hot air whistled out of the throat of a half-crazed ghost, like there are fangs he can't see but knows are hovering like a noose around his neck, poised to tear the life from him in a bright spurt of red.

His heart hammering, his lungs wet paper bags for all the use they are, he staggers back against the soap-damp counter, ceramic crunching underfoot. Something is here, something is here for him, something huge and hungry and smart, here to hurt him, to take him-

Beyond the blurred shapes of his family members Danny can make out a shape, gray and feathery as a cloud of dissipating smoke, but there are holes where eyes would be in a person, and something glitters there-intelligence, recognition, intent. A skeletal hand reaches for him, over the shoulders of his parents, and there's the source of the roaring; a black hole yawning where a mouth ought to be, a sucking rattle filling Danny's ears as the creature inhales.

He slaps the hand away, a low cry escaping him. It feels like hitting nothing, like trying to hit dust motes in a sunbeam, and yet the thing recoils, its mouth snapping shut as it turns and vanishes in an eye blink.

Someone is calling his name.

Danny blinks, and he's on the floor, huddled up against the cabinet. His face is in his hands, and his hands are hooked like talons. His fingernails are digging into the thin skin around his eyes; a shard of the broken plate is digging into his calf. There are hands tugging on his, hands on his shoulders, hands on his knees. He wants to scream and pull away, to retreat and try to make sense of what just happened, but he recognizes Mom's long black gloves and so doesn't try to phase away. His secret—he has to remember to keep his secret identity from his parents—

Jazz's hands still twitch away from his own, and he feels rather than sees the spark of energy that shocked her. He forces himself to breathe, to remember where he is and who is with him. Slowly, he calms. His heart no longer thunders; he can breathe again, see again.
His family is kneeling around him, their faces pinched with worry. "Danny?" His mother asks urgently. "Can you hear us?"

His mouth refuses to open, his tongue a lethargic slug behind his tightly clenched teeth. He nods instead.

"You okay now?" His father asks. His eyes are huge, the blue of them like chips of ice in his pale, frightened face. Danny swallows and tries to say he is, but his lips only move in a noiseless sort of grimace. He nods again.

"Let's give him some space," Jazz says, and she and Mom back away. Dad stays where he is, considering him, and then in an easy motion scoops Danny up off of the floor. Danny's limbs may as well be limp noodles, for all the good they are as he tries to wriggle free. Dad only holds him tighter.

"Jazzy-pants, can you get a soda out of the fridge?" Jack asks over his shoulder. To Danny he says, "A little fainting spell's nothing to be too worried about, Dan-o. A little bit of sugar and caffeine should perk you right up. But I'm gonna take you up to your room, set you down someplace comfy to shrug this off, alright?"

This time when Danny tries to speak, he manages a weak, "Okay," which is good enough for the both of them.

Once Dad sets him down on his unmade bed Jazz appears at his side, a root beer already cracked open in her hand. "Here," she says. He takes it with weak fingers, needing both hands to make sure he doesn't drop it. A few sips and his head clears, and his body feels less like he's been run through a spin cycle.

"What happened?" he rasps, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand.

"Looks like you fainted," Jack says. "Have you been feeling alright today?"

"I—" He thinks of the shape he'd seen, that had reached out for him. No one else had heard or seen it. "Yeah. I've been fine."

Mom tuts as she joins him on the bed, running her fingers through his hair like she used to when he was younger. "Well perhaps you're coming down with something. Why don't you take it easy tonight?"

"The dishes—"

"I'll take care of them," Jazz says quickly, giving him a measuring look.

"I…." He still feels a little bit like he's going to throw up, for no other reason than what could only have been a hallucination. That thing, whatever it was, couldn't have been real. His ghost sense didn't go off, and what else was there? Nothing but fairy tales and superstition. Nothing was downstairs waiting for him, sucking the heat from his blood with a dark void for a mouth. "Okay," he says.

After a few more minutes Mom and Dad leave to let him get ready for bed. Jazz lingers by the door, casting a worried glance at him. He's still clinging a little too tightly to the half-drunk soda in his hands. He eases his grip and the aluminum crinkles loudly.

"You sure you're okay?" she asks.

"Yeah." He feels nearly back to normal again, almost like nothing had happened at all. A quiet sense
of unease lingers in the back of his head, though, not like he's going to tell Jazz about it. She'd never leave him be if he said anything, and sleep is starting to sound like a wonderful idea.

“Was it a ghost?” Jazz asks, worrying at her lip.

“If it had been, wouldn’t you guys have seen it too?”

She can’t think of anything to say to that, so instead she smiles. “Shout if you need anything,” she says, and shuts the door.

Danny wakes with a barely-swallowed scream, leaping from his unconscious sprawl nestled under a heap of blankets to his hands and knees in an instant. Muscles straining with tension, his pulse thundering in his ears, he waits. He hardly dares to breathe, expecting a warning sound, or movement, just on the edge of his senses. His bedroom is dark apart from the orange glow of streetlights streaming in from the windows; the house is as still and quiet as it should be, considering it’s hours before dawn. It couldn't have been a sound that woke him up, otherwise he’d hear at least one member of his family startled awake as well. There isn’t a cold curl of mist pressing against his clenched teeth, so there aren’t any ghosts nearby that could have sparked his ghost sense either.

So what could have shocked him awake?

Chilly air is slipping in under his blankets, and he shivers more out of habit than from actually being cold as he kneels back on his heels. A benefit to being half-ghost is a particular immunity to cold weather (at the expense of melting twice as much on a hot summer day). He wraps himself up in his comforter as he hops off his bed, craning his ears this way and that, hoping to hear something. The carpet is warm underfoot, thanks to his room being directly above his parents' basement laboratory and its dozens of ongoing experiments and, of course, the ever-humming Ghost Portal. Closer to one of the windows it's chillier, and the dusty windowsill is downright cold when he leans his hands against it to get a look outside. No good; the streetlights always cast a glare on the glass at night. He pops the lock open and opens the window, wincing when it grinds on its hinges.

Outside, it's just as quiet and dark. There are barely any windows lit up that he can see, and no cars moving in the street. Above, a thin stretch of clouds is stained yellow by light pollution, blocking out the stars and even the moon. As he looks out lightning skitters out across the horizon; Danny counts to ten before a quiet grumble of thunder rolls out, an invisible pressure on his ears and chest. It might be the first rain before spring, if the wind plays nice. Maybe it was just thunder that woke him? But no, it’s so far off. There’s no way that would have scared him so badly, and he is scared. Right now, leaning against the sill, his limbs are shaking with fear.

Unease prickles up his spine, an absolute certainty that somebody is watching him. Danny whirls around, but there's no one else in his room—at least, no one he can see. He frowns, expecting his ghost sense to go off now, but it doesn't. He’s still alone. Just his imagination then? Or was the thing he saw in the kitchen real after all, lurking out of sight, waiting for him to drop his guard?

He turns back to look outside, happening to glance down at the sidewalk three floors below his window, and his heart leaps into his throat.

There's a woman staring at him.

Danny flinches back from the window, heart hammering. Who? What? What?
After a moment, he peers back out and down. She's still there, dressed in a stiff black suit, her dark hair pulled back in a severe bun. In the poor light, Danny can't be sure of anything else about her, even with her head craned almost straight up to stare at him. Maybe she isn't staring at him, but at the Ops Center up on the roof instead. It is pretty insane looking. But she isn't moving her head, and the angle of her jaw suggests her gaze is lower…. She has to be looking at him. She's right beneath his window.

A tense, silent moment passes. Danny waits on pins and needles for her to move, or to speak, to do something. And then she does. She nods, once, like she’s come to some satisfactory conclusion, and turns away. She walks down the sidewalk and disappears around the corner of FentonWorks.

Immediately Danny phases through the window, not bothering to transform and only belatedly remembering to turn invisible as he races after her. Everything about her screams suspicious; he has to follow her, to make sure she isn’t another clever ghost like Spectra, who can mask what she is with a little twist of a thermostat and a pair of dark sunglasses….

But when he turns the corner, no one is there. The woman—the ghost?—has vanished like a wisp of smoke into the night. What the hell.

He doesn't go back to sleep that night.

At lunch the next day the sky is just as overcast, a bitter chill having rolled in along with the gray and grumbling clouds that appear a breath away from downpour. Most of the other students remain indoors, either in the crowded cafeteria or in the classrooms of the more thoughtful teachers. Danny however, coaxes his friends to one of the picnic tables out behind the cafeteria despite the biting wind or the unseasonal chill. He doesn’t say why, and has only bothered with a long sleeved shirt to keep up a pretence of humanity. He'd forgotten a jacket in his haste to get to school to talk with them. Sam and Tucker agree with minimal fuss, but zip up their own jackets before braving the outside.

"It's December," Tucker mutters sourly. "December is not allowed to be this cold without snow."

Danny doesn't say anything, too busy throwing nervous glances skyward and twitching at every unexpected sound. Sam frowns, slipping on her gloves now that her tray is on the table and her hands are free. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"Didn't sleep well," he admits, reluctantly looking away from the clouds pressing down over Amity Park—the whole state, and most of its two neighbors as well, if the morning news was anything to go by. Sam brought an umbrella today, sticking out of her bag, just in case.

"Ghosts?" Tucker asks. A standard question, considering. But Danny shakes his head, frowning. In a terse, quiet voice, he tells them about the woman that had appeared beneath his window last night. He hesitates, tempted to tell them about the—the shape he had seen during his… whatever it was that happened in the kitchen. But that could easily be explained as a trick of the eye; a hallucination, caused by his fainting fit. He says nothing, instead.

"And she wasn’t—you know?" Sam asks once he's finished, wiggling her fingers in a gesture vaguely reminiscent of the Box Ghost at his most theatrical.

"Nope, my ghost sense never went off. She just stared at me." He hunches into himself as he picks at his lunch, shivering as if the weather actually bothers him. But when a kid can shoot icicles from his
eyeballs, a chilly spring morning can’t really rate. Tucker and Sam share a look over the table.

"So she was just some lady," Tucker says dismissively. "Probably just walking home from work or whatever. Lots of people work odd hours."

"She looked like she worked at a funeral parlor, or for the Men in Black. And it was three in the morning." Danny purses his lips. "I kinda expected her to mind wipe me, or something."

"It was probably coincidence," Sam says. "You opened your window right when she was walking by your house, and she looked up to see what the noise was."

“Then why did I wake up?” Danny presses, emphasizing it with a stab at his mashed potatoes.

Tucker hesitates, so Sam says, “Maybe it was the thunder that woke you up. Heck, it woke me up fifteen minutes before my alarm. It sure scared the crap out of me.”

"Maybe,” Danny says, but he hardly sounds convinced to his own ears, and he isn’t besides. He looks up at them to say something, but movement outside the school’s wire fence catches his eye, and he freezes.

There is a man in a stiff black suit walking at a leisurely pace on the sidewalk. At this distance, Danny can only make out close-cropped gray hair and a weathered, deeply-lined face. Maybe it’s a coincidence. Maybe he’s just some business man on his lunch break, getting some fresh air and a little old-dude exercise that won’t stink up his suit. Maybe—

The man stops. The man turns to face the school, and looks him right in the eyes.

Danny jerks back, crying out wordlessly. His knees catch on the hard plastic table and he falls off the bench, landing with a hard whuff of expelled air to the dead grass. Tucker and Sam both shout his name, jumping to their feet to see if he’s okay. He waves them off, hauling himself to his feet and hating the fact that he’s at school where someone might see if he kicked off the ground and flew after the man like he so wants to, because the man is gone now, of course.

“Did you see him?” he shouts.

“See who?” Sam asks at the same time Tucker blankly says, “What?”

“The guy in the suit!” Danny points where the man had been. “He was dressed just like the lady from last night! He looked at me.”

They share a wordless, worried glance. Tucker opens his mouth to—deflect, dismiss, decry—but Danny slaps his hand on the table to shut his best friend up before Tucker has a chance to say a word. “Never mind!” Danny snarls, and snatches up both his tray and backpack. “Let’s just go inside.”

He’s halfway to the cafeteria before he hears them gather their own trays and bags, hears them quicken their steps to catch up to them. Any other day he’d slow down to wait for them. Any other day he wouldn’t be so quick to anger, or so quick to abandon them. But today is… strange. Today feels like it could stretch on forever.

He looks up at the clouds again, squinting. If it would just rain already….

He doesn’t know how to finish that thought.
The sense of unease only lingers as the day goes on. Danny can’t even muster up any relief as dinner rolls around and there hasn’t been so much as a single Box Ghost sighting. If anything, it unsettles him further. The Box Ghost’s "attacks" are practically like clockwork. He’s due for an appearance. And if not him, why hasn’t another ghost itching for a little Earth-side havoc shown up?

So Danny sits on the edge of his chair, grinding his teeth and flinching whenever either of his parents laugh too loudly. He picks at his food, too ill at ease to be hungry. Jazz notices something is wrong, of course, because Jazz always notices when something is wrong. She leans over to hand him the basket of rolls, even though he’s only shredded the one still on his plate.

"Everything okay?" she asks quietly. Danny doesn’t know why she bothers. On the other side of the table their parents are hardly paying any attention to anything beside the ominously clunking device set between their plates. A ghost attack right there in the kitchen might not catch their attention. Apart from asking how he was feeling this evening, they had barely paid him or Jazz any mind.

Any other day, Danny would be nervous about whatever crazy device they’re cooking up now. He is nervous, but the thing on the table vaguely shaped like a Tetris block isn’t so much as a blip on his radar. His whole radar is eaten up by white noise he can’t hear or see; he only knows it’s there because it’s rattling between his aching teeth as if he’s been chewing on tin foil. Static in his brain, reducing everything around him to minor distractions at best. It takes him a long moment to even realize Jazz said anything at all.

Danny’s mouth thins. Everything is okay. No ghosts, almost no homework and what he did have is done already. No tests to study for, no Dash being a jerk at school, and Tucker and Sam aren’t in another one of their melodramatic protest-fights. So why does he feel like he’s waiting for—for—

He doesn’t know what he’s waiting for. But there’s something out there all the same. Something just out of sight. Something bad—no, not bad, but purposeful.

"I guess," he says, because Jazz is expecting an answer and the furrow in her brow deepens the longer he doesn’t say anything.

“You sure? After last night—”

“I’m fine, Jazz.” He doesn’t want to talk about last night.

She hardly seems convinced, but the dinner table is hardly the place she can wear him down. It’d be the one time they’re parents looked up from their contraption and heard something that would blow his secret identity out of the water, and she has no intention of being the one to blow that whistle. They both know that. "Well, let me know if you want to talk," she says, and pats his arm kindly.

Danny nods, and goes back to stirring his mashed potatoes, waiting for enough time to pass so he can be excused.

Too restless—too on edge—to sleep, Danny slips out of his room in a burst of white light to go for a short patrol around town. Normally flying at night is exhilarating. Normally it makes all the stress from school and home and ghost fighting melt away, even if only for a short while. But tonight he
feels no exhilaration, no wild instinct to whoop and holler at the stars as he rockets up and up and up where the air thins and freezes and then goes higher, because what does somebody like him need air for, really?

Tonight he does not rush or spin or laugh at his own delight. Tonight he clings to rooftops, skirts the opens spaces between buildings like he expects something big with too many teeth will bite him in half if he isn’t careful. Tonight he is afraid—genuinely afraid—to fly anywhere near the boiling, churning clouds. Lightning rattles in bright lavender strikes that leave blinking after images in his eyes, closer than the night before. Thunder still rumbles and crashes like a marching band belting out its loudest sound with the force of a physical blow. There’s all this energy burning and twisting above him, but there’s still no rain.

There aren’t any ghosts either. He crosses the whole town twice, hoping for even a single ghostly animal, hoping for something to fight, to burn up some of his own energy so maybe he can get some sleep. A half dozen times he catches movement in his itching eyes on the streets down below, but whatever was there is gone by the time he looks. Twice, he sees people in black suits looking up at him. One of them even holds up their hand in a little wave before vanishing into an alleyway. A dead-end alleyway that is, of course, empty by the time he reaches it.

Whoever—whatever—these people are, Danny doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what they want or why they look at him like—like he’s—

He doesn’t know. They look at him though, and it stops his heart each and every time.

He returns home with a gray pre-dawn light trying in vain to break through the clouds. He doesn’t bother trying to sleep. He paces in his room, clenching and unclenching his fists, and waits for his alarm.

Sam and Tucker both take one look at Danny—at the dark shadows under his eyes, the trembling of his hands and the patternless tapping of his feet—and pull him aside between classes.

"When’s the last time you’ve eaten?" Sam demands, already fishing for a granola bar in her spider-shaped backpack. She’s taken to carrying snacks for Danny, when she remembers, because there’s nothing like a ghost fight to make a growing teen weak with hunger. Somebody has to be the practical thinker in their little group. Most days, Danny appreciates her thoughtfulness. Today, the granola bar tastes like sawdust and he wants to duck into the janitor’s closet just to be left alone.

Danny shrugs, mutters something that could almost pass for English if there were a few more consonants to go along with the vague sea-saw motion of his hand. Tucker pulls an unimpressed face, but the furrow between his eyebrows only deepens.

"Were you out fighting ghosts all night?" He asks. “Man, you should have called us."

"No ghosts," Danny slurs tonelessly. "Checked everywhere. Checked the whole city twice. Not one ghost." He squints up the gray and rumbling sky. He’d heard his parents say there was talk of evacuating the city, if this storm kept building. How strange it is, they’d said, how out of season. How unnatural. The muscles in his jaw flex and relax, teeth grinding and partially bared in a grimace he can’t help. "Something’s wrong."

"What is?" Sam asks.
But Danny shakes his head. "I don't know."

Halfway through English, Danny happens to glance out the window and sees no less than four people in black suits standing in the parking lot. He bolts out of his seat and to the window, eyes bulging and palms slapping the glass hard enough to make anyone who hadn't seen him move jump. He hears sharp intakes of breath and at least one bitten-off curse. The people in suits are still too far off to make out any useful details. Three women, one man? Or maybe the one with the long hair halfway down their back is just short? They all turn their heads to look up at him, as if they heard his hands hit the glass. There’s no way they could have, with the distance between them. There’s no way they should be able to see him either, and yet they do.

At the front of the classroom, Mr. Lancer sighs and sets the papers in his hands aside. "Mr. Fenton," he says wearily. "Please return to your desk."

But Danny barely hears him, and he can’t muster the energy to care. He remains where he is, his breath too cold to mist the chilly glass and someone might notice such a little detail, such a tiny oddity, but he can’t care about his secret now. He stares out across the school grounds and mutters under his breath, trying to piece the who and what and whys together into a picture that might make sense.

Tucker leans out of his seat and tugs on Danny's sleeve. "Dude," he hisses. "C'mon, Lancer's gonna give you detention if you don't sit down."

"Don’t you see them?" Danny asks. "Right there, by the dumpster. They’re all staring at me. They shouldn’t be able to see me, the glare on the windows should be too bad even with the clouds, but they see me."

"Danny, there’s nobody in the lot. Sit down before—"

"Right there," Danny mutters again. Tucker’s still sitting down. The angle must be wrong. Of course he can’t see them, because he’s still sitting down. They’re there. They’re looking at him. One of them throws their head back and laughs at something another one said. He knows one of them spoke because the tallest one pointed up right at him, right at him, and the one next to him laughed. "What do they want from me?"

"Mr. Fenton," Mr. Lancer says again, sharper this time. "If you're going to disrupt my class without running pell-mell to the men's room as is your usual modus operandi, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Another tug on his sleeve. Tucker hissing his name again. Danny ignores him and Mr. Lancer both, squeezing his fingertips against the windowpane as he clenches his fists. The four people in black suits turn and walk away and out of sight, and only then does Mr. Lancer’s words sink in.

He scoops up his backpack—never opened, what was the point of taking notes on Shakespeare when you were being stalked by strange disappearing people who aren’t ghosts, but what else could they be, what else could possibly be out there—and strides out the door. He can feel the entire class’s eyes on him as he makes that walk of shame from the back corner. It should be embarrassing. It should be.

Danny couldn’t care less. There is something wrong in Amity Park and he thinks he knows who
—what—the cause of it is. Now it’s just a matter of cornering them someplace they can’t vanish away.

Danny feigns an upset stomach to avoid both his family and another meal he isn’t hungry for, and spends the time pacing in his room and flinching away from the windows. Every time he looks outside there’s at least one person in a black suit standing in the middle of the street, looking up at him as if they knew he dared to look. It’s never the same person; how many of them are there?

He opens his window once to—shout, or throw something, or jump out and chase them—to do something that will prove the people who aren’t humans or ghosts are more than stoney-faced shadows flickering in the corners of his constantly itchy eyes. There is one woman down there when he tries; bird-boned and white-haired, her lips painted a red so bright he can see her beatific smile all the way up in his room. She blinks out of sight before he can say so much as a word, exactly like a ghost. But none of the people in black suits act like ghosts, or look like ghosts. They look like perfectly normal people. They don’t set off his ghost sense. But they can disappear with a thought and they know when he sees them and—

And he’s beginning to sense them too. The itch in his eyes that he can’t blink or rub away. It’s only when he looks at them does it vanish, until they vanish, and then his eyes start to itch all over again.

The sky is black and growling, heaving like the side of some immense fairytale monster, when Jazz knocks on his door. He grunts absently, too busy biting his fingers to bother with words. She walks in, squinting into the darkness. When had it gotten dark? He hadn’t noticed. Too busy keeping an eye on the not-people-not-ghosts.

“Danny?” she asks uncertainly, groping for the light switch on the wall. He holds up a hand and lets his palm fill with sickly green light instead, and she jumps like she’d had no idea he was even there. She forgets the switch, shuts the door, and asks, “What are you doing standing in the dark?”

“Thinking,” he says.

“About what?”

“Can you see them?”

She squints again, confused instead of blinded by the burning light in his hand. She’s learned not to stare at a ghost ray directly. They all have. “See… who?”

Danny’s eyes are itching again. He bites his fingers so he can’t scratch. “Outside. In the street. Do you see them?”

He hears rather than sees her walk to one of his windows, because he’s turned away to staunchly face a wall. Better to look at the green-tinted shadows of National Geographic posters than the not-people-not-ghosts. Seconds pass. Then Jazz says, “Who am I supposed to be looking at?”

His eyes still itch. He scrunches them shut and bulges them wide open, without effect. He huffs and takes the six steps to join her at the window. There they are, just one for now, a pale-faced, black-haired woman with her hair in a braid that falls to her waist. She’s looking out at something else, something out the way his window faces, but as if she’s got a ghost sense of her own she looks over her shoulder and up. His eyes instantly feel better once she makes eye contact with him. “There,” he
says, pointing. “There’s a woman in the middle of the street. Can’t you see her?”

Jazz touches his arm, and the energy in his palm flickers out as he twitches away, scowling. He already knows what she’s going to say, but it’s still like a physical blow when she says, her voice hushed with concern, with something that might become fear if this keeps up and it will because it won’t rain—

“There’s nobody out there, Danny.”

“There is!” Danny nearly shouts, but of course there isn’t now, she walked out of sight as soon as she made sure he knew she was there. She’s gone, but she was there. “I’m not crazy, there are people in black suits stalking me all over town and I think—I know they’re the reason why all the ghosts are gone, and they brought this storm with them and they’re going to bring something worse but I don’t know what—”

“Danny!” Her hands pressing on his shoulders, guiding him to the bed and pushing him down to sit. She sits beside him, leaning close and tucking her head into the curve of his neck. She can’t be comfortable. He knows he’s tense as piano wire right now; his whole body aches with the strain of it. “Danny,” she says again. Softer. Sadder. She sounds as tired as he feels.

“I know,” he says through gritted teeth. He does. This isn’t right. This isn’t healthy. He can’t remember the last time he ate.

“Mom and Dad think it’s another ectostorm,” she says. “That’s why they’ve been working so much down in the lab.”

He hadn’t even noticed.

Jazz takes his left fist—clenched so tight the knuckles burn white and every tendon strains—and rubs the heel of his palm with her thumb. It should comfort him. She should comfort him. She’s his sister, one of his secret keepers, someone he can trust completely to be there for him. He wants to tear his hand away and push her off the bed. He doesn’t dare move a muscle.

“Sam texted me earlier,” she says quietly. “She told me you ditched school today.”

No sense denying it.

Her thumb sneaks under his fingernails, pushing his fingers back to gently press the crescent shapes he’s dug into his palm. No blood, at least. He keeps his nails too short for that. “Is it—whatever this is—really so awful?”

“I—” He swallows, pawing at his eyes with his free hand. One of them, or more, is back outside again. Like they can’t get enough of the freak exhibit. “It feels like the sky’s going to fall down and crush the whole world.”

She shifts her head to look up at him, hunched low enough—or perhaps he’s sitting that ramrod straight—that there’s actually a need to look up. “You know that’s not possible, right?”

Despite himself, despite the not-people-not-ghosts and the ache gnawing at his bones and the itch burning his eyes near to tears, Danny snorts. “A year ago we thought Mom and Dad were crazy for believing in ghosts.”

There’s no plausible rebuttal to that, and they both know it. Instead Jazz is quiet for a moment, focusing again on rubbing the tension from his hand. Then, “So have you talked to Vlad?”
“Why would I talk to Vlad?”

“Because apparently every other ghost has abandoned Amity Park, so who else could possibly be making you feel this way?” She smiles; he can feel it against his shoulder. “He’s always poking his big nose in places he shouldn’t. Maybe he found something stronger than he anticipated?”


He jumps up, pushing Jazz away unintentionally. He’s already transformed, a hard burst of white light that leaves stars in his eyes, and is nearly at the window when Jazz grabs his hand, hauling him back. “Where are you going?” she demands.

“Where do you think?” he snaps. “I’m going to Vlad’s. You’re right. He’s gotta be behind them—” He gestures at the not-people-not-ghosts that Jazz and Tucker can’t see, that maybe no human can see, that maybe terrify any and all ghosts into hiding. What *are* they? What do they want? He doesn’t know. He *will* know. “I’m going to put an end to this.”

And he pulls his hand away, phasing through the window before she can shout his name again. He’s gone, invisible and rushing across the rooftops, before she can open the window to try and call him home.

Vlad lives up in the northwest part of town, in a sprawling gated community where every lot is the same size as Casper High and everyone vies to make a bigger spectacle of their endless front yards than their neighbors. As Danny flies by (a mere dozen or so feet off the road, too afraid to dare any higher), each mansion is lit up with glamorous Christmas decorations, hard white glares that stain the black clouds pressing down above a sickly yellow.

Each lot, except one.

Vlad’s mansion is totally dark, not even one of its many windows lit. He lands outside the tall black gates, bright and cheery homes with expensive cars and shadows at the windows on either side, and quiet darkness before him. It feels more like standing on the outskirts of a cemetery for its grayness and stillness and quiet. It’s unsettling. Vlad always pretends so well at being normal. It feels like the mouth of a trap he’s about to willingly stick his foot in, for the chance at answers.

But before he can take a single step, his eyes begin to *itch.*

He recoils from the gate, palming his eyes and pressing to keep his fingernails from tearing more lines across his face. A cold pulse jangles in his chest, his core pounding almost like a heartbeat. He can barely hear his hitching breath over the sound of ectoplasm racing in his ears. Of course he’d expected there to be not-people-not-ghosts here, but he can’t help but want to run back home and bury his head under the blankets all the same. They haven’t approached him yet, they haven’t said a single word, and even though he needs answers he’s terrified of getting them and he doesn’t know why.

The gate opens, a thin shriek of iron hinges, and a soft whisper of air as it swings wide. Danny shakes his head, not wanting to look, not wanting to see, his eyes itch so bad, there's static electricity
sparking between his grinding teeth, fingers ghosting down his trembling limbs, and he understands all at once that they're here, they're here, they are here for him—

"Please," slips out of him, cracked and nearly voiceless with fear. He's on his knees, when did he fall? Someone is laughing, or talking, or there are many of them all around him, pressing in on all sides and he can barely think for the noise of them. They're here for Vlad but they want him too, and he walked right into them like an idiot, and there is nothing he can do because he knows how to fight humans and he knows how to fight ghosts but he doesn't even know what these things are.

With a desperate cry, he tears his hands away from his face and sends out a perfect arc of green energy. Drive them away, burn them before they can take him—!

He's alone.

Danny blinks, strains his eyes to see that much further into the dark, but there's no one. His eyes ache from being squeezed into the back of his sockets, but there isn't even the slightest itch now. Thunder rattles overhead, and Danny can't help but imagine that it sounds like laughter. He bites his cheek (already chewed raw, already a constant source of copper-citrus taste on his tongue) and trots up the sweeping driveway, not daring to fly until he's under cover.

It's short work to phase through each floor, waiting for his ghost sense to spill from his mouth. He pauses twice in his search; once in Vlad's library, which looks like someone made a determined attempt at tearing every book off the shelves for some reason, and again in the dining room where the table is set with twenty half-eaten meals abandoned a day or more ago. Danny suspects he knows the reason why, but finds little comfort in suspecting Vlad was attacked by a hallucination too.

He moves on, finally phasing through the ground floor to the hidden laboratory below, and at last his ghost sense triggers. Instinct demands he turns invisible, because Vlad is cunning and cruel and quick, but Danny isn't here to hide and spy. He's here for answers.

"Vlad?" he calls out. Something metal and hollow falls somewhere at his right, a soft clang that still manages to nearly drive him out of his own skin. He doesn't quite fall out of the air, but he does badly jar his ankles when he lands on the concrete. He tries to call out again and only summons up a weak whistle of air. He wants to find a desk and hide under it until he can stop shaking for five minutes. He’s okay. He’s okay. His eyes don’t itch, which means the not-people-not-ghosts are nowhere near the mansion—yet. He’s okay.

He takes a cautious step, and then he hears a rush of wind before hands crash into him with the force of a truck. He hits the ground hard and meets the tell-tale burning red eyes of none other than Plasmius. The only lights in the laboratory come from their own bodies; the dim white glow of their auras, and the green and red splash of their eyes. It isn’t much, but it’s enough to get a good look at Vlad, to get a read on just what the hell he might be planning. Only—

Vlad doesn't look furious, or gloating, or even irritated at finding Danny lurking about his property. He looks terrified. Eyes bulging, fangs bared, breathing in short and rapid gasps; Danny can feel Vlad's hands shaking against his chest.

Danny's eyes widen with comprehension. Oh.

"They're after you too," he whispers, and Vlad jumps off of him as if burned.

"What are you doing here? " Vlad hisses. Danny flips over onto his hands and knees, reeling back into a defensive crouch.
"To talk to you," he says. "Do you know what they are?"

Vlad is hunched, covered from the neck down by his white cape, but there's no missing the twitch in his cheek at the question. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says.

"You do, though." Danny takes a step toward him, and finds a grim satisfaction when Vlad takes a step back. He isn't the only one afraid, and he isn't the most afraid either. "The people in black suits. They're everywhere. And the storm—that's them too, isn't it?"

Vlad shakes his head, hiding his mouth behind his hand. Another step forward, another step back.

"Something's coming," Danny insists. "They're bringing something with them, and it's going to be the worst thing that's ever happened to Amity Park. And you know what it is."

A whine slips out of the man as he bumps up against a counter. Unseen glass containers scatter and roll behind him, ignored by them both. Danny takes another step, and another, until he is only a single step away from Vlad. Vlad would have to phase away to retreat any further, and they both know he's too proud to be so obviously weak.

"I thought this was your fault," Danny continues. "But they're after you too. And this isn't the first time either, is it? You know what they are. You know what they want."

Any other day, Vlad would scoff and deflect, belittle and deride. Tonight, he draws in a shuddering breath and shoves Danny away; weakly, only enough to put distance between them. Danny doesn't even stumble.

Vlad presses the heels of his palms to his red eyes and shakes.

"He's coming," he whispers.

"Who is?" Danny asks. Answers, finally! Of course Vlad would know what's happening, even if he isn't—maybe—the cause of it. Vlad's got a finger in every pie he can reach.

"You shouldn't be here," Vlad says instead. "They will find me faster, they will lead Him to me again, and this time He will not let me live!"

Danny frowns. "What are you talking about? They already know where you are! There was a swarm of them hanging out on your lawn when I got here!"

"I have taken precautions," he insists, his voice tremulous even in its certainty. "They cannot enter, I have ensured it!" But he squints, looking back at Danny as if seeing him for the first time. "You shouldn't have been able to enter either. What did you do?"

"I phased through a window—"

Vlad's hands are on him again, squeezing his arms like iron bands. "The sigils! You tampered with them somehow, broke them! What did you do? Tell me!
"

"Nothing!" Danny shouts. "What sigils? What are you talking about?"

Vlad lets him go, shoves him dismissively to one side, muttering as he walks away. "You weren't paying attention, of course not, you're only a child, I can't expect you to know any better—"

"Where are you going?" Danny asks, picking himself up off the floor, because Vlad is walking—walking!—towards the stairs.
“To fix what you’ve damaged, before they return! Now get out of my home! You’ll draw His attention all the faster if we’re anywhere near one another, and I need more time.”

Danny scrambles after him. “He who? Who is this guy you're so scared of? What is going on?”

Vlad spins on his heel, but it’s a poor mimic of his usual dramatics. “From who else? Who else could possibly instill such an instinctual terror in halfling creatures such as ourselves? Who could have such a horde as those—those abominations swarming at my doorstep? I avoided His trap once before and I'll do it again! I won't let that foul creature in!”

Before Danny can try to make sense of any of this, Vlad throws his head back and laugh, the syllables high and tripping over each other. Danny hears Vlad’s fear as plain as day, and doesn't have to wonder why; his eyes have begun to itch again.

“Oh, but what's the point?” Vlad asks, his laughter subsiding. “He gets what He wants, at the end. The end— ha! What am I saying? There is no end but Him! And what's the use of trying to bar myself away from the inevitable?”

Vlad staggers back down the few steps he’s climbed, throwing up his hands as he falls to sit on the last, giggling weakly. “No use!” he cries. “He proved that to me once already. How could I have forgotten? No use. There’s no use, Daniel. There’s no use but waiting for Him to find us, now.”

Danny shakes his head. “There has to be something. You know who’s coming, so tell something useful about him—something I can use— instead of rambling like a lunatic!”

“Useful?” Vlad cocks his head, considering him with a sudden focused narrowing of his bright eyes. “You want something useful? You want to know what weakness of his I have managed to uncover, to aid you in locking him away, as you did to Pariah Dark?”

“You helped,” Danny says, because it seems important, somehow, to remind him of that.

“Did I?” Vlad hums. “It must have seemed as such, to you. But I had a plan, cunning and brilliant, to defeat even the greatest of all ghosts and to crown myself as king before a legion of willing servants. Had,” he emphasizes. “Had, because there's no point to plotting when He’s coming for me now. He's here for you as well, no doubt. He’s not one for loose ends.”

Danny scratches the skin around his eye, and Vlad mirrors him without seeming to notice. “Please,” Danny whispers for the second time tonight, “Vlad, give me something. No one else can see them. Everybody else thinks this is just a bad storm.” Everybody else thinks I'm going crazy.

“Storm ?” Vlad scoffs. “This is no mere storm bearing down on us. He has opened a door, and He’s stepping through it now. He will reach down from beyond the stars to pluck you and I out of our weak meat with neither fuss nor flair. Don't you see it, Daniel? We're finally going to die.”

He laughs, a broken, hollowed-out sound.

Danny closes the gap between them again, their auras brightening in the close proximity. “Tell me who ‘He’ is. Tell me what I can do to stop Him so I can protect Amity Park.”

“There is no stopping Him,” Vlad sighs. “There is only delaying the inevitable.” He looks up at Danny, all the pride and power drained from him utterly, leaving him slumped and ungainly. He looks old. He looks so, so tired.

Danny knows how he feels.
“You want me to tell you everything I know about Him?” Vlad asks.

“Yes.”

“I can’t. I don’t dare speak of Him in any detail, or else He might hear.” Vlad hides his eyes away behind his hands, pressing away the itch that must burn him as much as it’s burning Danny. “I am a coward, Daniel. Even if I may only evade him for a few more moments, I would give anything for the chance.”

“Vlad.”

“Fine, fine.” He lowers his hands, meeting Danny's eyes directly. “I will give you a warning, but no more. Do not speak to the creatures in black suits, and whatever you do, you must not approach the dead.”

“Do not approach the—what? ” Danny bites back an impatient curse. “What does that even mean?”

“You'll know when the time comes. Now get out of my house. Leave me to die with what dignity I can scrape off of this floor.”

“But—”

But Vlad has him by the throat, having moved so quickly Danny hadn’t even seen him move at all. His red eyes are blazing hot; pink embers pop and hiss around his aura like sparklers. “Get out,” he snarls, and shoves Danny away. “GET OUT!”

Danny, with no other option, flees.

Back home again, with creatures prowling in the street below that he can’t fight or face, his family none the wiser. Jazz fell asleep at her desk, waiting for him to come home. Danny watches the rise and fall of her shoulders, listens to the evenness of her breathing. She sleeps peacefully. Danny doesn’t want to wake her, so he slips her comforter over her shoulders and phases through the wall to his own room. There, he resumes his pacing.

He manages a doze at some point, slumped sideways on his bed with his sneakers grazing the carpet. He doesn’t remember sitting down, but the itch of his eyes wakes him up before long. When he scratches, his fingers come away with red crescents under his fingernails. He must look awful, now. He certainly feels it. He can’t bring himself to care.

He’s awake for his alarm for the third night in a row. Some quiet part of him wonders if today will be the last day he ever hears it, and he laughs.

Oh, but he’s tired.

“Holy shit,” Tucker says when Danny walks up to his locker, where Tucker and Sam had obviously been waiting for him. Sam says much the same thing, or he assumes she does. He doesn’t quite hear
her over the thready pulse in his ears. He slumps against the locker next to his, trying to remember his combination. Never mind, he decides after a few fruitless seconds. What’s the point?

Sam and Tucker are talking at him—to him. He blinks, squints, shakes his head to focus, and the present comes creeping back. “What?” he asks.

“What happened?” Sam asks, with a tone that suggests she’s asked him more than once already. “What happened to your face?”

“They make my eyes itch,” Danny says. Sam and Tucker stare.

“Who does?” Tucker asks slowly.

Danny giggles. Even to his own ears, he sounds unhinged. Other people are turning to stare at him too. He closes his mouth, swallows the laughter before it can bubble up again. “I have no idea.”

Sam says his name, like she’s going to chastise him, or tell him to go home, but what the hell would he do at home? He’s nearly worn a visible path in his bedroom carpet. He can’t sleep, even though he wants to more than anything else. He holds up his hand, fingertips pink and crusty with dried blood, and Sam goes quiet.

“I went to Vlad’s place last night,” he says. “I’m not going crazy. He can see them too.”

They share a worried look. Ha, as if they have anything to be worried about. He—whoever He is—isn’t coming for them. Isn’t coming to—

Don’t think about it.

“He’s seen them before, too,” he continues. “He knows what they are, and—” And who they’re bringing with them. “—and what they’re doing, I guess.”

“What did he say?” Sam asks, leaning in. Danny wishes she wouldn’t, and takes a step sideways to keep the distance between them.

“He didn’t,” he replies. “He was too freaked out to tell me anything, except—” He bites his cheek, and tastes a new burst of copper. He swallows something that might be a small chunk of his own meat, the first thing he’s eaten since Sam’s granola bar. He bites his cheek harder to keep from laughing again.

“What did he say?” Tucker asks.

Except that I’m going to die. “That there’s nothing I can do but wait for them to pass by,” Danny says. The lie comes so easily. He’s glad for the relief that smoothes the worry from their faces. “He didn’t want to share much of anything with me, but I guess they’re just some kind of weird migratory—” Abominations. “—ghosts.”

“Really freaky ghosts, from the sound of it,” Sam says. She’s got that appraising eyebrow raised. Uh oh. “Just how many of them are there?”

“No idea. They disappear before I can get close. They just like watching me.”

“Really freaky stalker ghosts,” Tucker adds with a disapproving frown. “Are you sure there isn’t something we can do to drive them out of town faster?”

“I wish,” Danny says, shutting his eyes briefly. “But Vlad was just holed up in his lab waiting for
“Well if that’s the case I wish they’d hurry up and get out of here already,” Sam says, reaching out to pat his arm. He wants to slap her hand away. He wants to set something on fire. He stands rigidly instead, and lets her try to comfort him. “You look awful, Danny.”

“You sure you don’t wanna skip again today?” Tucker asks. “We can cover for you.”

Danny shakes his head. What’s the point? “I’m okay. Let’s just go to class.”

“Did you even attempt the homework?” Sam asks wryly, and Danny allows himself a short chuckle. “I don’t even remember what it—”

The intercom down the hall crackles, startling several other students. Principal Ishiyama’s voice, stern and yet with a tremor that can be heard clearly despite the old speakers, resounds through the school. “Attention all students, attention all students. There has been an incident outside of the school. Return to your classrooms and await further information. I repeat, return to your classrooms and do not leave the school grounds.”

Danny closes his eyes as voices rise in an unintelligible sea of noise around him. Here it comes.

There’s been a gas leak at the Nasty Burger. At least, that’s what they’re being told. People have died. People, as in more than one person is dead. They aren’t saying how many, but the tightness around Mr. Lancer’s eyes makes Danny’s empty stomach clench. He looks at the back of Valerie’s head, at the mass of dark curls falling down to her hips. People have died, but at least she was at school instead of working a shift.

As soon as he thinks that, he buries his face in the crook of his elbow and groans. People are dead because of him. There’s no way this is a gas leak, not with the not-people-not-ghosts and the storm and what little Vlad told him. He—whover He is—has finally walked through whatever cosmic door was big enough, and now He’s waiting for Danny to turn up. Of all places, why the Nasty Burger?

Ah, what does it matter.

But….

But who’s to say He will stay at the Nasty Burger? What if He comes to the school, looking for Danny? He’s already proven He’s happy to kill any humans He comes across. And there are so many humans holed up here. The whole school is on lockdown, and there are parents clamoring in the parking lot, and police trying to keep the peace….

Danny looks at Valerie again, then to Sam and Tucker too. They’re whispering to each other, for the moment not paying him any attention. If he stays here the whole school could die, and his best friends too, and Valerie, and Jazz—

He picked a seat in the back corner, because no one bothered following the seating chart today. No one is looking his way. He has to get out. He has to save them, the only way he can.
Danny phases out the window, invisible and silent, and no one sees him go.

Emergency response has cordoned off the Nasty Burger a block in every direction. It’s lunchtime, so nearly every street is backed up with traffic, and the police are having a hard time keeping the interested crowds at bay. Invisible, Danny coasts only inches above their heads and lands on the other side of the police. From here he can see ambulances and fire trucks parked outside the Nasty Burger’s parking lot, but nothing and no one is any nearer the restaurant. In fact, the vehicles are empty and all of the firefighters and EMTs are standing aimlessly in the street.

Something’s wrong.

Danny takes the risk and reveals himself, badly startling a police officer who’d been just about to walk through him. The man stumbles back with a curse, and then glares down at him. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack, Phantom?” he snaps.


The man frowns down at him, likely considering if there’s any point in sharing information with a ghost, even one that has proven to want to help humans rather than attack them. Finally he huffs. “Gas leak. Far as we can tell there aren’t any ghosts causing it so there’s no point in you poking your nose into this.” Another glare, then a reluctant sigh. “But we can’t get close for a better look.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean haven’t you seen the bodies in the parking lot? Protective gear is useless against whatever is the cause of—”

“Hawking!” Someone barks, and the officer—Hawking, apparently, but now that Danny looks he can read the man’s name on his uniform plain as day—clamps his mouth shut.

“Stay out of this, Phantom,” Hawking says, pointing a warning finger at him. “We can sort this out without any of your usual pyrotechnics.”

“Ectotechnics,” Danny corrects, because his mouth is a traitor and his brain is too tired to care.

A muscle works in Hawking’s jaw. “Whatever,” he grits out, and turns to face the other officer that had shouted for him.

Danny turns back to look at the Nasty Burger. Now that he’s paying closer attention, he can see three lumps in bright yellow protective gear lying motionless halfway between the trucks and the front door. Three more people dead, because of him. He staggers back, cupping his mouth, swallowing back the burning tang of bile. How many are inside? Why is He—whoever He is—doing this? What did Danny do to bring this Amity Park? Is it because of who—of what—he is? It has to be; Vlad had called them both ‘halfling creatures’ last night. Half-human, half-ghost, an abomination that makes other horrifying creatures swarm around them like flies, like—

Like birds of the same flock.

He takes a shaky breath, aware of too many eyes on him. So many humans in danger. He—he has to do something, he has to move. But—
“Phantom?”

“Mo—Maddie?”

Maddie steps nimbly through the gathered crowd of EMTs—when had they gotten so close to him, and why hadn’t he noticed?—and puts one hand on her hip. No doubt she’s leveling one of her most terrifying glares at him, but with her hood up and the gas mask on her face she’s all but unreadable.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, leaning in closer. Danny takes a step back, shoulders creeping up to his ears. “What did you do to your face?”

“My…?” Oh, right. All that scratching he’s done would still show up on his ghost half, even if it doesn’t sting anymore. Hopefully even the crusted blood has turned green enough to fool her discerning eye. “It’s nothing. Minor altercation. You know how ghosts are.”

“I do,” she says, a frown obvious in her tone. “And I know there hasn’t been so much as a single ghost sighting since your little altercation with Skulker the other day. Would you know anything about that?”

Danny blinks, picking absently at an itchy scab at the corner of one eye. It’s harder to scratch with gloves on. “About, uh, about what?”

“Where have the ghosts gone?” She demands, tapping her foot impatiently. “Only something of terrible magnitude would have driven them all off. We suspected this storm was a new ghost’s doing, but the only one we’ve been able to catch even a hint of recently is you.” She sniffs. “And you’re a menace, alright, but you’re no Pariah Dark.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he says drily. Scratch scratch. “I wish I had an answer for you. All I know is that something bad has set up shop in the Nasty Burger.”

Even with her face hidden, Danny knows she’s giving him a look that clearly suggests that’s the understatement of the year. “Fifteen people are dead, Phantom. I doubt that means much to you, but we’ve never had dealings with any ghosts that came with a list of fatalities.”

Fifteen people are dead. “…It’s not a ghost.”

She scoffs. “It has to be. What else could possibly cause this sort of concentrated mayhem?”

“I don’t know,” Danny says quietly. “But… I think I can make it leave.”

“That’s it? Make it leave?” She sounds unimpressed, disappointed even. Danny doesn’t blame her. “What’s to ensure it won’t come back?”

“Nothing. But this—” he gestures at the sky, and at the Nasty Burger, and at the growing crowd of not-people-not-ghosts walking calmly toward him that he knows she can’t see, “—is beyond anything either of us can handle. I can’t punch the problem away, and I’m pretty sure there’s no gun big enough to take it out either. This is the only option.”

She doesn’t look the least bit mollified, but well, there’s not much he can do about that. “Are you certain you can remove this… entity from Amity Park?”

She asks so calmly, like she’s asking him to take out the trash. As if it could ever be so easy, so passive. Danny doesn’t have a clue what—who—is waiting for him inside the Nasty Burger, but if it came to blows he knows there isn’t a chance at surviving.
Well, it’s not like there’s a chance at surviving anyway.

For a second, for one tiny fraction of time ticked away in his internal clock, Danny thinks, *I should tell her the truth*. He should tell her, about the accident, about all his late nights out fighting ghosts, about how sorry he is, for making her and his dad worry so much, and his grades, and everything else. But—

But he’s going to die today. He knows this, like he knows the distance of every planet in the solar system from the Sun, and the length of their orbits and their days. He’s going to die, and how could he possibly look his mother in the eye and tell her that?

He closes his eyes, and the moment passes. Better to let her think her son died human, skipping school and just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Better to have her think him a victim rather than the cause. “Give me ten minutes,” he hears himself say. “It should be safe, after that.”

“Should be?” Maddie echoes dubiously, but he’s already pushed off from the asphalt, risking a few scant feet of leverage. His eyes are burning, hot and stinging and dry. There are people in black suits dotted around the Nasty Burger as far as he can see in every direction. There must be a hundred of them, at least, and more are gathering still. And none of the humans notice. No one can stop this, except him.

He looks back at Maddie, managing a smile. Famous last words, Phantom. What are they going to be?

“Thank you,” he says.

Maddie cranes her neck to look up at him, her hand dropping from her hip in what can only be surprise. “For what?”

*Everything.*

Danny flies away before he can regret not saying more.

__________________________________________________________________________

He hesitates at the front door, hovering over the unsettlingly still bodies only inches beneath his trailing feet. Their masks and bulky protective gear render them shapeless, genderless, barely human at all. But they are. They were.

He passes them by. There's nothing else he can do.

Inside, it seems dimmer than usual, although a quick glance at the ceiling confirms all of the lights are still on. Maybe it's the quiet then, that makes it seem so much more somber. Not once has he ever walked into the Nasty Burger and not been accosted by the usual chaotic rabble of a fast food joint. Of course, there's no one left alive to take or make orders, to work the grill or the drive-thru, to make a fruitless attempt at keeping the bathrooms halfway sanitary.

Fifteen people are dead here, because of him.

Swallowing, he forces himself to look at the bodies heaped in booths and lumped across the linoleum. The vague shape of a person dressed in the same bright yellow as the others outside, sprawled just a few feet away from the glass door. An older man, his drink cupped in one loose
hand. A younger man, headphones still warbling in his deaf ears. A pair of young women, barely out of their teenage years, one of their phones buzzing fruitlessly on the table. A mother and her son, who can't be more than eight years old, slumped against each other like dolls. A woman in a drab raincoat, collapsed by the soda machine. He can't see behind the counter from where he stands, but there must be people dead somewhere, to account for the five he can't see. He can't smell anything burning, or hear the shrill beeping of machinery. Is there some kind of emergency shutdown? Or is the thing that killed them all responsible for keeping the building from going up in smoke as well? If that's the case, why?

Whatever the case may be, there's no blood or gore, no signs of distress. It's like everyone decided it was nap time and fell asleep where they were. Almost. They're all too still, their jaws and eyelids too slack, their chests unmoving. There's no convincing himself this is a magic spell he can break if he defeats the monster waiting for him.

The monster, in this case, looks very much like an old man enjoying a large helping of curly fries and a Coke.

"It's about time you showed up, Danny," the old man says, not looking up from his meal.

British accent. Black suit. Slicked back dark hair. Gaunt enough to look like a skeleton wearing someone else’s skin. Danny’s throat clicks when he swallows. "W-who are you?"

"I would think that was obvious." He gestures with one lax hand at the bodies around them, as if that was any answer at all.

“A serial killer?” Damn his traitorous mouth. Now is really not the time for jokes.

The old man wipes his hands clean with a cheap paper napkin and finally looks up, pinning Danny in place with strangely large and glittering eyes. "And here I thought you were halfway intelligent. Clearly I was mistaken."

He looks away, and Danny shudders with helpless relief. The old man might be an old man in shape and size, but like the not-people-not-ghosts in black suits, Danny is certain he is something else entirely. Danny’s eyes neither itch nor burn when he looks away from the old man, but something like dread squeezes his chest. Not a ghost, but something terrible—something final—all the same.

“Are—are you Death?”

That isn’t the question he meant to ask, but it’s what comes out of his mouth all the same. The moment he asks it though, he realizes there was nothing else to ask. He can feel the truth pressing against his eyelids, an unseen swell of power filling the restaurant like cold seawater rushing through the glass, like the beating of vast wings. For some weird reason, Danny thinks of finger puppets, and then wonders how much of whatever monster is frowning at him has squeezed itself into the shape of an old man, and how much is looming somewhere else, out of sight.

The old man doesn’t smile, but the unimpressed furrow between his eyebrow smoothes away and he nods, satisfied. “Slow, but not an idiot. I can work with that. Come along now, Danny, your burger is getting cold.”

“My...?” Danny dares to walk closer—and it is a dare, because he doesn't have a clue what this old man, this thing that freely agrees to be called Death, is capable of. Even less certainly, he doesn't know what Death wants with him. The obvious, as Vlad had been so afraid of? Or something else?

Core hammering, ectoplasm racing, lungs dead weights in his ghostly chest, he makes it to the booth
before his legs lock up out of sheer fear. He grips the back of the upholstered seat to keep himself upright, and his eyes fall to the table. There, opposite Death, is a tray with his favorite combo, including ketchup for his fries.

“Sit,” Death says, gesturing again with a curly fry. “Eat. I have it on good authority that you've had hardly anything in days.”

“Oh yeah?” Danny asks, attempting bravado and managing something just lower than a squeak as he eases into the booth. He knocks one knee against the table leg bolted to the tile and nearly spills both their sodas as he jerks, too twisted up with fear to even gasp.

Death raises one eyebrow, waiting patiently for him to recover. It’s a kindness Danny has learned never to expect from his enemies. To show weakness is to show an opening. He expects mockery at best, an attack he doesn’t have a chance of blocking at worst.

But Death? Death only waits.

“W-who?” Danny manages to ask eventually.

“My Reapers,” Death replies promptly, as if there had never been a lull in the conversation.

“Your—your what?”

“The—” He says a word that Danny can’t make heads or tails of, something that buzzes and clicks like cicadas in summer, or maybe it rolls out of Death’s throat and smacks itself against his long white teeth, or maybe it hums and sighs like a lullaby. Maybe it does all of those, and more. “You might recognize them for their uniforms.”

Uniforms? What could that…. “The people in black suits?”

“Precisely.” He pauses to take a long suck of his soda, the shifting ice in his cup shockingly loud. Danny twitches. Death ignores him. “My Reapers. Recruits from every inhabitable plane and planet, uniquely wondrous creatures with abilities compatible with the duties they fulfill under my name.”

Danny bites the raw meat that used to be the inside of his cheek. “They kill people.”

“Not at all,” Death replies lightly. “People, by definition, have limited lifespans. The body runs down like the badly maintained machinery it is, and once it dies, my Reapers come to collect the mind—soul, spirit, ghost—” Another look pinning him in place. “—whatever you’d prefer to call it, and take it onwards.”

“Onwards where?”

“Wherever it wants to be taken.”

Hardly an answer at all, but Danny finds he isn't surprised. Death talks down to him like a lot of adults did when he was younger, and how a few still do now. He’s too young, or too inexperienced, or too stupid to know the full answer. He ignores the unsaid jab and says, “They've been stalking me.”

“They have a justified interest in you,” Death corrects. “As they do anyone who might join their ranks.”

“Join their—what?”
Death rests his elbows on the table, slotting his long fingers together. Danny tries to focus on the bulging joints, the blueberry veins snaking across sinewy tendons, the neatly trimmed nails—anything that can keep him from meeting Death’s eyes. “And now we get to the heart of the matter; the reason I have set aside some time in my frightfully busy schedule to see you.”

Not for the first time, Danny wishes he could have stolen a little more than a cat nap here and there. He’s exhausted. His brain may as well be a bowl of old jello for the good it’s doing him. He could die at any moment, and his last words might just be another repetition of what? what? because he can’t keep up with what might be the most important conversation of his short life. Shaking his head, he says, “I’m sorry, you’ve lost me—”


Reluctantly, Danny unwraps his burger and takes a bite. As soon as the flavor hits his tongue his stomach lurches, demanding food immediately. The stilted conversation halts entirely as he devours his burger and most of his fries and milkshake, stopping only when he can’t eat another bite. He hadn’t realized how hungry he’d been.

“Better?” Death asks with a quirk of one eyebrow. Danny nods.

“Yeah, loads. Sorry. I—your Reapers kind of…” He fumbles, not sure how to put complete mind-numbing terror into words. “…freak me out.”

“They can have that effect on those more sensitive to the supernatural,” Death says, nodding as if he understood perfectly what Danny had been incapable of expressing. “However, I must assume you haven’t seen their true shapes, considering your reaction to them.”

“Um.” He thinks of dinner a few nights ago, doing dishes when the strange and frightening thing appeared behind his family. “Once, I think.”

“The scratches on your face,” Death adds patiently. “You’ve only been able to see their human masks, but clearly you suspected something more.”


“The scales are falling from your eyes, of course. But you’re doing a poor job of it. Allow me.” Before Danny can ask what he means Death—well, Death doesn’t move, but something happens all the same. Danny feels a hard, painless tug against his eyelids, like pulling dead skin from an old blister. Even though it doesn’t hurt his eyes water and he has to blink several times. Carefully he touches a hand to his face and finds—nothing. The scabs around his eyes are gone, healed in an instant. Whatever else Death did, Danny can’t tell.

“What did you do?” Danny asks.

“Gave you a little push. You’ll see my Reapers truly now, and no doubt more besides.”

“You don’t look any different.”

Death pins him again, staring wide and unblinking. “Don’t I?” he asks softly.

Danny looks away first, his core and hidden-away heart thumping for no reason he can figure out. “Y-you said something about joining your Reapers. What did you mean?”

“I meant that I make it my business to keep an eye out for remarkable creatures that deal in death, or the dead. Creatures such as yourself.”
“And Vlad,” Danny adds. “You’ve talked to him before.”

“Not long after his accident.” He puts a curious emphasis on the word, amusement maybe? Danny can’t be sure. “I would have been to see you sooner, but there was some nasty business I had to sort out first.” That was definitely amusement there. Danny’s tempted to ask, but decides against it. He doesn’t want to know what Death considers to be ‘nasty business.’

“He’s terrified of you,” Danny says. “I talked to him, last night. He was locked up in his lab with all the lights off, going on about all these sigils and how I must have broken one to have gotten in.”

“Vlad is a coward,” Death says with an unpleasant curl to his thin mouth, “And often a fool as well. I suppose twenty years has been long enough for my offer to have…” He licks his teeth, considering his word choice. “... warped in that addled head of his. He ought to no better than to think any ward he could paint would keep me out.”

Danny swallows, summoning up his courage. “What do you want with us?” Unsaid, Are you going to kill me?

“Consider this a job interview,” Death says blithely. “For—Reaping?” Killing?

Death seems to suspect what Danny’s incredulous expression means. “Collecting,” he says. “People die every second, Danny. The meat is sorted out by other people, but it’s a Reaper’s job to care for the soul. That is what I’m asking of you. A contract with me, to work for me, to ensure the dead pass on and don’t end up as another ghost obsessed over bubble wrap.”

“I….” Danny leans back in his seat, dragging a gloved hand through his hair. “Mister, I’ve never even had a regular job. What makes you think I’m remotely qualified to be a—to do any of that?”

“I don’t mean now, obviously,” Death says with a roll of his eyes. “I have no use for you while you still have a pulse. I meant once you’ve died.”

“...Oh.” Oh. “I, uh. I never thought about what would happen, y’know. After.”

“Many don’t,” Death replies. “However, I doubt you would want to spend eternity doing exactly what you’ve been doing since you pressed that button in your parents’ machine.”

“What do you mean, eternity? Don’t tell me I’m gonna be immortal or something because of the stupid accident, especially since you just said this whole Reaping thing could only be a thing once I died.”

Death’s eyes glitter, like stars twinkling through Earth’s thin atmosphere. “Has it not occurred to you to ponder the full ramifications of your accident? Have you not considered, knowing even a fraction of your parents’ research, the extent of the damage done to your soul?”

Danny shakes his head, uncertain, anxiety creeping through his limbs again. “I—I don’t know—”

“A human heart irradiated by the ectoplasmic fallout of a concentrated explosion meant to tear a hole through reality to access a plane of existence incapable of sustaining life?” Death clicks his tongue. “The odds of one, let alone three, surviving such an ‘accident,’ are staggering even to me.”

Wait, three? “You talked to Danielle too?” Danny whispers, dread a stone in his belly. He regrets eating as much as he did.
“Of course,” Death says after another loud gulp of his Coke. “She agreed, you know.”

“To— to being a Reaper?”

“Yes, once I’d explained the duties in full.” Death glances out the window, to the milling crowds gathering beyond the barricades. “She was eager to have a purpose.”

A purpose, huh? The heavy weight of dread turns to a churning guilt; he really should have told his parents about her. Who knows where she could be? The ecto-dejecto stabilized her, sure, but for how long?

Later. He’ll track her down later. It’s sounding like there actually will be a later for him to do just that, now.

Danny leans forward. “Tell me everything,” he says, and Death smiles.

Later, Danny will think back and try to recall just how long he spent in the Nasty Burger, bodies cooling at his feet while an entity he had never imagined existing outside of a teenager’s vague grasp of mortality told him secrets and wonders and truths he could never share with anyone. It seems like no time at all passes, but when he and Death walk out the front doors night has fallen, and the crowds have dispersed, and there are two more bodies splayed bonelessly in the parking lot.

Danny’s face twists unhappily. “Did you have to kill them all?”

“This is where and when all these people were due to die,” Death replies. “There’s no sense of thinking of it as murder.”

“But—”

Death looks at him, and Danny falls quiet. Emergency lights flash in the distance, staining them both red and blue, blue and red. Not for the first time, Danny thinks he’s in way over his head. The small curl of Death’s mouth seems to agree.

“I won’t apologize for the mess,” Death says, placing both hands on his cane. “It’s not as if you’ll be the one cleaning this up anyway.”

“I doubt you’re the kind of person who apologizes for much,” Danny says, unable to help the wry grin that creeps across his face.

“I make it a point to never have to.” But the quirk of Death’s eyebrow is almost a smile too, so Danny grins a little wider. “I’ll be off now to see Vlad. It seems I need to remind him of the details of our last conversation.”

“Good luck,” Danny says, and surprises himself by meaning it.

“Don’t expect to see me again.” Death walks toward a classic white Cadillac Danny is certain wasn’t there before. “When you do, don’t bother hiding in a dark basement.”

“Let me know you’re coming and I’ll get some Nasty Burger, on me.”

Death nods, visibly amused, as he fishes a single key from his jacket pocket. “Another time then,
Danny. Oh, and say hello to Clockwork for me, would you? It’s been an age since we’ve spoken.”

Somehow, it doesn’t seem much of a stretch to imagine Death and Time knowing each other. When the Cadillac’s door opens there’s another swell of that unseen power, that shiver down his spine that makes Danny think of rushing water and beating wings and finger puppets. It wipes the smile from his face, and puts a smirk on Death’s.

Danny waves as Death drives off. As soon as the old car turns around a corner his ears pop, and the world comes into focus again.

“Phantom!” Someone calls out, and then other voices pick his name up as well. He nods at the vague shapes clustered on the curb, weariness weighing down his bones once more.

“It’s safe now!” he calls back. “It’s all taken care of!”

“What is?” Someone else shouts, and he’s almost positive it’s his mother. He considers answering, considers staying to help with the dead, but who would believe anything he said? Above, the black clouds rumble and flash with purple lightning, and it begins to rain at last.

Danny smiles, the expression unseen by any of the humans in the darkness, and flies away.

Tucker’s at Sam’s house, as he expected. When he phases, soaking wet, through the closed window the two of them swear and shout at length, questions interspersed between the exclamation points. Neither of them really seem to expect answers from him, relieved just to see him again, until Sam pauses.

“What did you do to your eyes?” she asks with a slow and slightly worrying alarm. Danny touches a hand to his face, frowning.

“The scratches?” he asks uncertainly. They’re gone now, so what’s got her upset?

Tucker leans in too, squinting because he’s left his glasses on Sam’s desk. “Whoa, what the hell?” he asks, reaching out to tap a fingertip against the corner of his eye. It tingles, like the nerve damage he’d had in his pinkie for three weeks while his exaggerated healing abilities struggled to sort it out.

Danny swats his hand away with a glare. “Stop that! What’s wrong with you two?”

Sam takes his elbow and guides him to her dresser; more specifically, to the large mirror atop it. Danny blinks, and blinks again, and stares.

His eyes have changed, highlighter green from lid to lid now instead of just his iris. His pupils too, are green now, barely visible but for the slightest darkening in shades. “They’re like Vlad’s,” he murmurs, more to himself than to them.

“Where have you been?” Sam demands, with Tucker a step behind asking, “What happened, dude?”

He smiles at them both in the mirror, more tired than he can remember ever being, but happy. He understands now. He’s no longer afraid. He understands. “I got a job offer from the Grim Reaper,” he says. “Did you know he likes curly fries?”
Happy New Year's everybody! I killed 17 imaginary people for this fic.

ETA 12 Jan: Did some tidying up. I really hate how much AO3 wrecks the spacing when you use italics.

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