

Tuesday, October tenth.

Danny was not in the mood for this. He'd flunked an English test, had yet another ghost fight, and gotten detention because he'd skipped class for said ghost fight - and that was all in the last two hours. To see Dash Baxter barreling down the hall after him was the last thing he wanted to deal with, especially considering that he was fully capable of just slugging the guy and being done with it.

Still, that'd be two red slips in the same day - not a good idea.

He skidded around the corner, shoving past two band kids and hoping to make it out the front doors before Dash caught him. He could disappear into the crowd then, which was the most reliable way to get rid of the guy, and he could meet back up with Sam and Tucker. He saw the double doors at the end of the hall ahead - but Dash's footsteps were gaining on him, and he knew it would be close.

Dash made a wild grab, snagging the loop on Danny's backpack and practically yanking him off his feet. Danny yelped; that, according to the brute, was a good sound, and he slammed him up against the side of a locker with one hand. "I know you did it," he growled, jamming the first finger of his free hand into Danny's chest and making him wince, "You're the one that left that bear in the locker room! Now all the guys know he's mine! You think I'm ever gonna live that down?"

Danny kicked uselessly. "Hey, hold on - you can't prove it was me! How would I even get down there anyways - I'm not even on the team - !"

"Shut up! It was *so* you!" Dash snapped, "Don't try and tell me it wasn't! I don't even care how you did it! Now they're never gonna let me hear the end of it, and I'm gonna take that outta your hide!"

Danny twisted at the last second out of Dash's grip, landing on his knees on the tiles and scrambling back up into a run again. So maybe he had stolen Dash's teddy bear and left it in the footballer's locker room - but it served him right for the time last week he'd thrown a tray of chocolate-pudding-and-ketchup slurry at lunch and it had landed right on Danny's head. He wasn't about to forget about that one.

Dash charged out the front doors after him but Danny had already disappeared. He paused on the front steps, trying to pick him out of the after-school crowd, but it was as if he'd vanished into thin air. With a grumble to himself, and a promise to get the runt back tomorrow, he stalked back inside.

Danny peered out from under the side of the steps. He hated to rely on the tricks of the dead at school, but it was faster to disappear from sight than it was to actually find a real place to hide, and he'd only had a split second to make that call. He watched Dash turn and head back into the building, and let all his breath out.

"Don't think I didn't see you do that."

Danny whirled, a half-formed excuse already coming to mind as if he could really explain himself; standing in the shade under the tree by the parking lot stood Westley Weston, basketballer and self-proclaimed exposé of the paranormal. He was leaning up against the bark, arms crossed, and he didn't look happy.

"Goddammit, what do you want," Danny griped, as if he didn't already know. The whole day was just not on his side, and he was beginning to think he'd be better off calling it quits and going home rather than hanging out with Sam and Tucker.

Weston frowned back. "I wanted to make sure you knew I saw you do that. This, just now, and that fight you had with that other ghost earlier. You're not even being careful anymore - you know what would have happened if it had been someone else instead of me standing here?"

"They would have looked less like a fucking weirdo than you, that's what," said Danny, just to be irritating. If the snarl that Weston failed to suppress was any indication, it was working. "Don't suppose you have anyplace better to be? Like - literally anywhere except for here?"

Weston shook his head, temper dissolving into a smug tight-lipped smile. "Nope. Rastburg cancelled practice. I've got the whole night free. You? Oh, wait, let me guess - you're going to be so busy hanging out with your two entire friends. Don't they ever get tired of you?"

"Don't you?" Danny shot back. He turned, deciding the conversation was over, and hitched the backpack up onto his shoulders again. He contemplated flipping Weston off as he passed, but ultimately decided against it.

The hand on his shoulder made him pause. He wasn't about to turn and meet Weston's eyes - he was certain he had that insufferable smug look again, and he didn't really want to see it - but he heard Weston's voice drop to a threatening half-whisper.

"You'd better watch yourself, Phantom. I heard you're busy this time of year. Wouldn't want to let anything slip, would you?"

Danny shrugged him off. He told himself not to worry too much but it was too late - normally he could shrug the guy off, and normally he could get away with an extra-bastardy maneuver or two, but this time around the guy had been right: October had already started off busy, and he had a bad feeling about this upcoming Halloween. Traditionally, it was the most feared and haunted night of the year; that meant, unless he kept a lid on things, that it was shaping up to be a disaster. Nightly patrols were a must, with or without homework; unfortunately, that guaranteed that Weston would be out on his own ghost hunts looking to bother him. Maybe, he thought, he could get in some extra snide remarks then.

Danny wondered what a guy like that would do if he came face-to-face with an actual, bonafide angry ghost. He'd seen some of Danny's ghost fights before - most of the people in town had, at one point or another - but it had always been ghost-versus-ghost, and somehow trying to imagine ghost-versus-Weston didn't feel real. Danny couldn't see the guy flat-out squaring up to duke it out, but he couldn't see him running away, either.

To be fair, though, imagining Skulker or Johnny Thirteen or even Technus pummeling the shit out of him was pretty satisfying.

No, that wasn't quite right either. If it was Weston-versus-Technus, they'd probably just get into a shouting match, and Danny wasn't sure if he wanted to watch that. If it was Johnny, he thought - there was a guy who would deck somebody first and ask questions later. Danny might even pay money to watch that fight.

He paused on the corner of Carter Street and Seventh. Down one way, he could see the sign for the Nasty Burger; Sam and Tucker were probably already halfway there, and he knew they were expecting him. On the other hand, it really had been a rough day, and if he was honest he wanted to go face-down in his room and call it quits. As amusing as it was to imagine Weston getting in over his head with perilous antics, he knew he'd still see him later when he was out on patrol.

Well, maybe he wouldn't see him, but he was certain that he'd be seen *by* him, and that didn't make him feel any better.

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Danny was out of the house as soon as the sun went down. He'd been grounded after handing over the red slip he'd earned earlier, and at dinner he'd announced he was going to stay in his room all night and not make a sound and sulk about it; he'd left his bedroom door locked for good measure, and had, to his credit, waited until it had gotten fully dark before transforming and flying off.

Tonight, he decided pretty early on, was going to be a stress-relief night. Aside from the fact that he'd no doubt be plenty busy, he had been promised a visit from Weston even if it hadn't been put into those words. On the plus side, he'd been warned in advance and wasn't about to get sloppy; on the other hand, though, he had a feeling he'd have to root the guy out if he wanted to actually see him. If he didn't, it would feel like he was being snooped on - which was not only the most accurate statement, but also the least satisfying.

For the moment, he flew high and unseen over the streets of Amity Park. The moon was hidden behind a thick cover of clouds, casting a fuller darkness than the past few nights; for him, that was a non-issue, and he paused for a moment over the dollar store to see if he could spot anything.

The sharp taste of winter in the back of his throat was the only signal he needed that he was on the right track. With a silent sigh of release, he flew on, following the instinct in his core and letting it guide him to the end of the block. He'd been learning to trust that instinct a little further in these matters; when he'd first been figuring out his powers, and figuring out the balance of life and death in general, he'd hated to listen to it at all, and had shunned everything it suggested in revulsion. He'd realized - rather, he was still reminding himself - that it and him weren't necessarily at odds, and it could lead him almost right to an offending spirit if he listened.

He sunk lower over the pavement, close enough that his fingers could brush the tops of the streetlights if he reached down, and paused over a corner convenience store. There was definitely something in there, and he phased down through the roof without a sound. He didn't care much who it might have been - he was itching for a fight, and when he was done the thermos would suck everything up.

The specter appeared roughly in the shape of a raccoon. It was easily Danny's size, and was rooting through the shelves for chips and pretzels; when it sensed Danny it paused, bag of Doritos still in its raccoon-hands, and the end of its snout twitched as if it could sniff him out. It spotted him, hissed, and then pounced.

Danny was hoping for a half-decent fight. If he were less irritated, he might have taken it down with an ectoblast or two and been done with it, but his core prodded him toward a rougher brawl and he ended up charging the thing in a full-body tackle. They both went through the soda coolers and out into the alley behind the building, and the spirit clawed itself away from him, scampered a few paces out, turned back, and hissed again.

Danny hissed back without even questioning it. He still had plenty of punches in him, and he went after the mischievous spirit again - he struck it once, twice, and shoved it into the side of the dumpster. It scrambled, shrieking, and smacked him upside the head with one flailing hand in its bid for escape; he grabbed it by the tail to keep it from vanishing into thin air, made a grab for his thermos with his free hand, and sucked the screeching thing up.

That hadn't been horribly satisfying. He grumbled to himself, pushing off into the air again, and then sighed. He and his core were in agreement all of a sudden - *you really do want to destroy some things, don't you?* - and he flew off again in search of another malevolent spirit.

For an early October night, it was slow; the best thing he found in the course of an hour was that bad-luck shadow that Johnny Thirteen kept as a pet, and even that didn't put up a good enough fight for his liking. He thought, with the shadow now in the thermos along with four other ghosts, about staying out and picking some more fights. He'd not only defeated everything that came his way so far, but he'd done it almost without breaking a sweat. As far as he was concerned, he was just getting warmed up.

He caught a flash of movement behind the Nasty Burger and flew down without thinking twice. Nevermind that he hadn't sensed any sort of spirit down there - he wasn't done yet, and whatever hid in the shadows was going to be thrown into the thermos as well.

What he found in the shadows behind the Nasty Burger was, unfortunately, not a ghost. It was Weston, glowering down at the night-vision camera in his hand and muttering under his breath, and - by the looks of it - he hadn't noticed Danny yet. He'd probably been watching him beat up ghosts for the past hour, which was less-than-great, but Danny took the opportunity to be a bastard where he could get it.

"Having problems?" he asked, appearing in the air over Weston's head. He had his arms crossed, and was giving Wes the smug look he hated so much.

Weston nearly jumped out of his skin, turning his own gaze and the camera back up towards him in almost the same movement. "Fenton! I knew you were out here - "

Danny's smug grin vanished. He knew that, although it would come out distorted, the camera was still recording him, and he hated having to jump through those kinds of hoops during an interaction. *Well, so much for being a bastard.* "I told you to quit calling me that."

Weston, although trying, was not as cool as he'd been earlier. "Give it up, Fenton, we both know it's you. I've got proof this time! You can't just - "

"You haven't proved *shit*," said Danny, floating a little lower but still keeping himself out of arm's reach, "Now fuck right on outta here and let a guy live his afterlife, will ya? I've been real busy and you don't wanna get caught in the crossfire. You really don't. Trust me on that one."

Weston held his ground. "Yeah? Or what? You can't make me - "

Danny's irritated core jabbed him into action. "*I said fuck off!*" he barked, dropping so that he and Weston were face-to-face and giving him a hard prod with one finger.

Weston flinched. He took a step back, apparently having decided that he had better places to be than the back lot of the Nasty Burger, and dropped his gaze. "Fine. Maybe I will. But we'll both be back at this again tomorrow and you know it." He glanced down at the camera, which, although no longer pointed at Danny, was still in one hand, and took another step back. "You can't keep this up forever, Fenton." Then he turned and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Danny watched him go. Part of him wanted to give chase, but he knew it wasn't worth it. It wasn't just as if he could land a few hits and shove a human being into a thermos - no matter how satisfying that would be - and if he were to get into a fistfight he'd probably regret it later. Still, no matter what the guy would say later on in his defense, Danny had *definitely* made him jump, which was better than nothing.

Still not wholly satisfied, he took to the skies again. He was just getting warmed up, and he was itching for a good fight.

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It was nearly midnight, and Westley Weston crept back inside through his bedroom window. He hated doing that - especially when he knew full well that Fenton could just fly in and out of his own room whenever he felt like it - but it was the only way to keep his own parents from knowing he was out. He, like Fenton, would probably be in trouble if he was caught.

He fumbled for the switch on the bedside lamp and clicked it on, blinking a few times at the brightness, and set the camera down on the shelf over his desk. It hadn't been fully charged when he'd gone out, and had run out of juice earlier - it had gone dead at just about the same time that Phantom had caught him, and he wasn't quite certain how much of the encounter had been recorded. He was hoping for all of it - that would make it easy to drag-and-drop into the folder on his laptop, and he wouldn't have to do any extra filling-out in the notes about what else had happened - but he wouldn't be sure until he was able to review the footage.

He dug out the charger cord from under the bed, plugged one end into the camera, and set it down on the floor so that it could charge for a few minutes. He turned then to the laptop, which he always kept on the charger if he was home, and flipped the lid open. He yawned. To hell with midnight - he still had to go through the bits he'd gotten on tape, and probably stitch a few of them together with some masterful editing, before he could get any sleep. He glanced over at the camera. It hadn't woken up yet.

He stretched out, got himself comfortable, made a half-assed attempt at untangling the earbuds on the bedside table before giving up and shoving one of them in anyway, and pulled up the half-finished project he was working on. He'd been getting better shots lately, although that was mostly because Phantom was always out more in October than any other month; something about more ghosts near Halloween, he remembered Fenton saying a few days ago. He didn't mind that. It just meant he could get the proof he needed, and he knew that Danny would rather go after any old ghost than him anyway.

The camera made a small *ping!* to indicate that it was charging, and he fished another cable out from under the bed. This one connected the laptop to it directly, and he pulled the files onto the desktop so that he could sort them. He'd been out for almost an hour, but most of it was going around in the dark trying to keep up with Phantom's antics - no sense in keeping any of that nonsense, only the good bits, and he quickly got to work chopping off the pieces that he didn't need. *Let's see here - looks like he's going after that one, keep that bit, and - is that a raccoon? Raccoons can even be ghosts? Who knew.*

Paring the footage down didn't take him long. He skimmed over most of it, and the end result was a smashed-together file of about fifteen minutes. That was manageable. He nodded to himself, yawned again, and then turned his attention to the end of the video. How much of their conversation, if that was what it even was, had he caught? With luck, he'd have it all, and he could cut out that bit at the beginning where Phantom had startled him. Nevermind that it made up for the fact that he'd startled Fenton earlier - it was *uncool*, and he didn't need it. Hell, he was beginning to think he'd wasted all his cool points earlier. He really had been fumbling around, hadn't he? *Shit*. Maybe he'd just cut the dialogue out and grab a few choice stills instead.

*"Having problems?"* Jesus, did the guy have to be so goddamned smug?

*"You can't prove shit."*

*"Fuck right on outta here."*

It appeared that he'd recorded the entire encounter. That was a relief - or, at least, it would have been, if it weren't for the last second-and-a-half of the recording.

*"I said fuck off!"* Danny had dropped well within Westley's personal space, and the camera had gotten a close-up. It hadn't been in full focus - that was frustratingly out-of-reach, especially considering that he was no photographer - but in the final frames the details were unmistakable. There was a flash of something in Phantom's eyes, too bright for the night-vision to record; one frame, no matter that it was blurry, showed him something that almost looked like too many teeth; when he traced Phantom as he'd dropped, one frame at a time, he *swore* he hadn't been quite so thin. The kid was scrawny, even when he occupied his *normal human* body - but for his stronger ghost form to appear skeletal, especially considering he'd looked fine a second before when he was taunting Wes in the first place? What was up with that?

Wes set the clip aside for further examination. He knew he'd have to go over it later with a fine-tooth comb, and sort out all the rest of the details. There was the possibility that Phantom's form had just blurred into the surrounding darkness; the flashing eyes would probably help out that theory, he reasoned - that, and the fact that he'd never, ever, in his whole life, been able to get a perfectly clear shot of the guy in the first place. He was certain that Phantom knew about that, and was doing it on purpose to spite him. The guy really was insufferable.

For the time being, though, Wes had to get some sleep. He wondered, not for the first time, how Fenton could even function at all with a schedule like that. Then again, he came to school half the time looking like a ghost already, even if it wasn't in the literal sense.

*Yeah*, he thought, stowing the laptop away and turning over to get some sleep. *That tracks.*

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Friday, October thirteenth.

Danny was still irritable. He hadn't seen Weston since he'd caught him the other night, but he knew that didn't mean he was gone. It just meant that the guy could be - and probably was - around any given corner, and if Danny had the time he'd probably sniff him out.

Considering that he'd filled up the thermos twice over during the course of the week, that was a big fucking *if*.

At least the fights were getting better. After tangling with Johnny Thirteen's shadow the other night, he'd also discovered the Box Ghost's latest hangout - now there was a ghost, Danny thought, that knew how to take a few hits. He wasn't a guy who was too good at landing them, but that just made Danny's afterlife easier.

His core seemed to be settling back down again, too. It had taken him a few nights to notice how punchy it had become in the first place, but he attributed it to October and didn't think much else of it. It was a relief, in a way; it meant he didn't have to grapple with himself so much, and it meant that his focus was a little sharper and he could concentrate a little better.

That, in turn, meant he could hunt down and punch more ghosts.

He flew up, following the instinct of his core, and scanned the cityscape. Friday, October thirteenth, and he'd only caught two stray specters so far. He knew there were more out there. They couldn't hide from him. He took off, letting his gut lead him, and found himself at the abandoned factory at the edge of town. There was going to be a fight in there, he could feel it, and he hoped it was going to be a good one.

He floated inside, eyes glinting but otherwise unseen, and had a look around. Oh, yeah, there was *definitely* a ghost in here, hopefully several. He paused, listened, and turned slowly toward an enormous disused boiler. *Something* was hiding around, either inside the thing or in its shadow. The ring of irradiated green in his periphery allowed him to cut through the darkness, and he caught a flash of movement in the shadow. *Excellent.*

He failed to foresee the trap until he was caught in it. Something tangled around his ankle and he was yanked out of the air; he landed roughly, twisted around, and was ensnared a second later with another attack. He tried to pull himself back up, but was rendered nearly immobile and managed only to turn himself over.

From the shadow by the boiler emerged none other than Skulker, who had undoubtedly set the trap in the first place - he was armed, of course, and the business end of his ecto-cannon was aimed at Danny. The look on his face was one of long-awaited hunger for battle; when he spoke, his voice was rough. "We meet again, whelp. Perhaps this time will be our last."

Danny growled. Sparks of ectoplasmic energy crackled at his fingertips; the temper in his core flared in an instant - *come on, now we're talking, let's get him, let's really tear him to shreds!* - and he conjured and released an ectoblast that threw the ghost off his feet. He tore himself free of the webbing-trap that had caught him, went back up into the air again, and stared down at Skulker. Unblinking, he pulled the thermos off his belt and held it arm's length for a moment before dropping it somewhere into the shadows. "Fight me," he demanded, "Let's fuckin' go."

Skulker flew up to match him. "*Gladly*, and when I win I'll have your head mounted on a stick!"

All of a sudden that seemed like an idle threat. Danny made the first move, vanishing into the air and reappearing beside the brute to land a solid punch upside the head, and skirted up out of the way of three blasts from the ecto-cannon. He went in again, but Skulker was faster; his giant hand snatched Danny's head out of the air and threw him back, and Danny crashed into the side of some forgotten piece of machinery.

"You think you can best me? *Hah!* You're not even trying!" Skulker crowed, but they both knew he was enjoying himself. This, as far as he was concerned, was a real fight, and to him those were an increasingly rare occurrence.

Danny caught himself in the air and hovered for a moment, shaking the dizziness out of his head. His core fueled him and heightened his senses - *crush him! make him bleed!* - and his face brightened into a wicked and shark-toothed grin. He sensed the next attack before he saw it: the hunter was coming at him again, and he pulled both feet up for a double-barrel donkey kick -

Skulker grabbed him by the ankle and hurled him across the empty factory floor. He skipped, tumbled, and skidded to a halt; his mind scrambled to reorient him, but for a moment all he registered

was that he'd taken damage. The static dulled slowly, and he pushed himself up. One bony hand brushed gingerly under his nose, coming away stained and glowing - *sonofabitch, I'll get him for that* - and his resolve hardened.

"You disappoint me, whelp," Skulker was floating over him with a grin of crooked teeth and arrogance, and when Danny glowered up at him he just laughed. "Is that all it takes to defeat a ghost like you? You promised me a *real* fight!"

Danny lunged, refusing to be outdone even by a ghost twice his size; the two of them flew back in tandem, exchanging strikes in a near-seamless flurry, and Danny was certain that he'd beat Skulker into the dust this time. Nevermind that he'd never stood a chance before then, at least hand-to-hand - pent-up stress and his aggressive core were both pushing him onward, and he wasn't about to quit.

Skulker was the first to break the exchange, floating back to put some distance between them and giving Danny a pleased nod. "You're holding your ground, I see - I'd almost say it would be a shame to flay you, even if your pelt would make an excellent trophy."

"You want my skin so bad then come and take it," Danny hissed through his teeth, holding the hunter's stare and daring him to make the next move. Despite that his rational mind was beginning to doubt whether he'd actually defeat Skulker or not, his core was thriving on the conflict, and it had gained more of a foothold in his consciousness than he'd allowed it in the past. He was having the time of his afterlife, and when he was done he'd fetch his thermos and mop up the pieces. It was easier, too, that he and Skulker were on the same page - he noticed that the ecto-cannon had been eschewed in favor of a more old-fashioned brawl, and that meant Skulker was enjoying himself just as much as Danny was.

At the invitation, Skulker did make the next move. It was a full-body tackle, closing the space between them faster than Danny could react to, and one solid slug to the gut knocked him back into a stack of industrial steel barrels. The barrels toppled, and he flinched despite phasing through them so they wouldn't actually land on him; he locked onto the hunter again, fingers crackling with energy, and retaliated with a two-handed beam of blinding green.

His human mind was beginning to falter, but the malevolence in his core kept him going. The energy beams he produced, while powerful, were unhoneved; the attacks shot out in tesla-coil arcs, hitting their target but crackling almost in tune. He realized, as he only barely succeeded in avoiding another one of Skulker's punches, that it might no longer be a plain fistfight. It might be a *battle*, and that difference was a little more than he'd bargained for.

Skulker almost had him. Danny caught one of the hunter's fists mid-punch, and the hunter in turn caught his when he aimed to retaliate. It was a give-and-take but Skulker was bearing down on him; Danny had braced himself on one knee, holding off for the moment, but he could feel the wild temper of his core begin to shift into panic. The tell-tale buzz of static rose slowly in his ears.

He couldn't hold the hunter off.

Skulker knew it too. The crooked-toothed grin was back, and he pressed in a little closer. The hand over Danny's fist was crushing, cracking the knuckles one at a time. "Still think you can best me?"

Danny buckled. He'd wanted a fight but had gotten in over his head - *shit shit shit shit shit* - and the hunter wasn't about to let him go. He vanished through the concrete flooring a split-second before the hunter's fists would have crushed his skull, and reappeared in the air over his head a second later. He wasn't about to win this fight but he couldn't turn and run either; he ascended further, hoping to put a little more space between them. *Where the hell did you throw that thermos, what's wrong with you? goddammit, you fucking idiot!* He took his eyes off the hunter, but only for a second - he caught the dull glint of Fenton steel in the darkness and made a dive for it.

The instant he turned his back to the hunter, he was hit. Skulker's ecto-cannon was fired with deadly accuracy; it nailed him square between the shoulders, and he fell like a stone and smacked into the concrete. Something in him broke. The static was creeping into the edges of his vision but he did his best to shove it away - *just fucking get him, you're so close* - and swiped once at the clip of the thermos before

his fingers grasped onto it. He twisted over, threw the cap off, aimed, and hit the button on the side. The timing was too close. The thermos flashed, binding its target, and Skulker disappeared with a furious howl.

Then it was silence. Danny loosened all at once, but he'd still need a minute to regain his bearings; what he had to catch wasn't breath, exactly, but the fray of static was slow to retreat from his mind and only when it was gone could he calm back down at all. The spike of bloodlust in his core, at least, was sated for the time being.

He propped himself up carefully and began the damage assessment. If it hadn't been for the thermos - *why'd you toss it out, anyway? did you really think you were going to out-punch him?* - he'd have lost the fight. He came pretty close to losing it as it was; he'd taken a slew of hits, which would bloom into fierce bruises in a matter of minutes, and he was certain that something had snapped - just as well he didn't have to breathe, or he'd just irritate it - when he'd been shot down. The lower half of his face had been splattered in green from his bleeding nose, and his fingers came up first for a careful inspection on that. He discerned it wasn't broken, but one side of his jaw might have been. He made a slow and deliberate yawning motion, grimaced from the pain -

- and spat out a tooth. *Oh, fuck.* No wonder he'd bled so much. That entire side of his face burned and screamed when he moved, and he hesitated to investigate any further. It wasn't that important. It could wait. Goddamn, he wanted an ice pack.

He stared down at the tooth in his hand. It was whole, which for some reason surprised him, and stained with ectoplasm; he turned it over, almost in disbelief that he'd lost it - *all the fights you've had, and this is the first time you've had a tooth knocked out?* - and thought it must have been one of the canines, judging by the curved raptor-claw shape. He'd have a better look when he got home.

He willed himself up into the air - *carefully*, though - and picked up the thermos again. The nagging voice in his mind told him that October wouldn't wait, and that he'd have to be out again tomorrow if he wanted to stay on top of things, but what he really wanted was just to go home. He floated higher, spectral tail behind him like a comet's as he phased through the abandoned factory and out over the streets. He was in the air but he was still limping; he carried himself on the breezes and those only, and even then he allowed his body to hang thinly over the pavement to save him from wasting too much effort.

*Friday, October thirteenth. Wasn't it supposed to be luckier if you were dead?* He stared up at the neon sign mounted to the side of the Ops Center, and drifted in through his bedroom window. He collapsed onto the bed and wrenched himself back to life - his human body was blissfully unhurt, and he took a moment to decompress.

He still had the knocked tooth in one hand. He propped himself up on one side so he could take another look at it - what was he supposed to do with it, he asked himself. Tossing it out didn't feel right, and it wasn't as if he could leave it under his pillow and trade it for a silver dollar. Was he supposed to keep it, then? For what? It was a real nasty one, too, all hook-shaped and sawbladed, and only when he thought about it, in his room and when nothing *hurt*, did it occur to him that teeth weren't supposed to be shaped like that.

Teeth *weren't* supposed to be shaped like that. What in the hell happened? It was clearly *his* - where else would it have come from? He turned it over in his fingers, as if it would change its mind and turn out to be a more reasonable shape, and the more he tried to come up with an explanation the more it defied one. He ran the tip of his tongue along his teeth - *human* teeth, all of them, and he was certain he'd have noticed if something like that were to manifest inside his own mouth.

He had a feeling he wasn't going to get much sleep, if any. He knew his ghostly form healed quickly, so long as he kept himself fed, and in a few days he'd be alright - he'd have to wait and see if that meant the tooth would grow back. If it did, he'd have to see if the others were like it. Part of him doubted

it. That would be something he'd have known about, or at least *noticed*, wouldn't it? He set the tooth down on the bedside table next to his phone, as if he could forget about it and get any sleep.

He didn't get much.

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Monday, October sixteenth.

He'd almost gotten caught up on sleep, and had raided the fridge no less than four times over the course of the weekend. When his ghostly form healed after a particularly nasty fight, it always took the wind out of him, but keeping himself fed helped, and he knew that the disappearance of an entire rotisserie chicken would go mostly unnoticed. At the very least, it would be chalked up to his father's appetite instead of his own. That was fine, as far as he was concerned.

Mondays were usually tough, but this one seemed to slip through his fingers. Classes had all but blurred together, and by lunchtime he was in desperate need of a nap. He could see Sam and Tucker waiting for him in the cafeteria, and he made his way past three other crowded tables to join them. Sam looked up from what she'd been saying to give him a smile, and Tucker tossed him an extra bag of chips.

"You look like you had a rough weekend."

Danny nodded, fumbling the chips and leaving them on the table next to his tray. It was whatever-passes-for-sloppy-joes day, but at this point he was almost done caring what it might have passed for. A guy had to eat. "Yeah. Had a close fight with Skulker. Took last night off." Nevermind that he'd taken Saturday off, too; if he didn't make a mention of it, it somehow felt like less of a letdown.

"That bad?" said Tucker.

Danny nodded again. "Hoping it'll be down to bruises by tonight. Bet I'll look like a radioactive dalmatian."

Sam didn't think that was funny. "You know we could come with you if -"

"Don't," said Danny, "I mean - you don't have to. I'll be fine. Mondays are usually slow anyway. No big deal. Hell, if I catch Weston again I might even get to fuck around with him a little this time. I told you about last week, didn't I?"

"No," said Tucker, "What happened?"

Danny cracked a half-smile. "Caught him outside the Nasty Burger. You know how he's been going around with that stupid camera lately? One of these times I swear something'll happen to that thing, if he doesn't watch out for himself."

"You really wanna break his stuff?" said Sam.

Danny frowned. "That wasn't - if he got too close to a ghost fight or something, I meant. I'd bet money he's too stupid to stay out of the way."

"That, and ghost fights with you go all over the place," said Sam, "Half the times when me and Tucker are up on the roof spotting you we'll lose track of you. One of these days you gotta start keeping your shit together."

"Hey, you wanna try half this stuff? It's not as easy as it looks," said Danny, although that was only half-true. When he was out on patrol, he was better off the more he tuned into his ghastly instinct - even if that did make battles a little sloppy sometimes. Sam was still right on that one, even if he wouldn't say so out loud. "So maybe I'll see if tonight turns out a little closer to the vest. You guys were still on, right?"

"Yeah," said Tucker, "Things are getting a little crazy out there, man. We'll back you up."

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The three of them met up at dusk. Traditionally, the back lot behind the Nasty Burger was their meeting place; Danny was the last to show, considering his house was an extra three blocks, and he trotted up to Sam and Tucker as the last of the long evening shadows became complete. The sun disappeared behind the line of buildings to the west, and it wouldn't be longer than ten or fifteen minutes until the haze settled into fuller darkness.

"What're you thinking?" Tucker asked him, "The usual?"

Danny considered it. *The usual* meant that Sam and Tucker would be hanging out on a high rooftop and keeping an eye on the streets, and if it weren't for the persistent feeling in his gut he'd have agreed to that. For some reason, the evening felt off, although he couldn't place why, but he'd take it as a bad sign. "Yeah. Got a weird feeling about tonight, though."

"We'll keep an eye out," Sam promised, although to Danny it felt somehow empty, "Anything happens, we'll let you know."

Danny just nodded, shoving the feeling aside, and cast a quick glance to either side to make sure no one would see him transform. No matter how many times it happened, the feeling of death always took him off-guard: the way his heart suddenly sputtered out and quit, the cold that crawled into him like he'd been shoved into a snowbank in midwinter, the sharp spike in his senses as his core ignited and stretched out within him. The core, tonight, was unhappy; it was as if he'd woken a slumbering beast up from hibernation, and he knew that it was because it hadn't been allowed the time to fully heal from the Friday night fights. He felt alright, though - he stretched out, hoping not to be too sore. He wasn't.

He turned, already in the air, and offered Tucker and Sam each a thin hand. The apartment complex, although abandoned, wasn't haunted, and he pulled them both up and onto the roof. "I'm starting back on that side," he glanced over to the scattered suburbs to the north. "Just to get it over with. I'll check back in ten."

Sam just nodded and watched him fly off.

Danny swept across the closely-knit city streets, coming up in a vague parabola to avoid the overpass that separated the downtown area from the suburbs. This side of town was quieter, and as a result he didn't get up here as much; to see it after dusk was calming most of the time, although it did nothing for the odd feeling in his gut. The feeling had come up when he'd slipped out of his room earlier, and the transformation seemed to irritate it. It wasn't that he was still particularly hurt - he made sure of that - but he still couldn't put his finger on it.

The thought back, all of a sudden, to the malformed tooth that he'd left on his bedside table. He'd forgotten - no, he'd *wanted* to forget - all about it, and the thought of it made him pause midair. *Did it grow back?* As soon as he even wondered, his tongue came up to the side of his mouth and began poking around. There didn't seem to be a gap - if there was, he wouldn't be able to leave it alone and he knew it - but he suddenly placed the *off* feeling, and the realization smashed him over the head.

He hadn't had this many teeth before.

He dropped, knowing he had to find a parked car's windshield or storefront window or anything even mildly reflective, just to see what had happened if nothing else. Trying to imagine what it looked like without being able to actually see it yet was difficult - *what about Sam and Tuck, why didn't they say anything?* - and he landed on a narrow side street by a dormant semi truck. The rearview would have to do. Almost dreading what he'd find, he stared himself down and opened up his mouth.

At first glance, and as long as he didn't open wide enough, nothing appeared much different. The two fangs in the front, which he'd had since the beginning, were still there, and as sharp as ever; it was the first one behind that, he remembered, that Skulker had knocked out, and that was the one that was all hooks. The one on the other side matched, he found, and inset behind them there were *more* and -

Danny jolted, as if his own reflection was about to make a snap at him. At first glance - and *only* at first glance - he seemed fine. *Isn't it fine?* his core purred, as if to set him at ease. It wasn't as if it hurt

at all; in fact, he'd only even noticed once he'd paid attention on purpose. How had something like this slipped in under his radar, and why was it happening in the first place?

He found he couldn't get himself too worked up over it. He knew that this was important, or was rapidly shaping up to be important, but the ease in his core seemed to be at his side, and it seemed to keep his head about him. *Don't worry about it. Doesn't hurt, not even a little. It's fine.*

Was it, though?

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Thursday, October nineteenth.

Westley Weston had been editing footage for too long. He sat at his desk, laptop open, latest PowerPoint eight slides in - not that he'd ever had the chance to present anything that far, but he was going to be prepared, dammit, and a ghost like Danny Fenton wasn't going to expose himself. It was almost eleven. He'd been at this for seven hours flat, and when he stretched out for the first time since hunching over the desk he cracked up and down like a glowstick.

There were still some crucial pieces of his presentation missing - he'd had the thing outlined for the past six months, but video evidence was harder to come by than a pile of notes dictating the slideshow, and he'd been doing his best to get it together a piece at a time.

That, as it turned out, was proving to be a pain in the ass.

He stood, blinking a few times away from the screen of his laptop, and realized how much of a headache staring at it for the past seven hours had given him. Goddamn, he needed a break. He turned and made his way downstairs, tiptoeing past the overstuffed chair in front of the TV where his father always had college football on. He always half-expected it to swivel around as he went by, as if he was little and he was caught sneaking cookies from the pantry. Nevermind that he was a head taller than the old man now, and that he was rooting around for leftovers since he'd missed dinner.

The fridge gave him a couple of microwave burritos and the last half-a-serving of green beans. He'd take what he could get, and after that he'd be back up in his room again. It was late enough that he supposed he could get away with sneaking out his window again, and as soon as he'd scarfed the leftovers down he'd be gone.

He double-checked to make sure that the camera was fully charged - he'd kicked himself for that time last week when it had died mid-ghost-hunt - and then made his escape. It was starting to become routine for him, but he always stole a glance back at the house anyway, just in case anyone might have seen him. No one ever did, and he went out into the streets and powered the camera up.

It was a little late for Phantom to be out, he thought, but he always felt like he was better off going out than potentially missing a spectacular shot. If he'd gone at sundown, he knew he'd see the ghost, and he thought he might even have been able to keep up with him this time. He hadn't quite gotten Phantom's nightly route figured out yet, especially since he had a horrible tendency to get distracted chasing after something and then promptly fly all-over-the-damn-place to catch it, but Westley was beginning to catch on to some of the more frequent ghostly hotspots. He'd start at the abandoned factory at the side of town.

The camera was his best friend in endeavors like these; it meant he didn't have to carry a flashlight, since the night-vision display showed him everything he needed to see, and whatever he *did* see was caught on tape. With luck, and if Phantom was still out, he'd get some decent shots. The factory's old sliding barn-doors had been rusted open, and allowed him inside; he swept the camera from one side of the space to the other, hoping to find something useful, but the place appeared empty.

During the course of an hour, he made it about halfway across town, which wasn't so bad. There was a deserted convenience store that looked to have seen a fight, but by the time he got there it was long over and none of the remnants from the skirmish helped him out much. If Phantom was going to have a late night, he reasoned, this would be a pretty good contender for it - the moon was mostly-full, which

meant (according to one of his theories, anyhow) that spirits would be given a little more power than usual. He wished he'd been able to sneak out a few nights back; he was certain that Friday the thirteenth had been a ghost-magnet, and he wished he'd been able to see it. Instead, bogged down with homework, he'd suffered in his room the entire evening.

Something from the next block over caught his attention, and he turned and listened in. A segmented crackle like chain lightning, and something shrieking - it sounded an awful lot like a ghost fight, which meant he was in luck, and he darted up to the corner of the block to have a closer look.

It did look an awful lot like a ghost fight, too - a trail of luminescent green was splattered along the sidewalk, and several spirits were flashing in-and-out of visibility in the air over one of the streetlights, and Wes crept up to the mouth of a dark alley so that he'd be able to film undisturbed. The camera took a moment to settle on a focus it liked, but it captured the flashing spirits, and it captured Phantom in their midst. He was the blurriest of them, but mostly because he was moving so fast - these ghosts didn't seem to be *difficult* rather than simply *annoying*, and he snatched them up one at a time.

Wes knew the camera was catching it all, and he turned his eyes up to the fight instead of its rendering on the display. Phantom floated up over the streetlamp, which went dark when he got too close, and turned slowly. He must have been searching for any more of those spirits - whatever kind they were - but to Wes it seemed that he was being allowed a clearer shot, and he wasn't about to let that kind of opportunity slip. He glanced down at the camera again, just to make sure it hadn't wandered out of focus, and then back up at Phantom. The unearthly glow in his eyes was brighter than usual (which Wes chalked that up to that moon theory), and there was a certain stillness about him that Wes couldn't put his finger on. What was a ghost like that thinking, he wondered. He knew Phantom hadn't spotted him, or he'd be making a *scene* about it, but he was in deep thought about *something*.

Then Phantom turned away and took off.

Wes had gotten all of the footage out of the evening that he could, and he glanced back down the block and crept out of the alley. If there was ever a possibility that he'd be able to catch Phantom in crystal clarity, this would have been it - the display on the camera, while adequate for not running into things in the dark, was less-than-ideal for review, and he'd have to wait until he could pull the files onto his laptop to find out for certain.

That wasn't about to stop him from getting all excited, however.

By the time he got home, it was almost twelve-thirty. He'd left his bedroom window open, despite that it let the chill into his room, and he shut and locked it before fishing out the cable for the laptop and plugging in the camera. After an hour wandering around in the dark and getting fuck-all, it was about time he had some decent footage. He pulled the data and immediately opened it up, chopped off the first three-quarters of it, and sat back to have a closer look at what the night-vision had captured.

It seemed to have done alright with the little flashing ghosts, although he was less concerned about those than he was about the specter in the center of them. When Phantom manifested, he appeared as a thin blurry apparition; he struck out at the smaller spirits one at a time, and Wes was certain that the dark shape in one hand was that ridiculous thermos he always had with him. When the last of the spirits had disappeared, Phantom paused, falling within the span of a few frames into near-perfect focus. There was always a certain staticky quality about him, but all things considered the footage was good. The angle made him seem longer - especially with that tail all stretched out like that - but the details had all carried through, and going back frame-by-frame Wes could even make out the slight movements of the eyes when he looked around and the separate fingers and the way he seemed to hang in the air like a skeleton from an old movie, and the slight pause before he took off again back toward his house. It occurred to him, only now that he was looking at the recording, that the edge of the FentonWorks rooftop - or whatever that big ugly thing was on top of it - had made it into the frame, and that he had a pretty clear shot of the ghost flying home. That, he thought, was a pretty good score for a half-assed night.

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Tuesday, October twenty-third.

Eight p.m.

Danny sat alone in his room. He'd put his homework away an hour ago, despite not getting it finished - he told himself he'd ask Tucker about it in the morning, if he remembered, and he'd get all that chem stuff sorted out. Chemistry was never his strongest subject.

He pushed himself to his feet. The sun had gone down a while ago, and he knew he had to head out on patrol. Part of him didn't want to think about it - he'd been running himself ragged with those lately, and he couldn't wait for November to roll around so he could get some goddamned sleep - but it was better than putting it all off. He took a deep breath, nodded to himself, and transformed.

The ghostly core awakened and unfurled in the place where his heart used to be. Tonight, it felt restless; it was whispering, although not in words, and when he drifted up off the side of the bed it tugged at him as an untrained puppy tugs at a leash. He floated to the window overlooking the streets and peered outwards. It had been raining on-and-off all afternoon but it seemed to have quit for the moment; the puddles on the sidewalks and the sides of the road were still, and a thin mist diffused the streetlights into a yellow haze over the town.

Danny caught his own reflection too. Even in his ghostly form, he looked like he hadn't slept. His face was bone-pale, and seemed more melancholy somehow, even when he turned the corners of his mouth up to demonstrate a smile. The smile broadened, and he had another look at the hook-teeth he'd grown in; they were still there, of course, and the second set behind them appeared to have finished coming in too. That was what had startled the shit out of him a few nights back, but he'd almost gotten over that - *almost*, as much as he could get used to seeing two complete sets of mostly-human teeth when he opened his mouth. The first time he'd seen his fangs, he thought, had been similar. He'd been thrown for a loop, but he'd come to accept it. These were probably like that - and that was what he'd keep saying to himself until he started to believe it. He was keeping an eye on them, that was all - just to make sure there weren't any more of them about to come in.

As if he had any say in that.

Besides, even if it *did* start to become a problem, what was he supposed to do about it? Pull them out? It wasn't as if they were hurting him; they weren't so much as uncomfortable, if unsettling. Still - why wouldn't they have come in along with every other aspect of this form?

What if there were other things that hadn't come in yet? Would he somehow miss those too? It had taken until he'd had one knocked out for him to question the second set of teeth he'd been growing in - even now, when he thought about it, the ghostly voice in him was reassuring. *Pretty scary-looking, huh? Of course it's fine. Nothing's wrong.* Would it be like that, too, if he were to somehow manifest an extra limb, or horns, or some other trait?

What if there was something else he'd manifested already?

He stared back at his reflection in the glass. He wanted to think he looked fine. Tired, maybe - oh, plenty of that - but fine. He ran a hand through this hair, as if it might have been hiding a budding pair of horns or spikes or any other grisly thing; it wasn't, but that only made him feel marginally better. Something, despite his core's persistent assurances otherwise, still felt off.

Fuck it. He had things to do, and the longer he stood around the more he'd fall behind. His focus went from his reflection in the window back to the streets beyond it, and he phased out into the mist. His nightly patrols usually began in the north - the suburbs were quiet, which meant it wouldn't take him long. He flew high through the thickening fog, slowly accumulating the droplets suspended in the air, and by the time he reached the suburbs he was damp. He only gave them a brief skimming-over - there wasn't much, except for the odd lesser or shapeless ghost, but those were hardly considered malevolent - and then turned to the east to swing by the docks on his way back to town.

The feeling in his gut crawled up into his throat and froze. He paused, but only for a moment; there was definitely going to be a fight down there, and he cast a searching eye through the dark to spot the offending spirit. He descended slowly, unseen, and drifted over toward a stack of cargo crates lined up by a dormant ship. He turned, following the ghostly echoes of activity, and floated closer. It was a fragment of laughter; the skid of tires against the planks; the singular beam that pierced the darkness with an iridescent off-white; the choking-out of an engine being cut.

It was Johnny Thirteen, and wherever he went his nasty shadow wasn't far behind. Danny could see him straddling the bike by the edge of the docks - there didn't seem to be any sign of the shadow yet but he knew that didn't mean it wasn't lurking around someplace. He really did hate that thing. He spotted it a second later, rifling through the contents of one of the cargo crates; it seemed to sense him and looked up, and its mouth came open in a loose snarl.

"What is it?" Johnny asked, as if it could tell him, but he didn't get an answer. The shadow rose up, pinpointing Danny and coming in for the first attack.

Danny swirled out of its way and retaliated with two swift swipes - *wait, are those claws?* - that drew parallel lines of plasma across the side of the shadow's form. His temper had become irritable and growling again; that shadow was always a pain in the ass, and the sooner he kicked the damned thing into the dust the better. He went in again but the shadow was faster - it backhanded him, sending him spinning off the side of the docks.

Danny caught himself before he would have hit the water, reorienting and pushing higher to reengage. He wasn't about to lose sight of that shadow so easily - even when it was a shapeless void he kept his eyes on it.

Johnny, on the other hand, wasn't having any of it. "Shadow, heel!" he demanded, and the ghastly thing obeyed, sliding into the darkness at his side. He turned then to Danny, revving up the bike again. "Figures you'd show, punk. Here to ruin a guy's night, same as always."

"Johnny Thirteen," Danny growled back, "The hell are you after this time? You're looking for something, s'that it?"

"Lookin' for a good time, same as the next ghost." Johnny paused, giving Danny a once-over as if he was sizing him up. "Doing a little experimenting? It's a good look, I guess."

Danny frowned. "What's that supposed to mean - ?"

Johnny just laughed. "Look at you, kid - trying real hard to be a skeleton, are you? and don't think I didn't see those teeth."

Danny's snarl vanished, and one hand flew up over his mouth before he could stop it. Part of him wanted to argue - hell, most of him wanted to punch Johnny's lights out - but he felt as if he'd been struck. "I don't - I'm not really -"

"Hey, no judging, I said it was a good look," said Johnny, putting a hand up in concession, "But listen, a guy's got better places than here to be tonight, you feel me? No offense but me and Shadow are gonna hit the road. Guess I'll see you around, kid." He revved up the bike again, blew past Danny, and sped off into town. The echo of the bike's engine rattled back through the streets and eventually faded away.

Danny was still in the air, silent. *Trying real hard to be a skeleton, are you?* That had struck him harder than he'd thought. Coming from Johnny Thirteen of all people, out of nowhere, on a Tuesday night - it shouldn't have meant much, if anything.

Why, then, was Danny crying all of a sudden?

He couldn't really have been one, could he? He'd seemed fine when he'd transformed earlier. He dashed the back of one hand under his eyes, and stared down at it, palm up. It was like trying to see it from a dream. At first glance, it seemed alright, but only when he really *looked* it was suddenly alien - the wrist too narrow, fingers slightly longer than they should have been, and when he curled and uncurled them the movements felt distant and mechanical. From underneath the gloves of his suit, his fingertips

seemed like they were thinking about clawing their way out one at a time, and he remembered that he'd taken a swipe at Johnny's shadow as if the claws were already fully formed.

He'd even dealt it some damage like that; weren't those claws functional already?

How in the hell was he going to fix this? There must be a way to do that, or at least some explanation for what in the hell was going on, why a complete set of teeth would grow in with no warning or reason, why his form was twisting and more *inhuman*, and for the first time he wondered, *what if it keeps happening, and I can't stop it?*

*What am I becoming?*

*How am I supposed to fix this?*

His core, as it had been about the teeth, was calming. *What's to fix?* it asked, as if the question was plain, and as if watching himself slip further from being human was an everyday occurrence. *There's nothing wrong. It doesn't hurt. Things are as they should be.* It was a cool and soothing reassurance. He hated it, but it was coming from the deepest part of him he knew.

What was he supposed to do about it? Tear it out?

Danny sunk to the edge of the dock and stared out over the black water. He couldn't tell anyone about this, no matter what happened. Sam and Tucker - what would they say? What would they say, if they had a look at all those teeth, or if he transformed to find out he'd all of a sudden shed his skin, or some other thing had grown out of him? How would they take it?

What if he just didn't tell them?

Wouldn't that be easier, he thought. Wouldn't it be easier, so long as he went out on his own at night, and so long as he didn't say anything about it during the day? That wouldn't be too bad, and he could figure out what was going on and he could figure out how to make it stop. Of course, it sounded easy when he thought about it like that, like it was just something to tack onto a list of errands - *oh, and on your way home from that can you pick up eggs and milk too?* - and part of him doubted whether there was any way at all to fix it.

If he *didn't* fix it, though - what would become of him?

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Monday, October twenty-ninth.

Midnight.

He was so close, he could taste it. Six months of adamant prep and endless snooping were about to pay off, and he was absolutely *giddy* just thinking about it. He'd been accumulating footage for long enough, and had gotten a priceless still just the other night, and he was certain it would take a week, two at most, to catch the last few pieces that he needed.

Westley Weston was about to have incontestable proof in his hands.

He grabbed absently at the soda can by his laptop. It had been empty for the last hour-and-a-half; remembering that, he frowned down at it, swept it aside along with four others that had been discarded as well, and went down to the fridge to get himself another one. The house at this time of night was dark, and he made sure to step over the fifth stair that always creaked as he made his way to the kitchen. *Fuck*, and he should probably grab himself a snack too. He couldn't remember whether he'd skipped dinner again or not. He probably had.

He ended up grabbing himself two sodas - then he wouldn't have to interrupt himself again later to do it, and he shut his bedroom door again behind him and returned to his desk. The laptop, which had been whirring steadily for a few hours, was warm; he tilted one corner of it up to let it cool for a few moments, found a handful of old DVD cases, and propped it up on those so it wouldn't be sitting directly on the desk. After a minute or so, the whirring slowed to a dull hum.

Wes cracked the first of the two cans open, drained half of it, and set it down to one side. Now, where was he? Oh, that's right, he'd been reformatting - *again*, what a pain - and he'd been daydreaming *only a little* about having all of this done. Everything he'd tried to present so far got him little else than laughed at - even by the other basketballers, and they were supposed to be his *friends*, for fuck's sake - and he let the humiliation fuel him. He'd been angry at them, for a time, for making fun of him; that had shifted over the course of a few months. In his mind, it was no longer his friends' fault. It was *Phantom's* fault.

It was Phantom's fault, and Wes was so, so close to wrecking him.

His eyes lingered for a moment on the last folder on the left. That was, for the most part, where the junk went. He wasn't about to throw it out, in case it was going to become useful for any reason later on, and he rifled through it briefly before finding the stack of files he wanted. Most of them had been gathered over the past few weeks - a stolen clip of a ghost fight here, a still of Phantom there that was clearer than the rest. Capturing him in full focus was impossible, he grumbled, skimming over the shots with a frown.

Something about these was just *off*, in a way he couldn't place, but it had been bothering him for a while now and he knew if he stared long enough he'd figure it out eventually. They weren't all from the same night, either - it would just be one clip out of any given encounter, and he couldn't even say *why* they didn't sit right. They simply *didn't*, and it seemed to be at random.

Or maybe it wasn't. His attention sparked at once, and the thought that presented itself had come and gone in an instant without being processed. His mind scrambled after it, caught it, and this time held onto it; he stared, as closely as he could, at Phantom's outline on the screen. The *off* feeling was no longer merely a hunch. Something was *wrong*. The tail was longer than it should have been, no matter that his form was mid-spiral and he was dodging out of the way of some other spirit's attack. The dramatic pose, Wes thought, was why it had taken him so long to notice it in the first place - but now that he'd seen it, he couldn't *unsee* it. Was he out-of-proportion? He frowned, fished out an old still to compare the others to, and pulled them up side-by-side.

Oh, yeah. Something was definitely going on. Nevermind the spectral tail - holding up the two images made it clearer: he was thinning out, and something about the way he held himself was wrong, too, and somehow he seemed paler, if that was at all possible. It wasn't as obvious on some of the other stills, though - why would there be an inconsistency like that, he wondered. Was Phantom doing this on purpose too?

No, he realized - once he had them sorted, and the timestamps were all in order, it became not a series of inconsistencies but a gradual shift. The way his form thinned out, as if he were starving himself; the ghostly tail that stretched a few inches more every night; how his edges, though still blurry, seemed to slowly become more sharp and angular; his face, expressive if he was trying but settling further and further into long-faced melancholy by default; the stretch of his fingers - in one frame-grab he had them all splayed out in an attack, and despite the glowing and the shadows Wes was certain they were a full segment longer than they were supposed to be.

He thought back to the first time he'd gotten footage that was markedly off. That was - hell, the beginning of the month? almost? - and he rifled through a different folder to find the clip. That was the one behind the Nasty Burger, he remembered, and the last time that he'd actually interacted with Phantom at all. He pulled it up again, taking it a frame at a time.

Only in the last handful of frames did he notice the change; it was slight, only enough that he'd questioned it, or taken it as Phantom's usual blurred-out image, but looking at it now he was certain that it was the same thing that was happening in the more recent stills. He paused on the first of two frames - he'd assumed, at first, that it had been blurry interference that had made it look like there were too many teeth in Phantom's mouth; all of a sudden, though, he wasn't so sure. None of the other shots since then had been close enough to tell.

What in the fuck was going on? Was he doing it on purpose? Was he doing it on purpose, thinking that he'd be left alone then? If his ghostly form diverged enough from his human form - if the butts didn't match - then most of the footage that Wes had captured fell apart. *Goddammit, is he one step ahead of me?* Was this a last-ditch defense? Did he *know* how close Wes really was to exposing his secret?

Wes couldn't afford to think otherwise. He had to keep the upper hand, and he had to pull something spectacular while he still had that upper hand. He drained the soda can at the side of his desk, tossed it aside, and opened the second one. All of a sudden the rest of the night was laid out before him, and he wasn't going to be getting any sleep.

- - - -

Wednesday, October thirty-first. Halloween night.

Five-thirty p.m.

The sun wasn't due to go down for another hour, or just about, but Amity Park was already alive. This early in the evening, it was only toddlers and preschoolers. A lot of them liked to be starfleet commanders or princesses or more traditional little witches or vampires. One, accompanied by a grown-up in an inflatable t-rex, had been dressed up as a miniature Alan Grant and was even waving around a cardboard flare prop with unbridled glee.

Danny was still in his room. He could see mismatched packs of children tearing up and down the streets - the older kids, whether out of courtesy to the younger ones or out of the opinion that they were superior to them and the resulting refusal to mingle, wouldn't be out until sundown. That was when Danny would be out, too, only his mission wasn't one for a bag of candy. His would be a scramble to keep the peace on the most haunted night of the year.

He took a deep breath to psych himself up. Maybe - just maybe, and if he was *very* lucky, and played his cards *exactly* right - he'd be able to keep up with the mayhem. He wasn't counting on it, but a guy could still hope, right? He even had an extra thermos, on the off-chance the first one filled up (he'd never actually had that happen before, but if there was going to be a night he'd need it, this would be it), and if he had the time he'd swing back around the house before midnight for a can of Monster or two to keep him going.

By the time tomorrow morning came around, he thought, he was going to be dead on his feet.

A knock at his door jolted him out of his thoughts. Grumbling, he answered; it was Jazz, with a decorative pumpkin under one arm like a volleyball. She didn't appear to have dressed up this year - she probably thought it was childish, thought Danny with disdain - and the only indication that she was even acknowledging the holiday at all was that she'd switched out her usual aqua headband for one with a little black spider on it. Seeing him, she frowned a little. "Not going out this year?"

Danny bit his tongue. What he wanted to say was *not on my life* but he knew that would come out more snarky than he'd mean for it to. He just shook his head instead. "Too old for all that. I'm staying right here, all night, doing homework and being absolutely silent."

Jazz frowned. "I thought you loved Halloween - ?"

"Dead silent," Danny reiterated, "It'll be like I'm not even here. Don't worry about it."

"Oh," said Jazz, who seemed like she was going to press the matter but changed her mind at the last second about it. "Well, you can at least have the first pick of the candy if you want. We've only had one or two handfuls of kids come through so far. I thought it'd be better than whatever's left over afterward."

Danny untensed a little. He'd been certain that Jazz was going to bother him - she was consistently more observant than either of his parents, and he knew she'd noticed his word choice just

then. Despite that, she let it slide. He found himself wondering why that was, although he wasn't going to bring it up. "Yeah. That'd be great. Thanks."

Jazz held the pumpkin bowl up, allowing him to pick through it and grab a few handfuls of the ones he liked - mostly Mars Bars and Milky Ways, although he had a soft spot for practically anything with caramel in it - and then turned to head back downstairs. She paused at the top, turned back over her shoulder briefly, and met his eyes. "Let me know if you need help, okay?"

Danny just nodded, and watched her disappear down the stairs again. If he *did* end up needing help, she wouldn't be the one he'd go to for it - but something in the way she'd offered stuck with him. He knew the look she got when she knew something he didn't, and that, just then, was it. What wasn't she telling him?

Ugh, he'd worry about that later. The sun would be down soon, and after that it'd be a non-stop fight until it came back up again. At least, he consoled himself, he'd gotten first pick of the candy. He scarfed down a couple of the smaller ones - he'd save that king-size Twix for later - and turned his attention out the window again. The afternoon shadows had been growing steadily longer, and some of them were starting to swallow the sidewalks and the tops of buildings. If he didn't take that last half-hour to get a head start, he'd regret it later.

*Here goes.*

He transformed, and when his ghostly core ignited it felt like an explosion of gasfire. It knew what night it was, and for the first few moments it simply reveled in it; he could feel it stretching out all the way through him, as if it had been waiting, and he took off through the ceiling and manifested in the air over the roof. His mission was clear; he was prepared, stocked up, and fueled; he was a force to be reckoned with.

That made him smile.

He flew out, high and fast, over the streets. The last of the evening's direct sunlight didn't even bother him; it would be gone soon enough, and then he'd have the most gruesome night of his afterlife. He was looking forward to that. He thought back to a few weeks ago when he'd had that fight with Skulker - on a night like this, the guy wouldn't stand a chance. The voice of his core was smug and absolute, as if any of its whims or desires were certainties, as if it could will whatever it wanted into being.

As if it was unstoppable.

And he *felt* it, too. It was the most feared and haunted night of the year, and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to be the reason why. He'd paused over the roof, and from there he had a pretty good look at the streets and chaos below. *Where to start?* The question was one of amusement, and the mischievous smile broadened. How else to show off all those teeth - *you wanna see scary? I'll show you scary* - and his gaze settled on the abandoned Dusk-Til-Dawn at the bottom of the exit ramp by the overpass. That was going to be just a warmup.

He was going to be at this all night, after all.

He took off like a firework, careening in a barely-controlled arc through the sky, and landed through the old building's roof and in one of the darkened aisles. The instant he'd even gotten close, he'd filled up with January winds and long nights; it was the reassurance that he wasn't alone, and he turned slowly about him. *Hunt tonight*, he remembered, and nodded to himself. He'd come prepared, after all.

The first three spirits emerged at once, seeing him and growling as if to defend their territory, and it took him until he'd already knocked two of them out of the air to remember the thermos clipped to his belt. He drew it, took quick aim, and made three captures in quick succession; capping it and returning it to its place, he now had the building to himself. He did, but it wasn't satisfying in the slightest.

*Hunt tonight.*

He took off again. The sun would disappear any moment now, he could feel it, and when the last corner of the tallest building in Amity Park fell into shadow he'd be able to feel that too. Halloween night was what he was made for. *Let's fucking go.*

He flew up again, tracing the sounds of screams from further in town. Human voices echoed between houses and apartment buildings, growing into a steady cacophony that made it near-impossible to trace any singular cry to its source, and Danny perched for a moment on the bare-naked oak that his neighbors had sculpted into a monstrous hand. It was as if the thing was holding him, and staring down at herds of small children and accompanying parents below made him feel a little bit like a vulture from an old movie. One from a pack of six or seven comprised solely of Thors spotted him and waved; he stared for a moment and then opened up in an unearthly smile, taking a great satisfaction in watching the little hero flinch away from all those teeth. *Ah, coming in handy now, are they?* Despite the scary face, his core was in a state of absolute delight, and already he could feel something shifting and making room somewhere within him. He vanished in a gust of wind as the frightened Thor pointed up to the ghost he'd seen in the neighbor's tree, and by the time the rest of them looked up Danny was gone.

Danny couldn't stay. He had a lot of places to be. *Hunt tonight*, he reminded himself, one hand coming down over the top of the thermos and gangly fingers tightening around it. That, for the moment, kept him focused. He drifted upwards, following the chill of winter within him, and chased after the flash of lime light that burst from between two houses a block over.

He flew over some rooftop in time to see Technus, having located and wedged himself into the most elaborate Halloween display in the neighborhood. Five haunted animatronics - a complete set - jerked to life at his command, and a flock of children scattered like birds out of the yard and back toward the street; Technus was laughing, occupying the console that controlled the things, and only paused when Danny descended into the yard to face him.

"Ghost child!" Technus screeched, ecstatic, "I'm so glad you came to see this!"

Danny just snarled. His core, which had a fuller hold over him than it had let him know about, saw no reason to fight; his grasp on the thermos hesitated. Eyes ablaze, he addressed the ghost directly. "I knew I'd find you tonight."

"I know! Isn't this cool? Some people just go all out, it's practically an invitation! I couldn't make half this stuff up if I tried!" The animatronics under the wily spirit's control turned to face Danny one at a time, although they hesitated to make any attacks just yet. One of them, shaped roughly like an abused fox, tilted its head and its jaw fell open. "Looks like you're all dressed up too! Getting into the spirit of the season, are we?"

Danny cast a quick glance about him. He was outnumbered - five-to-one, plus Technus himself - and a small crowd of children had gathered on the side of the road to watch things unfold. Then again, did he really want to turn himself against every other ghost in town? Wasn't this supposed to be a night of unfettered celebration for everything damned and macabre? Wasn't he among them?

Didn't he deserve to have a good time too?

*Hunt tonight*, demanded the human voice in him, and all at once his temper surged. A half-baked retort didn't make it any further than the back of his throat - something about *get the spirit out of all this* - and he just roared instead, summoning and releasing pulses of energy one at a time in an alternating left-right rhythm that blew the heads off the animatronic crew. They fell, shoulders still smoking, and Danny turned back to Technus at the controls. "I'm *real fuckin' busy*, Technus. I don't have time for you." He still had a half-conjured orb of plasma in one hand; it solidified and he released it, frying the controls and drawing Technus out of the destroyed console. The other hand came up, with the thermos in it, and Technus was ensnared and dragged inside.

Danny took off again. Forget the smoking pile of destroyed machines in the yard, forget Technus, forget all of it. He had places to be. This was going to be the busiest night of his afterlife, and maybe if he was lucky and had the time he could stop and haunt FentonWorks for a half-hour or so and take a break.

Hell knew he'd need it.

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October thirty-first. Halloween night.

Eight p.m.

Danny was grappling with himself. The roof of the Nasty Burger was just about the only quiet place left in town, and he needed to think. He sat, elbows resting on his knees, head in his hands, trying to get his thoughts to solidify into a single direction. The thermos - the first of two, which was a little over half-full - stood upright on the roof in front of him. The second one, as of yet, hadn't been touched.

*Hunt tonight.* That sentiment had grown stale and dull. For the first hour, it was the only thing keeping him on track. The whims of his core had come unbridled for a while, and after he'd captured Technus things had started to blur together. He'd been to the abandoned factory; he'd been to the Townsend house; he'd been up and down his neighborhood streets four, maybe five times. He'd rounded up lesser ghosts left and right. He'd seen ones that he hadn't even known existed. He'd rounded them up too.

*Haunt tonight.*

How long had he been out here? Two hours, maybe a little more? It was exhausting. He couldn't go from one corner of the block to the next without something flying past him or skirting through the shadows. Couldn't he just find a place that wasn't too crowded and *scare the shit* out of some people? He thought again of the set-up that Technus had slipped into. He'd really had a good one, Danny thought. Those things were eerie enough to look at even without being possessed. To be able to control them? Brilliant.

*Hunt*, demanded the little voice in his mind, and he stared again at the thermos in front of him. *They must be so angry in there.* He reached out, as if to open it and undo all the damage he'd done earlier. It was Halloween. If anyone was going to have a good time, he thought, let it be the dead who've earned it. His fingers slipped around the thermos' metal surface, almost torn through the gloves of his suit. Their tips were stained a slight green - that was from one of the fights, he knew, although he couldn't remember which one. He'd had so many of them.

Maybe he did just need a break. He slipped up into the air again, legs dissolving in an instant back into the more-comfortable tail, the one that twisted and stretched out behind him like the drawing of a child's nightmare, and he almost opened up the thermos and let his friends out.

*Friends?* He hesitated. *Weren't they supposed to be enemies?*

He kept the thing in one hand, turned back toward FentonWorks, and rose into the sky. He could think about it and decide for sure on his way home. There was a monster there, he remembered, with his name on it. Maybe that'd keep him fueled the rest of the night.

By the time he returned, most of the activity from the streets had died down. He could see the only living soul still there, stationed at the front door with the remains of a bowl of candy, and he meant to slip in through the roof and sink down to his room. The ghost-shield, installed by the other two living beings - no doubt they were still out in their stupid van, on the same kind of patrol as him - kept him at bay, and without thinking he transformed so that he could descend onto the roof.

The instant he jerked himself back to life, Danny's mind cleared. He landed on the Ops Center, and the hatchway on top allowed him access back into the house without using his abilities; he ran from there into his room, slamming the door behind him, and sank to his knees.

What in the hell was he doing? What in the hell was *all that*? He stared down at the thermos in his hands - *were you really going to let them out? why in the fuck?* - and his grasp tightened around it. The last three hours, or somewhere close to that, had become muddled together. He must have had a ton of fights, judging by the captures he'd made; on a busy night, he might fill the device up to 25%, and here it sat at 57% and it wasn't even nine yet, let alone midnight.

The fights weren't the only things he'd been getting up to. Something came back to him, as if through a haze - he'd been lurking over that old oak tree, in between hunts, working out one of his

shoulders after he'd landed on it funny, hoping it wouldn't bruise too badly. He'd stretched it out too far, and something in it had snapped. It hadn't even hurt. He remembered, in that moment, he'd thought *wonder if it'll scare anybody off?* and he'd looked down at a cluster of trick-or-treating kids, around ten or eleven, and his mouth had turned down into the fiercest snarl he could muster.

It had scared them off, alright.

Why had he done that? He didn't want to hurt anybody - no, he *didn't* want to hurt anybody - and yet one show of the teeth was all it had taken to send them running. What if he'd have gone after them? Why would he have *wanted* to go after them? He was supposed to be hunting down the other ghosts - even now, he could hear some commotion starting up again from down the block. He couldn't afford to take a break.

But what would happen if he transformed again? Did he even have a choice?

No, he realized grimly, he didn't. He couldn't turn his back on Amity Park, especially on the most haunted night of the year. He pulled himself to his feet again, took a deep breath, and shoved his doubts aside. *You have to keep control of it this time. You have to stay focused.* He could do that.

He'd left out two cans of Monster and three candy bars for himself. They were sitting on the bedside table, and he took one of each. *Yeah, guess I really did know what the fuck was up.* He'd still have to find some dark corner outside to transform - that was one of the things that was expressly forbidden within the confines of the ghost-shield, and he knew he couldn't take the thing down while there was still chaos out there - and he went out into the hallway over the stairs. Jazz was still at the front door; hearing him come out, she turned and gave him a smile.

"Holding up alright?"

Danny didn't want to talk about it. "Fine. Just fine. I'm gonna go - um - see if the ghost-shield's taken any serious damage. Wouldn't be surprised on a night like this."

Jazz just nodded. "Okay. I might be up later. Another hour or two, maybe."

Danny, already halfway up the steps into the Ops Center, didn't even answer her. The hatch allowed him back out onto the roof, and from there he stepped out of the radius of the ghost-shield and back into the fray. It wasn't really a fray - not up here, and not yet - but he knew better. Whatever had started at the end of the block was drawing closer; he knew he'd be the one to have to deal with it. *You'd better fucking deal with it. Keep it together, Fenton.* He looked down at the can in his hand. It wasn't even nine yet, and he'd hoped to have saved it until midnight. Then again, he did have two of them. He cracked it open, tipped it back, and drained the whole sixteen ounces in one go. *Here goes. Again. Round two, bitches.*

He transformed, in a dark corner on the roof that the ghost-shield didn't reach, and this time when his core roared into activity he was ready for it. Reining it in would still take him a minute - *don't you tell me I can't haunt, that's what I'm made for* - but he refused to allow himself to budge until he had his thoughts together. *I'm a goddamned ghosthunter. That's what I'm made for.*

Denied the outlet it wanted, the core made his temper boil instead. It bloomed as a punchy irritability, as if anything would set him off like a firecracker. *Fine*, he growled to himself, *punchy it is.* He took off, following the chaos in the streets, and set his sights on the dead. That was what he was here for. That was the outlet for his aggression, and he was certain that would keep him going for the rest of the night.

The screams closest down the road caught his immediate attention. He flew down, following the sound, and in the midst of it was Penelope Spectra; she'd opted to remain formless, by the looks of things, but she didn't seem to have any issues terrorizing anyone, and when she spotted Danny she brightened. "Oh, you've finally made it! How wonderful!"

Danny just growled. His angry core pushed him into action, and he swirled down beside her to throw the first punch; she was quick and avoided it; he wasn't about to let her back too far out of his reach, and stayed on her tail.

Spectra released one of her own ectoplasmic attacks, catching Danny in the shoulder and shoving him back, and spun to face him at a more comfortable distance. "And that temper of yours is looking healthy, too. Tell me, though - how's that terrorizing going?"

"I got too much to deal with," Danny snapped, "I don't have time for your shit tonight, Spectra."

"Oh! Don't be so hasty! It wasn't going to be anything *bad*, I was just going to remark how that form's looking, this really is the perfect night for it, don't you think?" Spectra was eyeing him - and judging by that split-second of hesitation, she'd just struck a nerve. Her grin broadened, and she continued: "Don't think I haven't noticed! We all have to start somewhere, don't we? Teeth like that - *classic*, you really can't go wrong with those, and I must say the gaunt look fits you."

"Shut the hell up," said Danny, although that hadn't come out as harshly as he'd meant it to. He knew what she was after - all it had taken was one look for her to take aim at him, and the longer he floated there and took it the more damage she'd deal him. Still - one hand hesitated over the thermos at his side.

"Like I said, I wasn't going to say anything bad, Danny, you really don't have to worry so much - but, if I may, I've always got pointers for anyone with *monstrous* ambitions," Spectra's smile widened one extra degree, and when she slipped up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder he felt as if she were a snake.

"Hey, back off!" Danny spun to face her, knowing he couldn't let her out of his sight, but the fury in his core was slipping through his fingers and he couldn't hold onto it. What was left, then, except his own human determination? How long would that last?

"Don't be angry at *me*, kid. I'm not the one who'll ever make fun of you for this - we're both in the same boat, you know. Look at me, I'm a monster too and I've got it all going for me!"

Danny tensed. "But I'm not - "

"No?" Spectra just laughed, and waved a hand to indicate his form. "You can't call a thing like that *human*, can you? Even *humanoid* is - let's be honest here - a bit of a stretch."

The fire in Danny's core was gone. He hadn't been quick enough to capture her, and that was his own fault. Despite himself, despite that he'd *known* this would happen, he'd hesitated anyway, and now she had taken a deadly and precise aim at him, and was firing away.

Spectra knew it, too. Danny just floated, as if disarmed, and she struck him again: "But don't you worry about a silly thing like that! Just because the *living* won't look at you doesn't mean that you're a creature devoid of life. Who cares what they think? So what if they run screaming into the night at the mere sight of a thing like you? It's Halloween night, kiddo! You're allowed to be a terrifying abomination, just like anyone else!"

Danny recoiled as if she'd delivered a physical blow. "Stop it. Stop it! Shut up, I'm not - "

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, I promise. I won't lie to you, Danny, your look is a little helter-skelter, but this is your first Halloween, isn't it? The important thing is that you're having fun. If anyone deserves that, it's you. You're awfully stressed almost all the time - why not get out there and do what you were meant to do?"

Danny could feel the pleasant hum of his core reignite within him. It knew what Spectra was saying - it had been pulling for the same thing for the past three hours - and he knew he couldn't fend off them both, and especially not while he let her pick at him like she was doing. Oh, she hid it all behind praise, as she usually did, but that just made it more insidious.

Still - wasn't she right? Didn't he deserve to be having a good time?

Spectra was watching him like a hawk, and she had a fairly good idea of just how far under his skin she'd gotten. *Let's see if we can't go just a little further, shall we?* "Now, don't tell me you've never haunted before. I'm just *certain* you'd be a natural at it. You'll scare the living left and right, I guarantee it. I'm not even exaggerating, you'll - "

"I know," said Danny, just to shut her up, and realized too late that he should have kept his mouth shut. He'd come and gone from that bare-naked oak tree a dozen times, at least, and he'd lost count of how many roaming children had taken a look at him and skirted around him. *You idiot, why'd you tell her that? What good are you?*

Spectra paused. She seemed surprised, although he was sure she was feigning it, but she was quick to recompose herself. "You *know*," she said, as if she were mulling it over aloud, "And yet you're still in denial about the whole *monstrous* thing. Hm. Haven't you taken a look at yourself? Haven't you meant to make all those nice little changes?"

*Shit.* Danny tried, too-clumsy and too-late, to erase the damage. "Well, maybe - "

"Oh, it's no wonder you're struggling! I'll tell you what - since I like you, and *only* since I like you, I'll give you a few pointers. This doesn't go any further than between us two, got it?" Spectra had that hand on his shoulder again, and this time he froze up under her grip. She had him right where she wanted him, and they both knew it. "Now, I know you're in an experimental phase right now, but I really would suggest trying to consolidate that look - "

"Shut up," said Danny desperately, "What if - what if I don't want this - "

"Oh?"

"What if I don't," Danny hated every second of it - *what the hell are you doing? don't you know she'll take what you tell her and she'll just use it to rip you apart?* - but he couldn't stop himself. For the moment, he was able to fight back the haunting urges demanded by his ghostly form, but that was all the restraint he had left. To deny Spectra too was impossible. "What if I just want to be human again? You wanna help so bad - how do I fix this? I don't wanna be a monster, I didn't - I didn't ask for this!"

"Oh, of course not," said Spectra, with a slow shake of the head, "No one *asks* to become an abhorrent freak of nature, Danny - but sometimes it's about taking the hand that life deals you and making the best of it. How fortunate you are that I can help."

Danny scoffed, knowing that if he didn't he'd cry. "You're not going to help me - you fucking liar, you're probably getting a real kick out of this - "

"Oh, and there's that temper again. Let's see if we can't find a more productive outlet for that resentment," Spectra floated a little higher, leading him up with her, and had a look down at Amity Park's streets. "It's the living that you should be angry at, Danny. They're the ones that point and scream, they're the ones that think *monster* like it's a bad thing."

"No, I. . ." Danny wanted not to listen to her. He wanted to shove her into his thermos and call it done, he wanted to go and track down a dozen other ghosts, he wanted not to have even had this whole conversation - but he knew she was right. The living, said the voice of his core, were not things to fear, they were things within which to instill it, and now that she'd validated that little voice he was beginning to lose the fight with it.

*Haunt tonight - remember?*

"Go out there and show them, Danny," Spectra was goading him, and she could see his form stretch out just a little further, his jaw make room for just a few more teeth, his eyes shine just a little bit brighter. That meant she'd gotten all the way through to him. He was at her beck and call, and she smiled a cheshire-cat smile and sat back. "Go out there and show them what you're made of. Make them regret they'd ever messed with you."

What came alight in Danny's core wasn't fire. It was colder than that - not a blind rage but a calculated and seething vengefulness, and Danny couldn't drown that out any longer. No matter that Spectra had preyed upon him, just that she'd gotten through; she'd taken the wants of his core and justified them and made them impossible to refuse, and she'd torn down the will of his human mind with his own insecurities in the process. All the core cared about was that it could haunt as it pleased.

(*Oh, they'll regret it alright*) he growled, and he gave Spectra a bloodcurdling smile and took to the skies.

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October thirty-first. Halloween night.

Eleven-thirty p.m.

The screaming outside had been going on for hours. Whether it came from this end of the neighborhood or the other was hardly relevant anymore. It had been almost continuous, interrupted by the occasional sounds of battle and by the odd cheer afterwards, since the sun had gone down. That was coming up on five hours.

Westley Weston had no idea that it would have been so bad this year. Of course, he knew that strange happenings and haunted places always seemed to come to life on Halloween night, but it had never been anything like this before. That, he thought, was until that Phantom came to town. He must have been the one causing it, and that was why things had gotten so out-of-control. Phantom always said he wanted to help, but Wes knew that wasn't true. It was because of him that Amity Park needed the so-called hero in the first place. He was doing more harm than good, and once he was out of the picture, things might return to normalcy.

Well, as normal as anything could get in a town like this.

Despite the chaos, he was still out on the streets. Bands of candy-starved children had gone home hours ago, but the neighborhood wasn't empty; spirits still came and went, some terrorizing anyone who was still out, others uprooting garbage cans or shorting out light displays or any number of other things. He wasn't defenseless - apart from the night-vision camera, which he usually had with him, he also carried the baseball bat he'd been gifted for his tenth birthday before he'd shot up a foot and switched to basketball.

It wasn't much, but it was still better than nothing.

He made his way carefully along, avoiding a duo of ghosts that had taken to pulling the siding off the neighbors' garage, and kept his eyes on the empty space overhead. He hadn't seen Phantom in the neighborhood all night - he knew the guy was out, and part of him thought he was avoiding this entire area on purpose. *Why wouldn't he be, Wes thought sourly, I'll bet he thinks this shit's funny.*

*I'll bet he's up there someplace scaring the shit out of somebody right now.*

Something crashed from three houses over, and an earth-shaking *FOOM* nearly blew him off his feet. There was another ghost, one that appeared more whole than the rest, that held an electric guitar as if it were a weapon; she looked to have burst the fuel line on a parked pickup, which had ignited and roared into an inferno, and she floated on the edge of the blaze. She was burning along with it, cloaked in vibrant blue flames as if they fueled her. He wasn't fast enough to duck out of sight. She was staring right at him, and he panicked.

He turned and fled, but he knew he couldn't outrun her. She took off after him, arced over his head, and floated lower in front of him, cutting him off and forcing him to skid to a halt. She held the guitar over her shoulder, as if it may have been a battleaxe or some other heavy weapon, and her other hand rested on her hip. Even her eyes were aflame, and when she spoke her voice transcended sound.

*(You're not bailing out already, are you? We're just getting warmed up!)*

"Leave me alone!" Wes cried, turning back on his heels in panic and not even caring where he'd end up, only that he'd find a safe place to hide. He could hear the ghost laughing madly and coming after him, and he skidded around the corner of the block. The only thing that saved him was that he was a basketballer; he was all legs, and all running, and he darted into a dark alley in the hopes of losing the spirit, at least long enough so that he could find a better place to hide. The back-end of the alley was sealed off, just a dumpster and three solid walls of bricks and - *shit where the fuck is my camera forget it I gotta hide I gotta get out of here* - he slammed up against the rear, spinning around and trying his

*damnedest* to keep quiet and hoping the ghost wouldn't have seen him. The only thing he had to defend himself was a bat.

That wasn't much.

He could see the flickering light of the fire that surrounded her before he actually saw her; she came around the corner, paused for a moment, and then locked onto him. Through the wild blue flames, she was smiling, and all it took was a slight adjustment of the tuning of her guitar to take aim at him.

*(You can't hide from me, kid! This party's going all night!)*

The next thing he processed was a ghastly shriek, one that made both hands clamp down over his ears, and he ducked into a tight huddle against the bricks as if that would save him. He hated to even look but he slowly did anyway - the blazing ghost was screaming, but it wasn't at him; in the air over the alley floated another spirit, an ectoplasmic attack ready in each hand, and he threw them both at the flaming ghost without hesitation.

The spirit struck one chord on her guitar, but one only, taking out the side of one of the two buildings that enclosed the alley. The building fell out and collapsed; Wes threw his arms up, as if to protect himself, but he knew this would be the end of him -

The cold grip of death grabbed him by the shoulder, pulling him instantaneously out of solid existence, and the sensation made him feel as if he'd pass out. His knees gave in and he buckled, head swimming, and the next thing he knew was that he'd been pulled away from the rubble and out to the mouth of the alley. He took a second to regain his senses, shaking the dizziness away, and looked up at the ghost that had saved him.

Phantom floated over him, green eyes almost too bright to behold; his fingers, still on Wes' shoulder, were too-long and too-jointed, and sharp claws had broken through the gloves of the suit he wore; his skin was almost blindingly pale, and looked as if it had shrunk to cover bones and bones only; his face was turned downwards, and his lips had been pulled and peeled back to reveal no less than three rows of misshapen and jagged teeth - although there easily could have been more; his spectral tail had grown to twice his size, and was as gaunt as the rest of him. His touch alone sent a shiver down Wes' spine, and his gaze was impossible. Whether he was aware of it or not, he spoke with the same distant and echoing qualities that the flaming ghost did.

*(Are you okay?)*

Wes took a step back, heart pounding. "Phantom? I - "

*(I still have to finish this)* said Phantom, lifting himself up a little higher and facing down the flaming ghost. He glanced back over his shoulder at Westley, but only for an instant. *(Run.)*

Wes didn't have to be told twice. He turned, nearly tripping on himself, and bolted. He could hear the battle between the two spirits, but it was short-lived; the flaming ghost screamed in defeat, and the sound made him almost dizzy, almost sick. He wasn't about to turn back. He didn't quit until he'd made it home, and it barely registered in his mind that he wasn't supposed to have been out. At least, he thought as soon as he was able to think at all, at least nothing had made it as far as his house.

*Yet.*

It took him a long time to calm down after that. Sure, everyone at Casper High saw the occasional ghost - who in town hadn't? - but that was the first time he'd been singled out and attacked by one. The unnatural too-bright flames, the way he'd seemed like he was going to melt without even getting so close to her - *whatever the hell happened to Phantom* - it was all a bit too much.

But he was alright. He hadn't been hurt.

He hadn't been hurt, and that was thanks to Phantom too. *He saved you. He knows who you are, and he knows what you want to happen to him, and he saved you anyway.* The only thing he could think of was the ice-cold hand that had grabbed him - it really had felt like death, the sudden chill that had sent a shiver down his spine, and how the fingers were like a skeleton's - and had pulled him out of danger at the last possible second.

*He saved you anyway.*

Maybe, just maybe, Phantom really did think he was a hero.

----

Thursday, November first.

Westley hadn't slept at all. The screams from outside had gone quiet shortly after one in the morning, but that wasn't the only thing that had kept him up. He'd spent the remainder of the night turning over what had happened in his mind, how he'd been *careless* and had let that ghost see him, and how Phantom had materialized as if out of nowhere and spared his life.

Did that mean he thought that Westley owed him now?

*Did* Westley owe him now?

His knee-jerk response to that was *of course not*. Why would someone like Phantom demand anything in return for saving someone's life? He was fairly well-known for the heroics, and he was known not to accept any sort of gifts or the like - but, then again, Wes was the one who was hellbent on exposing his ghastly secret. What kind of guy did that make him if he went along and aired the proof anyway?

After all the work he'd put into it, how in the hell was he supposed to *not* do that?

By the time his morning alarm went off, he hadn't slept at all. He shut the clanging thing off, rolled over, and frowned. *Goddammit, you'd better not be flaking out about this. You're so fucking close, you've been pulling it all together for months, don't tell me you're too chickenshit to actually go through with it.* That wasn't it. He wasn't chickenshit - no matter whether he'd nearly pissed himself when he came face-to-face with a ghost or not - and he wasn't *flaking*. Things had just all-of-a-sudden gotten more complicated than he'd bargained for, and it would just take him a day or two to sort through.

That was all.

He didn't even know what to say about Phantom himself anymore, either. All he knew was that something was happening to him - a curse, maybe? were those even a real thing? - and that his form had begun to change. It had been slight at first. It occurred to him, as he was fishing out a t-shirt that smelled less like sweat and bonfires than the one from yesterday, that he'd only begun to notice it in the past few weeks. Were there other things that he had failed to notice completely? How long had this been going on, and why had it only recently become more prominent? That face, barely more than a skull, eyes all sunken in and lips shriveled away. . .

What if there was something really, legitimately wrong with him? What if this *wasn't* something that just came with being a ghost, and what if that meant that the ghostly part was taking over? What if that meant Phantom was going to lose control? He'd had it last night - that much was clear, no matter what his form looked like - but what if that was going to slip away from him?

Wasn't someone supposed to stop him then? Wasn't it going to be Westley?

That, he realized, had always been the plan. Phantom acted like a hero but he was still a terror - he was still a terror, and Wes was going to present the proof of it and then the secret would be out and they'd put a stop to him. He always imagined that the Guys in White would show up, probably in an unmarked van all decked out with the latest ghost gear, and they'd take Phantom away. Maybe the Fentons would even turn him over - that mother always had a look in her eye that made Wes' skin crawl, and he wouldn't put a thing like that past her.

Still - that didn't change much. The plan remained: expose Phantom, stop ghosts.

He could do that.

He grabbed his backpack on the way out the door, and headed down to the end of the block to catch the bus. The damage from overnight had begun to settle in, although the spirits had all vanished into thin air at the crack of dawn; a scattered pile of planks was all that remained of the neighbors' garage, and the pickup across the street was nothing more than a charred and still-smoking wreck. He frowned,

glanced down the road, and trotted across it to the alley on the other side. The side of the shop had collapsed into the alley itself - no doubt he would have been crushed if Phantom hadn't saved him - and resting on its side at the mouth of the alley was the camera he'd lost. He picked it up and inspected it briefly. It had gone dead, probably hours ago, and one side of the display was cracked. Judging by that alone, it was impossible to tell whether it still functioned or not. He'd been recording when the flaming ghost had gone after him - how much of the encounter had it captured before it had cut out? That, he supposed, was just something else to find out when he got home later.

He set it carefully into his backpack for safekeeping. He'd have a closer look at it after school. For the time being, he went back to the end of the block to catch his bus.

- - - -

He'd been thinking all day. He noticed, although he kept his mouth shut, that Fenton had called in sick; everyone else had a ghost story to share, and he heard about some of the carnage that had been brought about over the course of the night. Baxter and about four of his football buddies had been hanging out at the Nasty Burger, and were boasting to no end about how they'd fended off an angry box-wielding spirit; Valerie Gray, naturally, just scoffed and said she'd held her own; Paulina Sanchez had spent the night with all the lights on, just in case; even the band geeks and the preps had seen a handful of ghosts, although most of them hadn't come quite as close to being killed as Wes had; and it seemed to be variations on the same stories throughout Casper High.

A few had even mentioned Phantom, but no one seemed to want to talk about it when they'd seen Wes coming. He still overheard the rumors, of course, but only in hushed whispers and only by people who didn't think he could hear them. *My little brother said Phantom scared him; I saw him last night, and I had no idea he looked like that in person; did you see that fight Phantom had down by the movie theater? something took a huge bite out of one of the popcorn machines and Stan said that was him.*

So, Wes knew, he wasn't the only one that had seen Phantom, and he wasn't the only one that knew something was wrong. Even if no one else was as observant as he was about it - which, if he was honest, was not surprising - they were still able to notice that *something* wasn't adding up. Despite that they seemed to shut him out of the conversation, almost on collective instinct alone, that still made him feel better.

Well, *better*, or at least more sure of himself.

That also meant, if any of those sorts of stories were to be believed, that maybe Phantom didn't have as much of a handle on himself as Westley had thought. *I heard he almost blasted a guy to pieces down by the apartments on Fifth*, said one of the preps. Anecdotes and stories piled up pretty quickly, and the picture they painted seemed more to be one of destruction than anything else.

He kept wondering, too, about the contents of the camera in his backpack. He couldn't have a closer look at it until he got home, but it occurred to him, sometime in fourth-hour, that if it had kept recording after he'd dropped it, there was a chance he might have captured the fight with the flaming ghost. He wasn't sure what that might have looked like, but whatever he caught of it must have been better than most of the footage he had. *Well, maybe*. What was more likely, he thought, was that he hadn't caught anything at all.

By the time he got home, his patience had run out. He darted upstairs with barely a hello to his mother, set his backpack down on the bed, and gingerly pulled the broken camera out of it. He hated the uncertainty - did it still work or not? - but he plugged it in and set it down on the bedside table, hoping *oh please* that it would charge.

To distract himself, he pulled the laptop out and flipped it open. He kept glancing over at the camera anyway - it always took a minute to wake up from dead, but was this too long? was it really shot? couldn't he still pull any footage at all from it?

Pretty please?

The camera awakened with a soft ping, indicating that it was charging, and Wes was overjoyed. He plugged in the other cable - carefully, though - to get everything it had captured onto the laptop before it decided that it was too broken to do that; once it had all transferred over, he allowed himself to relax. Whatever was there from last night, it was safe.

*Now let's have a look at it.*

There was an hour and twelve minutes of footage. Most of it, he remembered, was just of him; he'd gone out around ten-thirty, maybe a little after, when he'd thought things had quieted down a bit and he'd finally worked up the nerve to go, in the hopes of finding Phantom. He'd thought that Halloween would have been the best night to get the best footage, considering it was supposed to be nonstop ghost fights.

Well, he'd been right about that last part.

He skimmed over most of it, thinking he'd chop most of it off as he did almost every time that he went out ghost-seeking, and around the forty-seven-minute mark there was an explosion of light that drowned out the night vision. That was the flaming ghost, he recalled, and everything for a solid minute after that was bleached-out and unusable. When it faded back to darkness again, the camera faced the alley. The side of the building had collapsed - this must have been after he ran home, he realized. His head slowly tilted to counteract the angle as he was watching, as if that would help anything come into better focus. He could see Phantom lingering in the air, turned mostly-away, thermos still in one hand. He hesitated as if thinking about something, and the thermos was clipped back onto the side of his belt. He was still for a long moment - long enough that Wes checked to make sure the footage hadn't glitched or cut out. It hadn't.

Phantom turned slowly, not around to face the camera but down to have a look at himself. Had he been injured in that fight - if he had, he didn't look it. He just brought one hand slowly out in front of him, palm-up and fingers out. Even out of full focus, they were impossibly segmented; the fingers curled and uncurled, one at a time, and his other hand came up to the side of his face. Maybe toward the front of it, Wes thought, he couldn't tell for sure. Phantom sunk slowly, head hung and tail crumpling under him, and came to rest beside the pile of destroyed bricks that cluttered the alley. The loose hand curled into an approximate fist, and through the distortion Wes swore he was trembling.

Was he crying?

That realization struck him like a spear to the chest. *Is he really. . . ?* Despite that the audio had cut out, there was no mistaking it. Phantom was weeping, and it was because he knew what he was becoming. When he'd saved Wes - even if their interaction had only been for a few seconds, he'd refused to acknowledge it, and it was almost as if nothing was wrong at all. He'd been sure of himself, same as he always was.

Only that wasn't the case.

The footage kept on for another twenty-odd minutes. Phantom pulled himself up, scrubbing at the eyes with one bony wrist, and took off again, and the rest of the recording was empty.

Wes just stared until it ran out. *What if he doesn't know what's happening to him either?* It was the first time that thought had occurred to him, but all of a sudden it became clear. Wes had assumed, until then, that Phantom had been controlling those sorts of changes deliberately, or at least willed them into fruition somehow. If he *wasn't*, though? If it was just *happening*, and he couldn't control it or reverse it?

What if Phantom needed help?

That was the only conclusion left. Westley denied it in disgust - *after all the time I've spent, every piece of evidence I've gathered up, I can't just throw it all out* - but suddenly he couldn't follow through with it, either. Uncovering Fenton's secret, he always thought, would be a crowning achievement. It was grand and it was spectacular and it would make him famous, and it would be sure to get him into the Guys

in White, at least as soon as he was able to join them. Someone who could be a human *and* a ghost couldn't be trusted, he said; someone like that was dangerous, he said; someone like that was allowing malevolent spirits into Amity Park on purpose, he said. Now that *someone* was just a scared kid like the rest of them - like Wes had been attacked by the flaming spirit, and he'd been scared too - and suddenly it all fell apart.

What would happen, then, if he still put his proof of Phantom's secret on display?

Would that make him into a monster too?

- - - -

Danny had locked himself into the bathroom by the lab.

He stood, palms down on either side of the sink, and stared himself down in the mirror. He hadn't been to school. He couldn't do it after last night - he just couldn't. So, when he'd collapsed into bed a little after six in the morning, and when his mother had woken him at quarter-to-seven, he'd gone cold and said he felt sick. That had gotten him out of class.

That said nothing about the messages waiting for him on his phone. Between Sam and Tucker, there were seventeen of them, and he knew they'd be asking what was going on. He'd told them, on the way home yesterday, that he'd planned to be fighting all night. He'd told them he'd keep them updated, and he hadn't told them he'd consider missing school.

He hadn't told them about what was happening when he transformed, either.

*No one asks to become an abhorrent freak of nature, Danny.*

He thought - well, he'd been thinking for a while - that it was simpler to go out on the nightly patrols alone. Sam and Tuck hadn't seen him go ghost for weeks, but that only meant they didn't have to worry about him. It wasn't as if he was lying outright. He could still figure this out. He still had time.

Besides, none of the other ghosts seemed to mind. *Looks like you're all dressed up.* Technus had said that. It was almost as if he'd *expected* that Danny would look like some unspeakable horror - as if he'd *decided* to manifest that way, as if he ever *would* decide to manifest that way.

Just for Halloween, right? Like it was a costume, and he could take it off afterwards.

Maybe - *just maybe* - there was still a way he could fix it. He held his own stare until he couldn't take it anymore, and finally he turned his gaze downwards. On the countertop by the sink: a pair of pliers, swiped from the cabinet in the lab, and just looking at them made his stomach turn. This wouldn't really fix it - but at least it would be a start. Didn't he have to try?

Danny took a deep breath. He pressed his hands into fists against the cold ceramic, as if that would keep them from shaking. *You know it's already too late*, said something in him, *you know you can't go back now. You had your chance.* He knew that chance was long gone. It was gone from the moment he'd spat out that tooth after that fight three weeks ago. Back then, it had been just a tooth, but that had spiraled out of control - *right, like you've ever had any control over this* - and part of him knew there was no recovering from it, and no slowing it down.

That wasn't good enough. He had to stop it.

He had to, or he could never let anyone see his ghostly form again. So what if the ghosts didn't care - he couldn't imagine Sam and Tucker seeing him, or Jazz seeing him, or any living human at all seeing him. He thought of himself, all bones and tail, sitting up in the dead oak tree; he'd sat up there and *haunted*, and he'd scared kids who'd seen him before and smiled, and what if Sam and Tucker saw him like that and they *screamed*? What if they screamed, or what if they froze up like Weston did? Even though Danny had saved him - he'd just stared like a deer in headlights, and he'd gone stiff under Danny's touch, and Danny had watched the color all drain out from his face just *looking* at him.

That hurt. That really, really hurt.

So, when he thought about it, he didn't have a choice. This had to happen, didn't it?

He looked over again at the pliers resting on the countertop. One hand slid over them, fingers tightening as if he'd be able to crush them, but he didn't have it in him to look himself in the eye. Somehow, that was too much.

*You have to do this. You have to try.*

Danny transformed. He always hated the feeling, but this one was compounded with a thick and heavy dread that clawed its way into his gut and settled like a hand around his core. He'd shut his eyes; he didn't want to see what would stare back at him when he opened them. He knew it was grotesque, and horrendous, and *inhuman*, and he knew that whatever else had twisted out of familiarity this time was something he'd never get back. He forced himself to look anyway - *Halloween's over, can't you take that costume off now?* - but that alone almost made him burst into tears. His ghostly form had been shrinking down to skeletal for some time, and by now it was coming very close to that; his skin had gone bone-white weeks ago, and it had shriveled up and clung to his skull and the sides of his neck as if it were tissue paper and one wrong touch might make it disintegrate. His mouth was little more than a gaping pit of teeth, four or five deep now and in all shapes mashed together, and the jaws just stretched lower to make room for them as if he was locked in a horrible anguished scream.

He couldn't look at himself like that. He couldn't bear to. *You have to fix this*, nevermind that he knew there was no fixing it, nothing he could do except further twist and mutate and watch himself slide ever-faster into the stuff of nightmares. What would he find next time - only a skull, perhaps? or would something else in him rot?

He still held the pliers in one hand. That, in his mind, was his last chance. He finally met the gaze of the monstrous thing in the mirror - those green eyes, at least, were still his own. *How long do you think they'll last?*

The steel jaws of the pliers slid easily around the last tooth in the rear. *How many are there, now? Could you even get rid of them all? What if they'll just come in again? Remember that fight you had, and you couldn't even remember which one you'd lost?* He shoved that thought away. He had to do this. He had to do *something*, just to resemble human again if nothing else.

*Or else they'll run screaming into the night at the mere sight of a thing like you.*

The tooth came out with a hard twist. The pain was sharp and blinding, shooting up through his skull and making his vision blur away to static; he swayed and then buckled, one hand still against the countertop in a weakening effort to keep him vertical, and he tasted rather than felt his mouth fill up with ectoplasm. Whether he screamed or not was beyond him. When the static finally fell away he was leaning over the sink, head down, wracked with sobs and knowing the pliers were still in his hand and he couldn't quit. The steady plink-plink against the ceramic glowed almost as bright as the fluorescents overhead.

The pain dulled to a steady ache but refused to settle into anything less. Danny looked up at his reflection again - *shut up, you stupid sonofabitch, you've had worse than this* - and the piercing eyes hardened into a determined glare behind the tears. *You wanna look like this forever? You wanna be a monster?* The pliers came up again and settled over the second tooth. Feeling them in his mouth made him flinch, and he jerked his head away out of instinct.

*How many times were you afraid of this?* spat the voice of his core, *how many nightmares of bright lights and steel and too-familiar shadows like vultures hovering over you and how many times do you think those shadows would have called them dreams? Tell me where you got those pliers from, tell me you've never thought of them coming at you just like this, tell me you're not just as scared of yourself as they are.*

*Tell me you're any better off because you're cutting yourself up into pieces instead of them doing it for you.*

Danny couldn't do it. His will broke; he dropped the pliers as if they'd burned him, and turned his back on the monstrous thing in the mirror. *How many nightmares? why are you doing this? do you still think you're in control?* Had he really thought that he could tear himself apart a piece at a time and still

come out the other side of it? Didn't that mean he was the one making himself into a monster? He sunk to the tile floor, mouth still bleeding, arms wrapped around himself as if there was any reassurance left.

He couldn't blame anyone who saw him for screaming. If he had to stare at himself in the mirror one more time, he might just scream too.

- - - -

Friday, November second.

Seven-fifteen a.m.

"D'you think he'll be here today?"

Sam and Tucker sat at their usual corner table in the cafeteria. The early-morning crowd was never as noisy as the lunch rush, and they both kept their voices lower than usual. There was a tray of packaged pancakes between them; Tucker grabbed the one off the top. "You didn't hear back from him yesterday?"

Sam shook her head. "No, you?"

"Not me," said Tucker, folding the pancake in half so that he could stuff it into his mouth. He thought for a moment, frowned, and then said through it: "Yaffink he's okay?"

"Honestly, Tucker? No. I don't. I mean, I know Jazz has your number, so I think if something *really* nasty happened she'd have texted you about it. At least, I wanna think that. But you were hearing all that crazy stuff people were saying yesterday, right?"

"Stuff about how the ghost kid scared Kim Carpenter's brother half to death? and how like half the hockey team saw him taking potshots at people over the Seven-Eleven?"

Sam nodded gravely. "That doesn't sound like him, does it? Something happened - something serious, and if he's in that kind of trouble we're gonna have to figure out how to help him. I know Jazz has been waiting for him to tell her about the whole ghost thing in the first place out of - I don't know, *personal space* or whatever - but I'm starting to think we'll need her help too."

"Y'know, I don't think I've ever seen you pull the big-sister card," said Tucker, "But yeah. I'll text her about it."

"Text who?" said Danny, startling Sam and Tucker both. He dropped into the empty seat next to Tucker and yawned, setting his backpack on the table in front of him and folding his arms over it. "Sorry I was out yesterday - long night, filled up a thermos and a half, if you can believe it, got home around daybreak and just fuckin' crashed."

"You doing okay?" said Tucker, "Not gonna lie, man, you still kinda look like shit."

"Still kinda feel like it," said Danny, "But I'm good. Back to the usual, I guess."

Sam and Tucker exchanged a look that Danny didn't catch. Tucker tried again: "We texted you. How come - "

"Like I said. I was out. Practically all day," said Danny, a little more forcefully than he'd meant to. He added, as if that would help: "Guess I'm still kinda stressed out about it. Sorry."

"You sure it's just stress?"

It seemed like they weren't going to get an answer out of him, but eventually he nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine. Ghost stuff's just been crazy lately, is all. Like I thought it was gonna be. You know how I said all month Halloween was gonna suck ass? Welp - I was fuckin' right."

"Danny, look," Sam said finally, since Tucker wasn't going to, "I know you were probably running around like a madman the other night - we were both kinda thinking you'd text us to back you up, even, but - there was a bunch of stuff we heard about yesterday, from a lot of people, and - "

"What?" Danny was trying to hide it, but Sam and Tucker both saw his eyes flash. The draft of cold air that swept around them all of a sudden was probably coming from him, too. "What did they say? Who told you?"

"They saw you up on top of a gas station throwing ectoblasts around," said Sam quietly, "Among other things. What's going on, Danny? That's not like you."

Danny frowned. "The Seven-Eleven, right? That was the fight I had with Spectra. Almost took out the whole block."

"That's not what Kevin Cooper from hockey said - "

"Fuck Kevin Cooper from hockey," Danny snapped, "Why don't we give him ghost powers and a body that doesn't make any sense and see how he likes going around in it."

"Hey, easy," said Tucker, knowing that if Sam opened up her mouth again she'd probably start an argument. He slid a hand over Danny's arm. "We were just a little worried, okay? We didn't hear from you at all yesterday, and people are saying all sorts of weird things, and we just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Danny softened. He wouldn't meet Tucker's eyes, staring down instead at the corner of one of the side pockets on the backpack. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and let it out slowly. The cold draft dissipated along with it.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I guess I just need a break from the ghost stuff. That's all."

- - - -

The final bell plunged the halls into chaos. The next eight-to-ten minutes saw every single student in the building active, and trying to get through the over-crowded locker bay was next to impossible. Sam hung back instead in one of the alcoves by the front doors, scanning the crowds in an attempt to spot Tucker and wave him over. Danny wouldn't be around for another four or five, at least, but that was just an excuse to let the crowds thin out a little. She spotted Tucker coming down the back hall, their eyes met, and she gave him a nod to acknowledge him.

"So I got a copy of Campbell's history notes," said Tucker, as soon as he was close enough, and slid the backpack off his shoulder. He fished out a handful of crumpled pages and handed them to Sam. "He said you guys were even now."

"Yeah, sounds right," said Sam, inspecting the pages briefly before folding them up for storage in her own backpack. "I think Danny should be around any minute."

Tucker leaned up against one of the painted-steel beams that ran every ten feet along the front wall, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yeah. So listen, I was thinking, and I know you and me are on the same page here. Something's going on he's not telling us about. Beats me why. I say we get him over, maybe your place, maybe tomorrow night, maybe with a bunch of movies. We'll get the story then."

Sam gave Tucker an amused smile. "You make it sound like we're gonna kidnap him."

"Hey, it's not like that - !"

"Really?" Sam pressed, determined to tease him while she had the chance, "You sure we're not gonna wait for him to get his guard down and then tie him up in the basement and make him watch the first Trek movie on loop until he talks?"

"Hey, what's wrong with the first Trek movie?"

"It was twice as long as it needed to be," said Sam plainly, and Tucker didn't argue. "But yeah, I guess that's not a bad plan. I bet he could use a decent weekend after Halloween. But don't think I didn't catch how you immediately said it was gonna be at my house - admit it, you fell in love with the downstairs surround-sound."

Tucker shrugged helplessly. "Yeah. Maybe a little. But I still - "

"Foley, Manson," they both looked up to see Wes Weston, backpack over one shoulder and a serious look on his face. "Can we talk?"

"Oh, Jesus," said Sam, giving him a wary eye and crossing her arms. "What do you want? If it's to get on Danny's case again you're gonna have to wait."

Weston's frown deepened. "No, that's not it. Look. I just wanna know how bad it is. If he's really - you know - "

"If it's what?"

"He wasn't here yesterday," said Weston, "And you hear things from people, you know. Starting to sound like he might have gone off the deep end."

Tucker took a step forward. "Like hell he is! What do you know, anyway?"

"I saw him the other night, y'know," said Weston, and his voice was devoid of the needling malice that it usually carried. He hitched the backpack up a little, shifting his weight onto one foot. "On Halloween."

Sam hesitated, but wasn't about to let her guard down. "And?"

"I want to know if he's doing it on purpose or not," said Weston. That, whether they'd believe it or not, was the truth. "I ran into that blue flaming ghost - whatsername, you know the one - he fent her off for me, and - "

"More than I woulda done," said Tucker, shooting Sam an *amirite* kind of look.

If it amused her, she made no mention of it. "And what? The hell are you getting at, Weston? I swear to *Christ* if you saw him get hurt or kicked him while he was down or - "

"I didn't," said Wes quickly, "He pulled me out from under a pile of bricks and - look. I just wanna know if he's going around like that on purpose."

"Doesn't sound like off the deep end to me," said Sam, arms still crossed.

"Are you out of your mind? Have you *seen* him, he's all fingers and teeth and - "

Sam huffed. "This another one of your conspiracy theories? You think we're gonna buy it for a second? The hell are you on?"

"I'm serious!" Weston cried, "Look, he's been getting worse, don't even tell me he's not. I'll show you, I - "

"Here we go again," said Tucker, "Can't you give it a rest for, I don't know, maybe just the weekend or something?"

"This one's from almost two weeks ago," said Weston, ignoring Tucker completely, and pulled up a blurry photo on his cell. He shoved it into Sam's hands, as if it would speak for itself. "That's not what he looked like on Wednesday. Don't tell me it hasn't been getting worse."

Sam gave him a distrusting look, but glanced down at the phone in her hand anyway. The photo was mostly grainy and black, but under the yellow triangle of the streetlamp's light Phantom's form was still visible. Despite the shitty quality, there was no denying the changes. She looked back up at Weston again; instead of her usual sarcasm, she almost sounded desperate. "You fuckin' shopped this, didn't you?"

Weston shook his head. "Of course I didn't, I know it's from earlier, there's more he - " He cut himself off, mouth still open, and he looked as if his mind had suddenly ground to a halt. "Wait," he said finally, "You didn't know about this. At all."

"No," Sam said slowly, "What in the hell is this."

"He didn't tell you. Why in the fuck wouldn't he - holy *shit*, you had no idea any of this was going on? When's the last time you saw him? Phantom, I mean."

"What kind of question is that," Sam wanted to snap - her abrasive attitude was the stuff of legend, but this time Weston had managed to pull the rug out from under her and the uncertainty was showing through.

Wes wasn't about to let up. "Toward the beginning of the month, right? Lately he's just been going out on his own - I'll bet you haven't seen him. Not unless he's human."

"He didn't text us for backup on Wednesday night," said Tucker, sliding Sam a knowing glance.

Weston just nodded. "I'll fuckin' bet he didn't. Look, I really, *really* thought you two knew about this. Jesus, imagine finding out about it from me of all people."

"You said you saw him Wednesday," said Sam, "You said it was getting worse."

"Oh, shit. Yeah, I so did. Way worse. It's been happening faster, far as I can tell. That photo's from the twentieth, right? Almost two weeks ago. Stuff I got from Halloween's all fingers and skull. Wouldn't be surprised if he starts losing guts or something, the way I see it," said Weston, and sighed. He paused, knowing there was only so much he could say, and shifted his weight onto the other foot. "Look, I know you guys don't like me. You don't, Fenton doesn't, I don't like him, it's awkward. But. If he's doing this on purpose - and if half the shit people are saying about him is true, you know, the stuff about how he blew the Fazbear garage setup to bits, or how Lindsey Freeling saw him take a chunk out of the neighbor's house - if that's his fault, maybe somebody should stop him, you know?"

Sam scowled. "And that's gonna be you, isn't it."

"Well, we gotta do *something*," said Weston, "Or else he'll - "

"We? Fucking *we*?" Sam snapped, "There's no *we* except me and Tucker. You think you get to be invited? You think we're gonna help you? What, stop him, or drag him into his own thermos, or whatever the hell you think is good enough? He's our best fucking friend, Weston, and you really honestly think we're going to side with you? After all the shit you've pulled?"

"And what if you can't stop it?" Wes demanded, "What if he's losing control, and he didn't tell you about it because he still thinks he can fix it on his own. I'm telling you right now - he can't. You probably even can't. So then what?"

Sam took an angry step forward. Both of her hands had balled into fists, and despite that she was a full head shorter than him she was determined to stare him down. "What the hell makes you think we can't?"

"Because - " *Because if there was a way to fix him he would be fixed; because he only allows himself to acknowledge it when absolutely no one will know that he's scared of what he's becoming and he can't do a thing about it; because he didn't want you to take one look at him and worry.* Wes couldn't bring himself to say any of it. He knew that what he'd seen of Phantom late on Wednesday night was stolen - stolen in a way he couldn't describe, and in a way that didn't apply to anything else he'd ever captured on film. It wasn't as simple as *Fenton is a ghost*. It was *Phantom is human*, and that was a line he didn't know was there until he'd crossed it. "Just because," he said, because Manson was still glowering at him and he knew he had to say something. "It wouldn't have gone on this long otherwise."

"Further than two weeks?" said Tucker.

Wes nodded slowly. "I traced it back almost to the beginning of the month. Hardly even noticed it then. Maybe longer, maybe not."

"And you found out about it before we did," said Tucker, "Wonder what that makes us, huh."

Sam sucked in her breath through her teeth; she'd just made a realization, although she wasn't entirely sure what it meant just yet. "You knew about this for weeks, then. You knew - and you didn't say shit about it. Not even your usual batshit-tinfoil-hat conspiracy rants. Nothing at all. Why not. Why keep only this bit secret, and still yell about the regular stuff?"

Wes opened his mouth to say *because it took me most of that long to figure it out* but stopped himself. He reconsidered, and what he settled on was: "Because for a while I still thought he was in control of it. If he's not? If you can't help him, someone's gotta."

"And, again, you think that would be you," said Sam, this time without the angry refusal she'd carried with the sentiment previously.

"I don't know. Maybe, maybe not," said Wes, "Just *someone*."

"Wait, is he really on our side now?" said Tucker, sliding a glance to Sam. He knew she didn't like to think it, either, but this was perhaps one of the strangest interactions they'd had with Westley Weston. He hadn't screamed once about obtaining the last piece of evidence for whatever his latest presentation was going to be about; he hadn't even so much as mentioned the Guys in White, despite being the self-proclaimed leader of their fan club, and despite that being one of his go-to threats that would come to

fruition if any of his theories ever gained any traction. He really did sound, all of a sudden, like he wanted to help, but Tucker knew there was still something he wasn't saying, at least not to them, and not yet.

"Sam," he said, "I don't know about this."

Sam just nodded in agreement. "You're not the only one. Tell you what, Weston. You wanna help so bad? Get lost. I don't wanna so much as see your fuckin' face. You've done enough damage as it is."

"But - " Wes protested, but he shut his mouth after that. He turned, hitched up the backpack over his shoulder, and shoved his hands into his pockets. He glanced back at Sam and Tucker, but only for a moment. "You know why I haven't told anyone?" he said, "Because no one should be saddled with half the shit he is. You take one look at him, you'll know what I mean." Then he was gone.

Sam let her breath out in a slow huff. "The fuck does he think he is," she grumbled, "Come on, Tucker. We gotta find Danny. Whatever's going on - whatever's happening to him - we gotta have his back."

- - - -

Saturday, November third.

The knock at Danny's door startled him. He scrambled, shoving his hand-drawn ghost map back into the first drawer of the bedside table, and then thumped onto the floor to go and answer it. He opened it, but only a little; it was Jazz. "What?"

"Danny, can we talk?"

He didn't like the sound of that. "Why?"

"It's important," said Jazz, which wasn't as helpful as she probably thought. Still - her voice was quiet, and more serious than usual, and that was enough to set Danny on edge. After a beat, her voice dropped further to just a knowing whisper: "It's *dead* serious, okay? If that's what you want to call it."

Danny's blood ran cold. He looked, for a moment, like an animal that was realizing that it had just run into a trap, and when Jazz gently pushed the door open and had a seat on the chair by the desk he didn't protest. She had her hands folded neatly in her lap; there was something in them, but he couldn't see what.

"Danny," she said, "Listen. I didn't want to intrude like this - I was hoping you would have come to me when you were ready to talk about it, and I was hoping that we could have this conversation on more even terms."

Danny swallowed the stone that had formed in his throat. "You know," he said, "About - "

"Half-ghost things," said Jazz with a nod, "I've known for a little while now. Like I said, I wanted to have this conversation when you were ready to come to me about it. I didn't want you to think I was overbearing. I still hope you don't think that."

"Well - " Danny's mind had almost ground to a halt. What the hell was he supposed to say - *no, I'm not really a ghost or yeah, and I didn't tell you about it because I didn't trust you or yeah, maybe I am, but I didn't want you to get in the way and think you knew better than me about it.* None of those were right. He wouldn't meet her eyes. "Yeah," he said lamely, and sat on the edge of the bed. "I meant to tell you. I guess I was still thinking how you'd take it."

"I promise that's something you don't have to worry about," said Jazz evenly, "Whatever happens, I'll be here. You can always talk to me, and you can always come to me for help. You know that, right?"

Danny sighed. "How long? When did you find out?"

"The whole Spectra thing," said Jazz, "Don't worry about Sam and Tucker, they didn't say a word about it without me asking."

"They knew you knew," said Danny, as if it was an accusation.

Jazz just nodded. "I didn't want to get in the way, Danny, please believe me when I say that."

"So how come you're telling me this now?" he asked, folding his arms over his knees, "You said you wanted to wait until I said something about it."

"Well," Jazz's voice trailed off and her gaze fell. Her hands had begun to fidget with what was in them, and she turned them over: a pair of pliers, stained a luminescent green around the jaws, and a malformed and discarded tooth. "I found these in the bathroom downstairs," she explained, and took a deep breath to keep her voice from breaking. "And there was plasma in the sink."

Danny turned away.

"You did this, didn't you?" Her voice was low and quiet. "I want to know why."

Danny's breath hitched. His throat, all of a sudden, was burning, and anything he might have said had tangled up. Hot tears stung in his periphery and blurred together. *You can't tell her. You just can't.*

"Danny."

He said nothing.

Jazz rose slowly, setting the pliers and discarded tooth down on the desk with a soft tap, and sat on the side of the bed next to him. "Danny, *please*. I want to know what's going on, and I want to help."

Everything in him was tensing up. *You can't tell her. She'll say you're a monster and she'll be right.* His chest burned, and he couldn't have said anything even if he'd wanted to. How could he tell her he was trying to be human again? How could he tell her what it was like to look in the mirror and see himself rotting away a little at a time? Would she even understand that? *Could* she even understand that?

Didn't he trust her?

One ice-cold hand slid over hers, and he took a deep breath. "Promise," he whispered, unable to manage anything more than that, "Promise you won't tell anyone."

And he threw himself into the monstrous jaws of death. It all came back to him an instant - how he twisted further every time he transformed, how it seemed to be choking him out of control, how the voice of delusion in his core was *insisting* that everything was fine and *isn't it much scarier this way?* and he couldn't believe it but he couldn't tune it out anymore either.

He floated as an abomination over her. Her hand had become impossibly small in his, but he kept ahold of it; there were things which even then he knew had changed - *since when? yesterday? this morning?* - and he wondered if he could still hold onto those green eyes for just a bit longer.

Jazz beheld him in morbid awe. "Danny," she whispered, "Who did this, how - how did this happen. . . ?"

Danny was unblinking. His mouth had overgrown, and when he spoke it was not with sound but with the mechanisms of the dead. *(I don't know. It started happening a couple weeks ago, when the teeth started coming in, but then there was other stuff too and I don't know how to fix it, and it keeps getting worse and I can't make it stop)*

"You don't know what's causing it," said Jazz slowly.

*(No. I don't. It just started happening, and I can't just turn back to normal and you know what the worst part is? There's this part of me that thinks this is normal. It thinks there's nothing wrong with me and it thinks I'm supposed to be like this and I can't get rid of it, and I know I can't listen but it keeps getting louder, and I don't know how much longer I'll be able to tune it out. What happens if I give in, Jazz? Do I just lose whatever control I have left?)*

"I don't know," said Jazz, "You still sound like you, though, even if - whatever's going on - doesn't want you to look like it."

*(I don't feel like it, either. It doesn't hurt, I mean, I don't feel it, not really, but - how do I make it stop? I don't want to be this, I don't want to keep sinking away from being human, what if one time I can't turn back? Then what am I gonna do? Jazz you gotta help me - )*

"Hey, easy," said Jazz, hoping to keep him from working himself up too quickly, "Listen to me, we'll figure this out, okay? I promise we will. I'm not gonna let you take it on your own. I said I'd have your back. I mean it. Okay?"

Danny was silent. He couldn't shove the delusions of his core away; he transformed, knowing that was the only way to banish them, and threw his arms around Jazz and cried.

- - - -

Sunday, November fourth.

He hadn't gone to Sam's over the weekend like they'd planned. It would have been overnight Saturday, and they would have holed up in her basement with a handful of bad retro movies and had popcorn, and they probably would have built a blanket fort. He'd been looking forward to it.

Instead, it was Sunday afternoon and they'd met up at the Nasty Burger. Sam and Tucker had already claimed their usual table under the window, and Danny dropped into the empty seat next to Tucker. "Sorry about yesterday," he said, "Chem's kicking my ass again, and Dad *insisted* he could help this time."

"Sure," said Sam, "You doing okay otherwise?"

"Yeah, fine," said Danny, and this time he almost sounded like he meant it. "Maybe next week we could do the sleepover. If that's okay, I mean."

Sam shot Tucker a tight-lipped look, and Danny caught it too.

"What? We could do some other time, or my place, that's not - "

"Danny," she said bluntly, cutting him off, "Look. Me and Tucker have been talking. I don't mean for this to be a buzzkill on your weekend, but - you're not okay. I dunno if you noticed but we definitely did. There's something you're not talking about."

"What?" said Danny, but the chill that was coming from him all of a sudden was an indication that Sam was right. He looked over at Tucker, as if he expected Tucker to back him up, but then back at Sam again.

"We know what's been going on, Danny. Me and Tucker both. You haven't let us go on patrol with you for like three weeks."

"Well I'm fine on my own anyway," said Danny, a little too quickly, "If I needed you guys to back me up I'd say so - "

"Like you did on Halloween?" said Tucker, "Don't try and tell me you had it under wraps, man. Don't say it wouldn't have been any easier without us, either. You pushed yourself so hard you had to skip class."

"Yeah? Maybe I did, so what? I knew I'd be up all night. Besides - I didn't see you guys go out either. You wanted to help out so bad, why didn't you?"

"Because you said you had it under control and we took your word for it," said Sam, "Only you didn't, did you? You still don't."

Danny frowned. "What are you - ?"

"We know what's going on, Danny. About what's been happening when you go ghost." Sam gave him a deliberate look, and he knew from experience it was the kind he couldn't argue with.

"What," said Danny, "Who told you? It was Jazz, wasn't it? She said you had her number."

Sam shook her head. "No, it wasn't. But I don't think that matters - "

"It does so matter!" said Danny, "She swore she wouldn't tell anyone. If she fuckin' snitched I gotta know it was her."

Sam crossed her arms. "I already said it wasn't - "

"Then who did?" Danny snapped, "I guarantee it was somebody."

Sam held his stare, long enough that he started to think she wasn't going to break it, but then sighed. "Wes fucking Weston. That's who. Happy now?"

"What?"

"I said it didn't matter," she scoffed, throwing one hand up. "What do I know."

"You've been talking to Wes fucking Weston behind my back?"

"Well," said Tucker, not entirely sure he wanted to interject but too late to decide against it, "He kinda did corner both of us on Friday after class, and you didn't show, so."

"And he said what, exactly."

Sam sighed. "He said he knew something was going on. He was actually super weird about it. He said it was getting worse."

"And you believed him?"

"Yeah, he's practically got a time-lapse of it on his laptop," said Tucker, "Dude. Seriously, how come you didn't tell us?"

"Because," Danny snapped, knowing that the second he stopped being angry he'd break, "Because I thought I could fix it and by the time I realized I couldn't it was too late and I didn't want you guys to freak out and think it was coming out of nowhere because it's *not* and - " He was breaking anyway. *Dammit, weren't you going to hold it together?* He pushed himself back into anger again, which only helped for the moment but that was good enough. "And now you're telling me that *Wes fucking Weston* of all people just came up and told you about the whole thing. What, and I bet he was real fucking smug about it too. I swear I'm gonna fucking get him for this one - "

"He actually seemed kind of concerned," Sam conceded, "I didn't know he had it in him."

"He doesn't," said Danny, "That just means he wants something, and he's gonna try and get it the second any one of us lets our guard down. I can't believe you two. Seriously. You know this is *my* skin on the line if he gets what he wants, right?"

Tucker put a hand on his arm. "Danny, hold on for a sec, just hear us out, okay?"

"Are you kidding?" said Danny, "I don't get enough shit from him, I gotta get it from you too now?"

"But it's true, though. About whatever's been making your ghost form like that. That's why you took Halloween night all on your own. You didn't want us to see it, did you?" Tucker was always softer, even when Danny was angry; he shot Sam a look, knowing her rough edges would only rile Danny up further, and she kept quiet.

Danny knew it too. "No," he said finally, "You don't wanna see it. It's real nasty."

"Weston said it's been going on for a few weeks now," Tucker pressed, "Maybe longer but that was as far as he could tell."

Danny hated to even think it, much less express the sentiment out loud. "Yeah, he's right. Just about." He could still hardly believe it. After he'd been careful enough not to let anything slip, and after he'd almost started to come to grips with the whole ordeal - *as much as you're okay with being a twisted horror* - this was the second time in as many days as he'd been confronted about it. Jazz, despite that she was too nosy for her own good, had been easy. Sam and Tuck - that was different. He wondered what they'd say if they ever saw what his ghost form had become.

Perhaps it would still be better if they didn't.

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Monday, November fifth.

Wes couldn't afford to be late to class again. It was bad enough that he'd missed the bus that morning, and had come into first-hour late; Tetslaff wasn't going to be happy if she caught him trying to

slip into the locker rooms past the bell, and he knew she was the one who would catch him. Rastburg would let anyone on the team off easy - but Tetslaff? She was always trouble.

At least he had a little space today - there was a quad of girls that decided to stand and talk in front of his locker as often as not, and this time around he didn't have to chase them off. He dropped his textbooks off, threw the mostly-empty backpack down, kicked the straps so they wouldn't catch in the frame of the locker, and slammed it shut.

Danny Fenton appeared from behind the locker door in that same instant, making Wes yelp. "Jesus, Fenton, did you really have to do that?"

"Dunno, did I?" said Fenton, in the extra-casual way that Wes hated, "And did *you* really have to sit in the dark every night for the past four months so you could get another frame to pin up on your conspiracy board about a ghost kid who never even fucking bothered you to begin with?"

Wes groaned. "Ugh, look. I'd love to sit and argue - seriously, I would love to do that - but I don't have time for this."

"Did you have time to go behind my back and open up your idiot mouth to my two best friends about something that's also not your business to begin with?" said Fenton, who reappeared in front of him as soon as he turned away, "And while we're on the topic, let me ask you something else. Did you really, *honestly* think I wouldn't find out about you doing that?"

Wes was not amused. "That's what you're mad about this week? Whatever. I said I don't have time for this. If Tetslaff catches me late again I'm dead."

"Keel over, then," said Fenton with a sudden sharpness. One of the fluorescents over his head popped and went dark, making Wes flinch. "I'll bet you could only do that trick once. Come on, Weston. Let's see it."

The two-minute bell sounded overhead; that was the indication that Wes wasn't going to be on time, even if he booked it, and that meant he may as well take Fenton's bait. "Look, I had to do *something*. You weren't gonna say fuck-all about it, were you? That's what Manson said."

"Remind me again why you're the one that gets to make that call instead of me?" Fenton snapped, "Maybe - just maybe, humor me here - there's a reason I didn't. Did that ever fucking occur to you, Weston? Or did you just see a chance to make things worse, and you took it?"

"You're the one that's making things worse!" Wes exclaimed, "You're the one that's *dead* half the time! You think anyone's supposed to be like that? Did you think it'd turn out fine, just-this-once, just-for-you? Did you think you were going to be *okay* with it?"

"Shut the hell up, you don't know - "

"You think I don't know what I'm talking about? The hell I don't! You think I spend this much time seeing everything that's going on, and you think I'm still sitting here in the dark? I can't just *watch* anymore, Fenton. Whatever's fucking you up - "

"I'll fuck *you* up!" Fenton grabbed him, coming up a foot or so from the floor so that they were on an even keel. The final bell sounded hollowly through the halls; any potential spectators to the argument were gone, and in that moment Fenton shirked off the restrictions that would have come with them. The fluorescent lights snapped in sequence, plunging the hall one segment at a time into darkness, and Wes was thrown with an inhuman ease across the space. He smashed into the lockers at the other side, caught himself, and scrambled back.

"Hey, back off!" Wes cried, taking another step back as if he could keep the distance between them if Fenton made another grab for him, "You don't get to pin this on me! I *watched it all happen*, Fenton! I have every single piece of it! I saw you get just a little scarier every fucking night since *September* and - "

"You wanna see scary?" Fenton's voice was sharp, and the look he gave Wes was one like stone. "You really wanna see scary, Weston? *I'll fucking show you scary!*" He transformed with a blinding flash, and the form that floated in the hall was no longer Danny Fenton. Even in the semi-darkness, his outline

was clear: a skeletal frame, with ribs that finally tore free from the ever-shrinking skin that had bound them, and endless vertebrae cloaked in the shadows of the spectral tail; his skull gaunt, with his jaw hanging loose and teeth that burst forth and spread like a rash across one side of his face; arms thin as thread barely keeping a jacana's hands aloft; hair untethered by gravity or the mortal plane; behind it all, those tortured eyes, sunken too far into the skull and blazing instead from somewhere beyond it. Wes was frozen in the spotlight of death, and in that moment he knew he was doomed.

*(Take a good look, Weston)* said the rampant ghost, *(That's what you want, isn't it? You wanted to see this, to document every single tooth that comes in, every inch of me that fades out of my own grasp, you wanted to take every bit of it and put it up on a billboard and you want your own name right next to mine because you're so fucking brilliant aren't you)*

In the clutches of Phantom's gaze, Wes was trembling. "I . . ." His mouth had run dry, and he tried to swallow the terror that had crawled up into the back of his throat.

*(What? Don't like that?)* his voice was heard in Wes' mind like thunder, and he drifted closer. *(Isn't this what you wanted? Aren't you getting a snapshot of this? put it in the yearbook, maybe? or would you rather just stand on a table every day at lunch and hold it up and scream?)*

"I won't - " Wes stammered, backing into the lockers at the side of the hall and pressing up against them as if that would help him. Phantom's deathly stare was blinding but he couldn't look away. "I swear, I won't - "

*(And I'm supposed to believe you, aren't I?)* said the ghost, *(Tell me why I'd want to go and do a stupid thing like that)*

Wes couldn't hold the blinding gaze of the ghost any longer. Even shutting his eyes against it left negatives that still bore into him, and his hands tightened into fists at his sides in an effort to keep them still. "Because I didn't - I haven't told anyone, I swear - please, just *listen*, I didn't tell anybody, not about this - not about all the stuff I saw - "

*(And why not?)* demanded the ghost. His ribs began to shift and tap like impatient fingers holding together the concentrated darkness within him. *(Why the hell not?)*

"Because I wanted you to fix it!" Wes cried. *That's what it boils down to, isn't it? You know he's still human in there, underneath it all.* He forced himself to meet Phantom's blinding stare, behind the twisted skull and past all those teeth - *he's just as scared as you are.* "I saw everything. I saw what happened on Halloween - when you fought off that ghost and I ran home, I found the tapes after - and I knew you didn't want anyone to see, and I knew you couldn't stop it and - "

*(And you went right to my friends with it)* Phantom's voice was seething, but the anger was already starting to break; already, he was starting to sound more human.

Wes hesitated. "I . . . no, I didn't. Not with that. I couldn't - I wasn't even supposed to see it. I thought - I thought your friends knew, hell, I thought you could control it - but you can't, you're just as scared as the rest of us, only you're the one on the inside, behind everything that keeps happening even though you don't want it to - "

*(Shut up)* said Phantom, and he almost sounded desperate, *(You don't know what it's like! You never wake up and wonder how many teeth you have today that you didn't have yesterday, you can still look yourself in the mirror and you're still human and - )*

"Aren't you?"

Phantom went quiet after that. His face - what there was left of his own - was unreadable; the empty eye sockets were alight in green, and the horrid downturned mouth was frozen in anguish. He drifted lower, and the headlight gaze finally fell. *(I want to be)*

"Danny?"

Phantom and Wes both turned; it was Tucker, at the end of the hall where the lights hadn't burst, and he put a hand up to ward off the ghostlight when Phantom stared.

*(Tuck? What the hell - what are you doing here, I - )*

"I didn't see you in trig, I knew something happened," said Tucker, "I went to see if you were - *holy shit*, is that what you're looking like now? That's - "

*(Don't even say it, I know it's bad, I can't - I can't help it, okay? I'm not - )*

"That's - well - I'm gonna go with terrifying on that one, actually," said Tucker, giving the form a once-over as well as he was able in the dark, "The hell are you doing, man?"

*(I - )* The ghostlight stare turned back to Wes for a moment, and then fell. *(Making things worse, I guess.)*

"Told you," said Wes, who wouldn't look Danny in the eye either.

"Danny, look at me for a sec. Look at me. Right here. I promise you're gonna be okay. We had this talk yesterday, remember?"

*(Don't say that, Tuck, you don't know for sure if I'll ever fix this - )*

"Yeah, man, I do. I know it, because I *trust* you, and I know you're still *you* in there no matter what."

*(You barely even flinched)*

"I mean - maybe we'll still see if we can do something about those creepy fingers, but."

Danny hesitated. Then he had his arms around Tucker, creepy fingers and all, and everything in him began to unwind at once. Perhaps it was the reassurance of his core aligning with his best friend telling him things were going to be alright; perhaps it was the simple and *oh-so-human* need to be held; perhaps it was that, even if his deathly form never reverted back to its more humanoid shape, he could still be acknowledged as *someone* rather than *something*.

That, when it came right down to it, was what he wanted.

- - - -

Tuesday, November sixth.

Danny drifted in through the window. Halloween had come and gone, but the encroaching winter meant long nights and patrols in the snow; at least the cold wasn't a bother, not really, not when he was out for hours at a time. He settled face-down on the bed and just rested for a moment. It had been a long night - *jesus, can a guy ever get any fucking sleep?* - and the thermos at his hip, which was blinking slowly, would probably need to be dumped out again before the weekend.

He transformed, took a deep breath, thought about it, and decided he should probably take care of that thermos before he forgot. It was late enough that his parents might both be asleep, and there was a chance he'd be able to sneak down into the lab unnoticed. He yawned, propped himself up on his elbows -

- and nearly jabbed himself on something sharp. He recoiled, running one hand over the side of the pillow to see what it had been, and his fingers found it a second later. He held it up against the soft moonlight in the window; it was a flat-headed tooth, and for a brief puzzling moment he wondered where it had come from. *That's not mine. Unless it came from my ghost form. . .*

*Did it fall out on its own?*

That, he thought, as he set the thing down on the bedside table, was probably a good sign.