

nothing bad ever happens at a haunted carnival

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nothing bad ever happens at a haunted carnival

by [maybeans](#)

Summary

Drawn in by the promise of a large sum of money, Team Mortal takes on on a job at an abandoned carnival. The goal is the same as always: get in, put the ghost haunting the place to rest, get out. With their very own ghost on their team, they definitely have the advantage.

Absolutely nothing will go wrong.

Notes

team mortal is a hermitcraft/last life ghost hunter au that i've been working on with my pal joey (@yoeyrt here on ao3). i highly recommend reading the other two fics that he wrote in this collection before this one.

finally FINALLY i'm posting something for team mortal hehe. i've been working on this on and off for almost a month n i'm so glad to be posting it. i highly recommend listening to clown music while reading for maximum enjoyment. enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“Alright, listen up everyone,” Etho starts, shuffling some papers in his lap. “We’re almost here, so let’s go over the job.”

“Remind me again why we didn’t go over this *before* we left?” Grian asks, leaning forward from his seat behind Etho to get a glimpse at the job info.

Etho swats him with the paper, smiling a little under his mask when Grian retracts with a grumble. “Because I wanted a nap. Anyways—”

“*Question,*” Bdubs pipes up, and Etho’s phone screen flickers to life. “*Are we getting any cotton candy?*”

Etho sighs. “You can’t eat, Bdubs.”

“*Oh, it’s not about eating it. I just want to watch the little machine spin. It’s mesmerizing.*”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, because there definitely won’t be a functioning cotton candy machine. This place has been abandoned for over a century.”

“*Woah, spooky.*”

“Well, we are here to find a ghost, after all,” Grian chimes in.

“Right. Our client is a hotel owner looking for a plot of land to set up a sister hotel. Problem is, the land’s currently occupied by this old carnival. Whenever he’s sent people to survey the land, they’ve run away pissing their pants. He went himself and had a similar experience. He’s hiring us to send any spirits on their way so he can start properly surveying the area.”

“So,” Mumbo chimes in, eyes still trained on the road, “you’re telling me a presumably wealthy business owner hired a couple of ghost hunters. To hunt ghosts he believes to be real.”

“Yes?”

Mumbo clicks his tongue and shakes his head. “That’s bad business. Clients are bound to hear about it and think he’s nuts. Which he is.”

“Mumbo, the only reason I’m not going to hit you with this paper is because you’re driving.

“Rude!”

“So, ” Bdubs butts in, “*what’s the game plan?*”

“That’s what Grian and I were working on last night.” Etho shuffles his papers, the hastily scribbled transcript of his phone call with the hotel owner replaced by Grian’s ridiculously neat bullet points. “The challenge here is that we have such a big area to cover. Usually we’re limited to one building, and even then we usually know the specific room or area that’s the source of the haunting. Here, activity has been reported all over the place. Whatever this spirit—or spirits, it could be more than one but let’s hope not—is doing, they’re not consistent with it. All we really have to go off of is they’re malicious, and they could be anywhere.”

“Which means—”

Etho looks up to the rearview mirror to meet Grian’s excited gaze. They lock eyes and Grian immediately retracts in his seat. “Oh, sorry Etho, I didn’t meant to interrupt.”

“You’re fine. Go ahead.”

“Oh. Alright then. Um, it means we need to narrow down the location of the ghost before anything else. We’re going to hold off on the motion sensors, at least at first, as we don’t have nearly enough to cover the entire carnival and we wouldn’t know where to put the ones we have. We’re just going to go in with the spirit box. If that doesn’t work, we’re going to search the grounds.”

“How long do you think this is going to take?” Mumbo interjects. “They’re showing a new season of *The Great British Bake Off* at eight tomorrow morning and I want to be back in time for a good night’s rest.” He frowns as Etho turns to glare at him. “What?”

“You’re waiting in the car. I don’t wanna hear complaints from you. Besides, I doubt we’re gonna be done before midnight, considering it’s already almost nine. Which,” he quickly continues before Mumbo can complain about their late start, “we did because as you should know by now, ghosts are easier to communicate with at night.”

“It’s an old carnival,” Mumbo huffs. “It’s probably just all the wooden rides creaking.”

To that, Etho merely shrugs. “It’s always possible we’re getting duped. But this guy paid big money up front, and it’s only half of what we’re getting. I doubt he’d do that over creaky rides.”

“He would if he’s nuts.”

“*Etho, tell Mumbo he’s being an ass.*”

“He can hear you.”

“Those words mean nothing to me because they are not real,” Mumbo responds matter of factly.

“*Ugh, this guy.*” Etho swears his phone flickers, as if mimicking Bdubs’s sigh. “*Also, please tell me you have a plan beyond ‘spirit box and hope for the best.’*”

“I do, actually.” Etho picks up his phone and angles it at the papers in his hand.

“*t’s...a circle. With lines in it.*”

“It’s a sigil,” Etho corrects. “It’s a symbol that can help you perform certain actions. You draw it, usually in the ground. This one can be used to contain spirits.”

“*Is this seagull–*”

“Sigil.”

“*–seagull really strong enough to trap a ghost?*”

“Hold that thought,” Etho says as they turn onto a particularly steep incline. The road is paved only with gravel, resulting in the team’s three living team members grasping hold of a seat or steering wheel as they’re violently jerked up and down.

When they finally pull onto flat, non-gravelly land, the group lets out a collective groan. Grian leans forward, head against his knees. Etho sighs, resting his own head against the dashboard. Hearing Mumbo gasp softly next to him, he looks up.

The carnival stands before them, a series of tents, shabby buildings, and wooden stands. Colorful paint peeks through on some of the buildings, once-vibrant blues, yellows and reds faded with time. Striped tents have been worn down by a century of dirt and grime, visible even from their distance. Rides, most notably a wooden roller coaster track that jutted out from the side of the carnival like a splinter, have caved in on themselves.

“*Woah,*” Bdubs murmured.

The van comes to a halt. “This is as close as Gertrude is getting to that mess,” Mumbo says, taking the keys out of the ignition.

“I’m sorry,” Etho says as he shoves the papers, minus the one containing the sigil, into his bag, “did you just call your van *Gertrude* ?”

Mumbo nods, a look of total seriousness on his face. “It’s a respectable name.”

“You need help,” Etho mutters, ignoring the dirty look thrown his way in favor of opening the door. “C’mon, Bdubs, time to test this sigil out.”

“*Test? What do you mean test?*”

“Don’t worry about it.” He turns back to Grian, who still has his head against his knees. “You coming, Gri?”

“G’mme a minute,” he mumbles. “Trying n’t to vomit.”

“Um,” Mumbo says, quickly sliding out of his own seat with concern etched on his face and running to Grian’s door. Whether it’s for Grian or for the van is unknown to Etho.

“This is our last resort,” Etho explains. He pulls out a blank piece of paper and a sharpie, then uses his thigh as a surface to swiftly draw out the sigil.

“Turn so your back is to the moon...” he murmurs the instructions to himself, positioning himself accordingly before kneeling down and placing the paper on the ground, then the phone on top of it. “Make sure the ghost is inside of the sigil...”

“*Hey, hey wait a minute, I did not consent to—*”

Twin beams of light flash into the air, one from Etho’s sigil and one from his phone, growing in size until they merge. The light grows brighter for a brief moment, before fading to reveal the phone, now encompassed by a larger, still-glowing sigil.

“Bdubs, try leaving the circle.”

The markings on the ground emit a steady blue light, a barely-visible barrier arching upwards and around the sigil like a dome. Though he can’t see Bdubs, he does see the barrier ripple, as if a hand had smacked into it.

“*I am, and I can’t! Very rude, Etho.*”

“Relax.” He grins, the thrill of the magic done right nearly making him giddy. He tears the paper slightly, just enough to break up the circle. “Try now.”

Etho feels a cool breeze brush past his shoulder, as if someone were trying to shove him. He laughs.

“*If that’s your last resort, how come I was your test dummy?*”

“You can handle it. Also, revenge for singing Britney Spears at the top of your lungs for the first hour of the ride.”

“*Toxic is a musical masterpiece, thank you very much. Plus, I have an incredible singing voice.*”

“Sure you do.” Etho pockets his phone just as Grian shuffles out of the car, looking a little green but otherwise normal.

“*G, you have the weakest stomach of anyone I have ever met.*”

“Thanks,” he mutters, stretching with his back arched like a cat. He glances down at the sigil as Etho tucks it into his bag. “I take it it worked?”

“Yep,” he responds, popping the ‘p.’ “Thanks for being such a good sport, Bdubs.”

“ ‘m going to haunt you until the universe explodes, asshole.”

“Mhm. Have fun with that.” He shuffles through his backpack, checking over all his equipment one last time. “You’ve got a flashlight, right, G?”

“I do.”

“And a copy of the sigil?”

“Yes. I have it memorized, as well.”

“Perfect.” He zips up his backpack and shoulders it, watching as Mumbo opens the door to the driver’s seat.

“Hey! Sure you don’t wanna tag along?”

Their driver gives him an unimpressed stare over the hood of the car. Etho shrugs.

“What? Just asking. One of these days maybe you’ll say yes.”

“Maybe one of these days you’ll accept that it’s never happening,” Mumbo mutters, barely audible over the sound of him opening the car door. He slides in, about to shut the door before Etho holds a hand up.

“What’s the code we’ll give you in case we need backup?” Etho quizzes.

“Banana. Please don’t use it.” He yanks the door shut before Etho gets the chance to respond.

“No promises,” Etho mumbles. He turns to Grian, who’s fidgeting with his sleeves and warily eyeing the carnival’s shoddy tents.. He quickly snaps to attention at the sound of Etho clapping his hands together.

“Now then, let’s hope the spirit box works so we can get this done quick and easy.”

The spirit box does not, in fact, work.

They’ve set it up a little ways into the carnival, surrounded on three sides by red and white striped tents. Etho is crouched in front of the box, hands folded together and pressed against his mask as Grian keeps a flashlight pointed at the box.

“Is it...playing clown music?”

“Well, we are at a circus.”

“Yes, but that means a radio station within range is playing circus music.”

Etho squints at the radio, which is continuously flitting through stations before suddenly stopping on what sounds like the Can Can.

“That is a fair point.”

“*So...does that mean there’s a ghost? I mean, no words, but it does keep stopping on circus music.*”

“Could be.” Etho sighs, leaning closer to the radio. “Can you tell us who you are?”

The Can Can plays for a few seconds, mocking him.

“Could you...tell us *where* you are?”

Static. Then more Can Can.

“I don’t think this is working,” Grian supplies unhelpfully.

Etho sighs and switches off the device. He tucks it back into his bag and stands up.

“Alright, we’re doing this the old fashioned way. Let’s start looking.” He shoulders his bag, grasping his own flashlight. “We’re gonna do a loop of the inside perimeter and then work our way inwards. Stick close to me and don’t get left behind.”

The pair weave their way between tents and wooden buildings, slowly swinging their flashlights from side to side. As they pass one of the smaller tents, Etho slows and frowns, pointing his flashlight at the spot where the tent meets the ground.

“It’s charred,” he mumbles.

“That’s, um, not the only thing that’s charred,” Grian says, a stunned lilt to his voice. Etho turns and swings his flashlight in the direction of his friend’s.

The conjoined circles of light reveal more tents and buildings stretching out on all sides, forming the circular shape of the carnival they’d seen from outside. Some stood soundly, hardly untouched, while some had fallen in on themselves. The structures that led towards the middle, however, weren’t just collapsed—they were burnt, through and through. Skeletal remains of buildings, stands, and rides reached upwards like clawed hands, the ground around them covered in a thick layer of soot and ash. Etho walks up to what seems to have been some sort of merry-go-round, Grian peering cautiously over his shoulder. Some of the poles are still standing, rusted and half-hidden by the caved-in roof. He kicks a lump of plastic with his foot, revealing a partially melted smiling horse that sends a cloud of ash into the air. Etho readjusts his mask and steps back as Grian pulls away, coughing.

“Did this hotel owner mention,” Grian has to pause to finish hacking old carnival ashes out of his airway, “that this place burned down?”

“No, and I wish he had.” When Grian doesn’t respond, Etho turns to see him staring at the burnt buildings with a sorrowful expression.

“What a terrible way to go,” he murmurs.

“*Eh, I can think of worse ways. Dying in a fire sounds cool.*”

“For all you know, you *did* die in a fire.” Etho says before placing a hand on Grian’s shoulder. “C’mon. We have a chance to put these spirits to rest.”

Grian blinks, as if coming out of a trance. When he looks back up at Etho, his usual, easygoing smile is back.

“You’re right. Let’s get to work. You double checked that you have all the equipment, right?”

“Mhm. Although, if I’d known we were dealing with a burnt carnival rather than a regular one, I’d have brought gas masks or something. The fumes might kill us faster than the ghosts do.”

Grian’s smile turns into a look of alarm, to which Etho puts his hands up in a placating gesture.

“I was kidding. Besides, we’ll be quick.”

Grian backs away from the merry-go-round and falls into step next to Etho, shuddering. “I hope so. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Every place we go to gives you the creeps,” Etho teases, nudging Grian with his elbow.

“Rude!”

“*Etho, it’s weirder that you’re not spooked,*” Bdubs pipes up, and Etho has to resist the urge to flick his phone.

“It’s not. I just know what I want and how to get it done.” Etho kicks away part of a shattered glass ball before Grian, whose eyes are trained on the burnt carousel behind them, can step on it.

“*Okay, control freak.*”

“I am not a control freak. You’re just jealous that I have everything under wraps.”

“*Am not.*”

“Are too.”

“*Am not.*”

“Are too.”

“Etho,” Grian whispers, wrapping a hand around Etho’s bicep, “I think I just saw something move.”

Etho turns, following the path of Grian’s flashlight, wobbling slightly. There’s nothing there, just the sooty remains of an old carnival ride.

“*You sure you aren’t seeing things, G?*”

“I swear, I saw something human-shaped move next to the roundabout,” Grian insists, the light bouncing as he points the flashlight at the ride in question.

“If you saw something, I doubt it was a ghost,” Etho says, shaking him off and starting off again down the dirt path. “They’d have to be pretty damn powerful to manifest.”

“*I don’t know, Etho, maybe Grian’s right. There’s definitely something off about this place. I can feel...I don’t know, like a presence here.*”

“Yeah, a ghost. That’s what we came to look for.”

“Yeah, duh, but we can only deal with so much. On the off chance that this is a ghost more powerful than me, we’re kinda screwed.”

“Honestly, there’s a lot of ghosts out there that are more powerful than you, Bdubs.”

“Hey!”

“Besides, we’re not screwed,” Etho huffs, picking up the pace. “We have our backup plan.” He traces a circle in the air to indicate the sigil, just in case any malicious spirits were listening in.

“Okay, well—ah! What was that?” His phone vibrates in his pocket.

“Stop messing with my phone. It’s just the wind.”

“That’s what they always say in movies right before getting murked!”

“No, it’s definitely the wind.” Etho points his flashlight at the source of the noise, where a tattered flag mounted to one of the tents blew lazily in the breeze.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh.’” Etho reaches up to readjust his mask, and—

He comes to a stop, swinging the flashlight around in a semicircle. Everything around him is still—the tents, his clothes, his hair. The only thing moving is the flag.

“Bdubs,” he says slowly. “There is no wind.”

He should have felt a cool breeze on his face, but he felt nothing. The air is as still as could possibly be. He swings his flashlight upwards once more.

The flag is still.

“Ah, the old ‘rustle the sheets’ trick,” he mutters. “I’m so impressed. Bdubs, go check it out, will you?”

“Fine, fine.” He feels the chill that accompanies a spirit passing through him as Bdubs vacates the phone. *“Let me just—nope, nothing there. But it’s obviously a ghost, I just can’t see it. Hurry up and use your sigil thing before they get away.”*

“What? No! I told you, that’s a last resort.”

“Why should it be? All you’re doing is keeping a spirit in place long enough to talk to them. That’s hardly last-resort material.”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Bdubs. I’m in charge, and I say it’s a last resort.”

“Seriously, man? We’re supposed to be working as a team here. Right, Gr—oh. Fuck.”

“What? What is it?” Etho cranes his head upwards, trying to get a good look at the top of the tent.

“Did you see the ghost?”

“Etho, turn around.”

He does so, and sees nothing. Nothing at all. No ghosts, no possessed objects, and no—

“Shit.”

Grian is gone.

Mumbo stretches his arm as high as it will go, phone clutched in a death grip. He wiggles his hand desperately, willing the little data bar in the corner of his screen to go up.

“Come on, Come on. I know you have a signal out here,” he mutters. “Load.”

The last episode of *The Great British Bake Off* does not want to load. He sighs, retracting his arm and slumping back down against the driver's seat. Why on Earth had he agreed to drive around his friends who were chasing down something that definitely did not exist, he did not understand. Sure they shared some of the funds with him, but he had his own respectable job at the garden shop. Why hadn't he just stayed content with that?

It had nothing to do with Grian's ridiculously effective puppy dog stare. Nothing.

Reaching for the front seat's lever, he reclines it and props his feet up against the dashboard. He closes his eyes. Might as well get some sleep while he's waiting. It's not like they were actually going to need—

His phone buzzes.

Mumbo groans, pulling the device up to his face.

Message from Grian: bnanba

He sighs, rights his seat, and opens the van door.

Grian squints at the roundabout, trying to discern any humanoid shapes. He *swears* he saw something just a second ago. If he could just take a quick look, then he might find them a huge lead.

He turns around, eyeing Etho as he engages in yet another heated argument with Bdubs. He opens and closes his mouth like a fish, debating if he should call out to them or not. On one hand, Etho had said to stick close for good reason. They were in a haunted carnival, after all. On the other hand, he really doesn't want to draw their ire.

Walking quietly around the roundabout, he approaches the spot where he'd seen the figure. It had been right here, around the caved in roof—

Cold, ghostly fingers against his neck are the only warning he gets before something grasps the edge of his sweater and pulls. Grian stumbles sideways, struggling against whatever has a hold on him. He opens his mouth to scream, but it's as if the air inside of his mouth is getting sucked

inwards, and he can't make a sound.

He stumbles down a path, unsure if it's the way he came or an entirely new route. All he can do is attempt to fight against the vice-like grip on his collar. Panic jolts through him at the thought that this spirit could stop him from *breathing*, and jerks himself backwards as hard as he can.

The grip on his collar disappears, and he barely catches himself from falling backwards onto the ground. He counters it by leaning forward, grasping his knees and heaving for air. As soon as he can breathe without gasping, he rights himself and aims his flashlight wildly into the darkness.

"Alright, where are you?" He squares his shoulders and pulls out his best intimidating voice, the way he's seen Etho do on countless hunts. It's probably not as effective, considering that Etho's voice doesn't usually tremble and go up an octave.

No response. No sign of a ghost, not even the fluttering of a tent this time. The carnival is as still and dead as it was meant to be. Then—

"You shouldn't be here," a voice whispers, merely a breath away from his ear.

He screams and spins to the right, but there's nothing there. Just the splintered remains of some old carnival game, a few shattered light bulbs mounted to the fractured wood gleaming like sharpened canines.

"I'm not scared of you," Grian says hoarsely.

It's fine. It would be fine. He just needs to find Etho and Bdubs, who were right—

He does a double take, then spins slowly around. Finally taking in the environment around him, he realizes he's in a new area entirely. It must be a fair ways away too, considering that there's no sign of the fire here.

Wonderful, he realizes with a sinking feeling in his gut. He's completely lost.

"C'mon, take me out of your pocket."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because, I'm already holding the flashlight."

"You have another hand, you know."

"Yeah, well, I need that hand available in case something pops out and tries to murder us," Etho grits his teeth, trying to put as little focus on the useless conversation he's been roped into in favor of searching the grounds for any sign of Grian or the carnival spectre.

Bdubs snorts. *"What, are you gonna punch a ghost or something?"*

"Obviously not. But ghosts can move and throw stuff, you know. I gotta be ready."

“I can’t move shit!”

Etho sighs. Bdubs never was that interested in learning useful stuff about other ghosts. He’d always ask them stupid things, like their thoughts on pretzels, or incredibly rude things like the circumstances around their death. Etho is smarter, more inquisitive than that; he’s spent the majority of his life enamored with life after death, studying hard to puzzle together exactly how everything worked. There are rules to the supernatural, and he’s already got a fair amount of them figured out.

“I know. Like I’ve said before, there are different types of ghosts. Some can move things. Some can possess objects and draw their strength from them, like you. Others can possess objects, but...” Etho swallows, forcing down a sudden lump in his throat. *“You get the point. Some ghosts can summon an apparition of themselves. The more powerful the ghost, the more visible and long-lasting the apparition will be.”*

“Are you seriously explaining ghost rules to a ghost? That’s like, mansplaining but... ghostsplaining! You’re totally ghostsplaining right now!”

“Please shut up,” Etho grumbles, willing away the headache forming behind his eyes.

“And now you’re trying to silence me. Taking away my only platform to speak. That’s very rude, you kn–hey, where are we going?”

Etho is approaching a decrepit building, wooden planks held together by rusted nails and draped in various, once-vibrant fabrics. He shines his flashlight along the deck wrapping around the front before aiming it directly into the dark, open entrance.

“I thought I saw something move.”

“Oh, so when Grian wants to investigate something he saw, it’s ‘probably nothing,’ but when you do it it’s totally legit.”

Etho merely huffs, stepping up onto the deck. The floor creaks below his boots as he reaches up to wipe dust off of the sign hanging above the door. *Fantastic Funhouse*, it reads.

“I wasn’t denying he saw something, I just wanted to keep us on track.”

“Yeah, and look where that got us!”

“Shh.” Etho steps into the house, slowly scanning the room with his flashlight. The house branches off into a few different directions—a brightly colored hallway, another with a scratched-up sign reading *M-ze of -i-r--s*, and a staircase leading up to the second floor. A scraping noise brings his attention back to the first hallway, painted in stripes of red and yellow. Just as he shines his light down there, something turns the corner.

“There!” Etho takes off down the hallway, the light reflecting off of various mirrors on either side of him. *“I saw something go down the–Bdubs!”*

The ghost has left Etho’s phone, evidenced by the apparition floating in the mirror. He’s giggling, stretching out his cheeks and wagging his tongue.

“What are you doing?” Etho hisses.

“I look just like you in here!”

Etho glances at the mirror as he approaches. It's one of those warped reflections that makes you look taller. He sees his own reflection beside Bdubs, distorting his face in unusual and silly ways. It's honestly pretty funny—wait, no, he's supposed to be chasing a ghost right now. There's no time to mess around in the mirrors, no matter how stupid it makes Bdubs look.

“Bdubs, I just saw the ghost. Stop messing around!”

“*Fine, fine, geez, you're no fun.*” He feels his phone tremble slightly as it's repossessed. Gritting his teeth, Etho takes off down the hallway.

When he rounds the corner, the shadow has vanished. Seeing as the hallway continues as one, albeit very twisty, path, the ghost could only have gone one way.

Etho can feel his breath hot against his mask as he runs through the seemingly endless fun house. He's by no means out of shape, turning the sharp corners is hard enough as it is, and actually keeping a grip on his flashlight with sweaty fingers is nearly impossible.

He catches a glimpse of a shadowy foot just as it turns down to the left. It's good that Etho caught up when he did, as the hallway suddenly splits in three directions.

“Hey!” he calls out. “We're not here to hurt you, we just want to talk!”

“*Unless you're here to hurt us, in which case we are very scary.*”

“Bdubs!”

“*What? We gotta tell them who's boss.*”

A chilling laugh echoes down the hall, and Etho can feel the hairs on his arms raising despite the layer of sweat covering his skin. They round another corner, then another, then another. Despite being the one doing the chasing, Etho can't help but feel like he's on the prey end of a sick game of cat and mouse.

Something creaks above his head as he runs under it, and he barely makes it to the other side before a gaudy chandelier comes crashing down right where Etho had just been standing. He nearly faceplants into the ground, catching himself in the nick of time. This is fine. Completely fine. Totally not scary.

“Isn't there anything you can do to stop them?” Etho huffs, lowering his hands from where they'd instinctively gone to cover his head.

“*I would have done it by now, wouldn't I?*”

“Just say no.” Etho rounds another corner. At the end, he can just catch the flash of a shadowy skirt.

“Please, just stop for a moment,” he tries again. Of course he finally finds the ghost when Grian isn't here. He can talk to ghosts, sure, but Grian is much more charismatic than him. He'd do a much better job reasoning with them.

“*Hm,*” a cheerful, lilting voice answers. Etho perks up, hope sparking in his chest. Distantly, he hears the sound of something creaking, but he ignores it in favor of absorbing the ghost's words.

“*No, I don't think I will.*”

Etho huffs out an annoyed breath before rounding the corner. Rather than the ghost he's been pursuing, he's met with...a wall. A brick wall.

His phone begins to vibrate as Bdubs starts cackling.

"Oh man, that's priceless!" He snuffles, and Etho can imagine him wiping away imaginary tears. *"They really got you good there."*

Etho groans, tangling his fingers in his hair. "Bdubs, this is serious! We lost the ghost, we have no idea where Grian is, and we still haven't made any sort of progress in putting the spirit to rest."

"Sorry, it was just—man, the look on your face was priceless. And I can't even see your whole face!"

"Whatever." Etho attempts to pull his mask higher up his nose as he starts back down the way they came. "Let's retrace our steps and see if we can find any signs of the ghost on our way back."

Etho's fairly good with directions—it's something he prides himself on, but he's pretty sure this part of the fun house was designed to confuse even the most direction-savvy of people. After several twists and turns, he's not entirely sure if they're on the right path.

"Uh, Bdubs? Do you know if we went right or left here?"

"No clue."

"Wonderful." Etho mutters, and turns left. He thinks the paneling in this hallway looks familiar—but then again, the paneling is pretty much the same in every hallway. Just keep following his instinct, that's all he had to do. That usually worked out well. If he kept going, he could just—

Huh.

"Bdubs," Etho says slowly, "I could have sworn we turned right here."

"Did we?" Bdubs responds, clearly not paying attention. The sounds of slicing coming from his pocket indicate that the host haunting his phone is engaged in a game of Fruit Ninja. Etho sighs and slaps his pocket.

"Damn! Etho, I almost beat my high score!"

"I think we made a wrong turn. I remember turning right after turning left three times, and we just turned left three times. I must have messed up an earlier turn."

"Clearly. There's a dead end to our right."

"Yes, thanks for that wonderful observation."

"You're very wel-hey, watch out!"

Bdubs's warning is just soon enough for Etho to catch sight of the loose floorboard in front of him—as he's tripping over it. He stumbles and rights himself before he can hit the ground, flailing his arms and narrowly stopping himself from faceplanting into the hardwood floor.

The flashlight, however, isn't so lucky. It slips from Etho's grasp and hits the floor with a clunk and a shatter. The light immediately goes out, plunging the funhouse into darkness. Etho stumbles back quickly, avoiding shards of glass.

“Um, Etho, buddy? Wanna turn on your phone flashlight?”

“It’s broken.” Etho says shortly, glaring daggers at the loose floorboard. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What? How do you even break a phone flashlight?”

Etho doesn’t respond, instead digging his palms into his eyes. Great. This was just his luck. This was *just his luck* .

“Fear not!” He feels something like a flick on the forehead. *“Ghosts have excellent night vision! Allow me to lead the way.”*

Ah. So there was a solution available. Rely on Bdubs to get out of here.

He resists the urge to scream.

Mumbo walks briskly between the dilapidated tents, illuminated by the moon, arms folded tightly around himself. It’s not as if he’s scared or anything like that. It’s just that it’s a bit chilly out tonight, that’s all. There’s nothing scary about an abandoned, decrepit carnival, he reminds himself as he scans either side of him for any sign of his friends.

Something to his left creaks, and he jumps, putting a hand to his chest.

Alright, maybe it was a little spooky. But that’s only because it’s dark out, and his friends could be in danger. It’s not that the place is haunted, because ghosts aren’t real. Truly, the most terrifying thing about this place was the safety hazards. He sincerely hoped his friends both had recent tetanus shots.

“Hello? Grian? Etho?” The creaking of rotted wood is the only sound he can make out in response. “Anyone?”

Anyone? Why did he say ‘anyone?’ The only people here were the three of them. Ridiculous.

“Looking for your friends?”

Mumbo yelps and scrambles away from the wooden stand to his left, where the voice had come from. It appears to have been for a game of darts, with a large circular target hung on the shabby wall behind the stand. A few rusty darts littered the ground, and the crooked shelves housed several of what must have been prizes—though Mumbo can’t see how anyone would want these sorts of toys. There were a few stuffed animals: rabbits, elephants, even a squid of all things, but they had all clearly been hand sewn by a not-so-adept seamstress, all in various states of wonkiness and disrepair. Several were missing an eye or two, and most were ripped at the seams and spilling stuffing on the ground.

“Alright,” Mumbo says, chuckling nervously, “very funny, Etho. And I know it’s you, because Grian wouldn’t do this.” He paused to think about it. “No, Grian would. But he has a terrible American accent, so it’s still definitely not him.”

“No idea who you’re talking about, but I’m not who you seem to think I am.”

“Uh huh, uh huh, sure.” Mumbo creeps forward, approaching the stand as silently as he can. As soon as he’s in arm’s reach, he jumps forward, slapping his hands on the edge of the counter and swinging his head over the edge. “Aha! Got–huh?”

There’s nobody there. Mumbo could have sworn the sound was coming from behind the stand, though. He backs away and spins slowly around, looking for where his friend could possibly be hiding.

“You know, it’s rude to call me out here for an emergency just to prank me,” he huffs. “But, hurrah for you! You got me! Now come on out so you can finish your job and we can go home.”

“Ah, you don’t believe, do you?” Mumbo whips back around. The voice is most certainly coming from behind the stand, but there’s no one there. Maybe they’re behind the wall? It really doesn’t sound like it, but it’s worth a look.

As he’s starting to circle around the stand, a flash of blue catches his attention. He turns to take a look, and–

The blood drains from his face. No, no, that isn’t possible.

The stuffed squid is *waving* at him, its tentacles moving to and fro. Stuffing flies from A couple of the plush limbs with each motion. Mumbo keeps his eyes trained on that thing, despite the urge to run away screaming.

Deep breaths, Mumbo. This is probably some sort of old carnival trick that’s somehow still moving after all these years, and incredibly advanced for its time period. And has no visible wires or gears attached to it. Yes, that is the only logical explanation.

“You’re probably trying to convince yourself this is some sort of carnival trick that’s somehow still active, huh? Well, hate to break it to you, pal, but I’m the real deal.”

Mumbo takes a step backwards, nearly tripping over a discarded clown doll. “Well, that is certainly very advanced programming.” His voice is definitely not shaking. “Impressive, truly.”

“You’ve sunk real deep into denial, haven’t you? Can’t really blame you, I was the same way myself when I was alive. The rest of the crew always said, ‘Zee, you ought to talk about the idea with respect, one day you’ll join them!’ and I always laughed them off. Well, look where that got me! You ought to start believing too, you kn–hey, where are you going?”

Mumbo had decided that during that thing’s speech was the perfect time to make a run for it. So maybe that hadn’t been Etho or Grian’s doing. That means he has to find them. No time to ponder whatever is going on here–

He shrieks and skids to a halt, just in time to avoid some sort of projectile from nailing him in the side. He turns his head to see where it had come from, just in time to see a dart fly out from behind one of the wooden stalls. Straight towards his head. He shrieks again and leans back, the dart just barely missing the tip of his nose.

“Oh dear,” he croaks.

Grian walks quickly down the dirt path, alternating between straying closer to the edge to avoid being out and the open and darting back to the center as shadows shift around the edges of the beam of his flashlight. He pulls the collar of his sweater up, trying to suppress the shivers running down his spine. It's the middle of summer and nearly 60 degrees even with the sun fully set; there's no reason for him to be cold.

"Relax, Grian," he mutters to himself. "Just try and focus on finding Etho and Bdubs until Mumbo shows up. It's fine. You're fine."

A sudden chill passes right through his sweater and he shrieks, swatting at the perceived location of the intruder. He only succeeds in smacking himself on the shoulder. Had it not been for his white-knuckled grip on it, the flashlight would have gone flying out of his hands.

"H-hello there, if you can hear me, please don't eat my soul." He scooches away from a ripped tent canvas fluttering in the wind. Was there even a breeze blowing? "We just want to talk, that's all!"

This is far more terrifying without Etho here. He bites down on his lip to prevent himself from shouting out for his friend, out of fear that it will alert any malicious spirit not already focused on him.

"You seem a little spooked, love."

Grian shrieks again, jumping half a foot in the air. Spinning around for the source of the voice, he spots a torn and sullied curtain swaying lightly. It's made from a heavy, plum-colored velvet—and the movement it's making looks more like someone drawing it back than a simple gust of wind.

He takes in the sight of the building the curtain is guarding. It's a small thing, cylinder shaped and built out of wood save for the canvas roof, which is pulled to a point just like the rest of the tents. Purple and gray paint are peeled and scratched away at some parts, and covered with faded graffiti on others.

"What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?"

"Um," Grian says, shifting his weight to ensure that his jellylike knees aren't about to give out on him, "you're not going to kill me, are you?"

"Oh, hardly. It's been so long since I've had a customer. Not to mention, one who can actually hear me! Come in and I can give you a séance."

"A séance? But you're a..." Grian's eyes trail upwards to the faded lettering above the entrance. *Magnificent Medium*, it reads.

"...a medium. A ghost medium."

"Sure am. Now, how would you like to come in and take a seat?"

Grian swallows, hoping to ease up the knots forming in his stomach. On one hand, he has no idea if this ghost is trustworthy. This situation could easily result in him getting...emotionally tormented, or something. Finding Etho and Mumbo first is the much safer option. If this ghost can move curtains, though, what was stopping them from throwing a knife into his skull?

On the other hand, he's made contact. The ghost is speaking to him directly, offering to converse with him. Who knows if he'd get this chance again if he left and came back? Maybe he could help put this uneasy spirit to rest, right here and now.

They *probably* meant it when they said they wouldn't kill him, right?

Grian takes a deep inhale, switches his flashlight off, and parts the curtain.

He passes through the entrance, gut squirming as he eyes the charcoal-colored doorway. The medium's building—tent?—gave the impression of once being cozy. He steps over a once-plush floor pillow, one of several scattered about the floor. Shredded remains of what appeared to once be a Persian rug peek out from underneath the intricately carved legs of a small mahogany table, with two matching chairs on either side of it. Behind the table, several faded and ripped flyers are nailed to the walls. A few tears in the tarp forming the roof allow slivers of moonlight to make their way into the tent, illuminating the sole object resting on the table.

It's a broken crystal ball, only the stand and half of the glass remaining. Behind him, Grian hears the curtain being drawn swiftly shut, leaving only a small sliver of moonlight illuminating the table. It's just enough to catch the curved surface of the glass ball, just as a ghostly hand passes over it.

He jumps backwards as the specter of a woman takes shape, perched on the stool behind the table. Death has dulled her rosy complexion and the silks forming her dress and cloak, but their past vibrance is still apparent. She folds one spectral hand under her chin and gestures towards the chair.

"Have a seat, stay a while".

Grian approaches the chair like a mouse investigating potentially trapped cheese. He slowly lowers himself into the seat, half expecting ropes to shoot out from the floor and wrap around him.

This is fine. He can do this on his own. If he wants to bring peace to this spirit, he first needs to appease her. That was easy. He'd have her charmed in no time. He closes his eyes for just a moment, calming himself by picturing all the takeout they're going to order if they successfully finish this job. He exhales, forcing his hands into his lap and a pleasant smile on his face.

"My name is Grian. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The medium pulls her hand up to stifle a laugh.

"A proper one, aren't you? My name is Netty. A pleasure to meet you as well, love."

"Okay, another left. No, no, your other left."

"There's no other left, Bdubs, it's either straight or right."

"You know what I mean!"

"I actually don't."

"Right. Go right."

Etho sighs and turns right. They'd been blindly fumbling their way through this funhouse for at

least fifteen minutes with no sign of an exit. The great thing about being a ghost is that Bdubs can see through walls, meaning he can easily locate an exit, but Bdubs could only go a few turns ahead before having to jump back into Etho's phone to recharge. At least he can see; Etho can barely make out a few feet in front of him.

Which is once again proven to them when he nearly walks face-first into a wall.

"Bdubs!"

"Sorry. Had to test your night vision. Too tempting."

Etho groans, backtracking and dragging his hands down the side of his face. "Can you please wait to be a dick until we're back in the car?"

"I'm being a dick? You're making what should be an adventure a chore! You won't let me have any fun!"

"That's because it's work, not an adventure. You have to take it seriously. Ghost hunting is serious stuff. You can't afford to make mistakes."

"Oh right, Mr. Perfect, because I'm the one who got us separated from Grian. I'm the one who dropped the stupid flashlight and plunged myself into total darkness."

"I wouldn't have dropped the flashlight in the first place if you had been watching my back! Besides, we could have caught the ghost right at the beginning if you didn't stop to goof off in front of those mirrors!"

"And how were you planning to do that? With the sigil you refuse to use?"

"I don't know, but you stalling us doesn't help!"

"I wasn't stalling! What were you gonna do, talk to the ghost? They clearly didn't want to listen to you!"

Etho stops dead in his tracks and wrenches the phone from his pocket, staring holes through it.

"Don't you put this on me. You were messing around, just like you always do, and I would have figured something out, just like I always do. In case you haven't noticed, that's how this stuff works"

"That's your problem, Etho! You think you have to do everything yourself, when in reality, you have a whole team more than willing to help you."

"Then why weren't you helping me, huh?"

"What do you think I'm doing right now? You wanna talk about not helping? You could have used that sigil when we'd cornered that ghost before they'd had the chance to phase through the wall!"

"Oh please," Etho scoffs, tugging a hand through his hair, "how would you know that's what happened?"

"Because! They're a ghost! We can phase through walls, dipshit!"

"It doesn't matter. We're not using the sigil unless we're in actual danger."

"Why not?"

“Because I’ve had shitty experiences with forcing ghosts to do things, alright?” He snaps before leaning back, surprised by his own outburst.

For a beat, there’s no sound but Etho’s heartbeat and distant creaking. It’s unnervingly quiet. He squirms uncomfortably, as if there’s an itch under his skin he can’t get to.

“*Uh, you mean with sigils?*” Bdubs finally asks.

“Yes. No. I don’t want to talk about this. Just—” Etho shakes loose hair from his fingers. “Can we do this my way? Only use the sigil as a last resort?”

“*Yeah, we can do that.*” Bdubs sounds entirely serious, and though he’s grateful, Etho can’t help but feel a little uncomfortable with the change of tone. “*And, I’m sorry for not taking this job seriously. The truth is, I sorta forget the danger this stuff poses to you guys. Y’know, since I’m dead and have been for a while. You could probably gather that though, you’re pretty smart.*”

“Trying to win me back with flattery, huh?” Etho scoffs, but he knows his smile is evident even with the mask. “Fine. I forgive you. Whatever. Just try to save the hijinks for times when we’re not chasing or getting chased, yeah?”

“*I’ll do my best.*” A beat. “*And?*”

Etho sighs. “And I’m sorry for being so uptight. I’ll try to loosen up a little.”

“*Look at us! Getting along so well. It’s like we were meant to be.*”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever.” Etho tugs at his mask to hide the flush on his face, only to give up once he realizes his ears have gone red as well. “Let’s get out of here so you can have an actual reason to talk about how great we are.”

“*We could text Mumbo. Left.*”

“How is he gonna help us if we’re lost inside of a building? He’ll just get lost trying to find us.”

“*That’s a fair point. Uh, right?*”

Etho turns and sighs. “Bdubs, you took us to another dead end.”

“*Okay, I swear, I checked this route like twenty seconds ago, and that wall was definitely not there.*” Something creaks, too far off to discern where it’s coming from. “*I’m one hundred and ten percent sure that—*”

“Shhh. You hear that?” Etho tilts his head, trying to discern the noise. “It sounds like something inside the house is—”

He cuts himself off, a grin splitting across his face.

“Oh Bdubs, you genius.”

“*Uh, thanks? But I didn’t do anything.*”

“No, no, you were completely right. There *wasn’t* a wall here. And there wasn’t a wall way back when we first started backtracking.” Etho walks up to the dead end and shoves it sideways. It creaks and groans before eventually sliding slowly to the left. “Someone’s been moving them.”

“*Woah! How’d you know?*”

“That creaking noise I keep hearing. I thought it was just an old house being an old house, but no. Our ghost is moving the walls. Probably a fun party trick for carnival goers, or a way for them to change up the exit route.” He gives it final shove, opening the wall enough for him to squeeze through. “Come on, let’s go.”

Mumbo nearly faceplants into the dirt as he scrambles forward to avoid another flurry of darts. Seriously, how many dart-related stands *were* there in this place? He’s been running for a solid minute now, with no sign of the darts stopping.

He’s approaching the end of the path, where it splits off the left and to the right. He squints at a wooden sign shaped like an arrow, pointing to the left. *Dart Games End Here, This Way for the Main Tent!*

Ah, so there is a sign after all.

He slides to a halt, flailing his arms to keep him upright before taking off again down the left. He can see the top of the main tent now, a grand thing towering over all of the surrounding structures. He forces himself to keep his eyes trained on the tattered flag atop the red and yellow striped canvas, knowing that if he falters he’ll stop to look behind him. If he can just get inside the tent, maybe he’d be safe.

His heart hammers in his throat at the thought of all those near misses. If he gets another round of darts thrown at him, his luck is bound to run out eventually. Just another left until he’s at the tent. He rounds the corner, praying there weren’t anymore—

He runs smack into another body, stumbling back with an “*oof!*” He blinks and rights himself, preparing to sprint past the unexpected obstacle, before processing who’s in front of him.

“Etho!”

Etho, who’d been busy rubbing his head and grumbling under his breath, looks up, startled.

“Mumbo! What are you doing here?”

“Grian texted me the code word.” He looks around. “I take it you haven’t seen him?”

“*Nope. Trust me, we’ve been looking.*”

“We figured we’d head to the center and see if he’s here. If not, maybe we can at least locate the ghost—who you can blame for my lack of flashlight, by the way.”

“*Yeah, Etho and I got lost in this ridiculously large fun house for like, half an hour! It was so annoying! Turns out the walls were fake.*” Etho pulls aside the tent’s opening flap and steps in, holding it open behind him until Mumbo steps in to hold up the canvas.

The tent is circular, with enough space to comfortably fit a large truck inside. A spacious wooden stage, the sides painted with red and gold detailing, sits in the center, surrounded on three sides by wooden stands. Many of the benches have collapsed inwards, and those that haven’t look far from stable. Several ropes hang from the ceiling, a splintered wooden pole swaying slightly from one of them.

“Seems they were ready for show night before the carnival caught fire,” Etho comments. He reaches over, as if to snatch Mumbo’s phone, but pulls back at the last second. “Mumbo, you don’t see any signs of the fire here, do you?”

“I’m sorry, the what?”

“Right, you weren’t there. A good portion of the place is burnt down. We discovered that shortly before we lost Grian. That must be how our ghost died.”

“*D’you think they want revenge? Maybe someone lit the place on fire on purpose.*”

“Hmm. A jealous competitor, perhaps?” Mumbo frowns in thought, stroking his mustache, before catching Etho raising an eyebrow at him. “What? I love a good mystery.”

“You answered Bdubs.”

“Wh-no, I answered whatever voice was speaking! Whatever very real, not undead voice was speaking!” Mumbo protests, his voice rising in pitch. Even with the mask, he can tell Etho has a smug smile fixed on his face.

“Sure. Whatever you wanna tell yourself.”

“Listen,” Mumbo huffs, “I’ve had a very stressful night, alright?”

“*You’ve* had a stressful night? *You* sat in the car while *we* got led into a fun house by the ghost and nearly cornered them, only to lose them and get lost because they kept moving the walls!”

“I’m the driver! I’m not supposed to have to leave the comfort of my van!” Mumbo flings his hands up for emphasis. “Instead, Grian texts me, is nowhere to be found, and I had actual *darts* thrown at me while running for my life from a talking–wait.”

He stops mid gesture, a frown settling on his face.

“What? What is it?”

“You said a ghost was moving those walls in the fun house?”

Etho rolls his eyes. “This really isn’t the time for your skepticism, Mumbo.”

“No, I–” Mumbo huffs, the mere thought of the words he’s about to say nearly causing a headache. “If, *hypothetically*, the stuffed squid that spoke to me right before darts started flying at me was the one who set off the–”

“I’m sorry,” Etho interrupts, “a stuffed squid spoke to you? And you didn’t mention that the minute you ran into us?”

“It didn’t seem important at the time. Anyways–”

Etho and his phone groan.

“–let’s say, hypothetically speaking, the stuffed squid that spoke to me was–again, *hypothetically*, I cannot stress that enough–a ghost. And you’re saying you’re certain it was...a *ghost* messing with you in the fun house.”

“Yes.”

“Meaning...” Mumbo trails off, holding a hand out towards Etho.

“There’s more than one ghost,” Etho finishes, pointing at Mumbo. His hand balls into a fist as he processes the statement. “Wonderful.”

“Well, it’s a circus, right? Maybe we should try figuring out which one is the most important ghost. Maybe one of them is in charge of sales, or something!”

“Yeah, if I had to work in sales I think I’d haunt the world of the living too,” Etho mutters.

“Alright, think. Bdubs, what do we know about the ghost we saw?”

“Uh, they run fast? And they were in the fun house...oh! And they wore a big long skirt!”

Etho frowns in concentration, tapping his fingers together. After a moment he looks up. “Nope, that tells us nothing. Mumbo? What about your ghost?”

Mumbo clears his throat. “My *hypothetical* ghost was a stuffed blue squid. That spoke to me and threw darts at me.” He scratches his head. “Am I going insane? Has living with you lot finally done me in?”

“Mumbo, focus. You can psychoanalyze yourself later.”

“Well, they referred to themselves as Zee, I think? And said something about being a skeptic...oh! ‘The rest of the crew always told me I shouldn’t talk poorly about the dead,’ or something like that.”

“So probably not someone in charge, if they said ‘the rest of the crew,’” Etho concludes.

“We should also consider that Grian might have his own ghost running him around the place.”

“That’s tr—”

Etho cuts off as a low, reverberating chuckle fills the air. He and Mumbo scan the tent, searching for the source of the noise, but none is apparent. The latter backs up slowly, shrinking in on himself like a cornered mouse, squeaking when he bumps into Etho.

“Grian?” he asks the seemingly empty tent hopefully. He turns to see Etho squinting at him.

“What?”

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong person,” a voice drawls from somewhere to Mumbo’s right. The accent is decidedly American, and therefore not Grian. Well, it was worth a shot.

“We’re just here to talk—” Etho begins, but the unidentified stranger continues on as if he hadn’t spoken.

“Listening to you trying to reason out which of us to go after was entertaining, it really was. And clever! You’re smarter than I initially gave you credit for. Though, in my defense, when you first showed up you were bickering like a bunch of schoolchildren. I mean, c’mon, aren’t you supposed to be a team? How are you supposed to take me down when you can’t even work amongst yourselves?”

“Hey! Etho and I had some quality bonding time today!” Etho’s phone declares, which Etho supports with a firm nod.

“Thanks to my guidance, you did. Which, by the way, Salem? Zee? Lovely job with these three.

Beanpole over here looked like he was about to pee himself.”

“Hey!” Mumbo protests.

“What do you mean, ‘your guidance?’ We’ve spent all night trying to make peaceful contact, and all you guys have done is mess with us!” Etho crosses his arms, glaring in several different directions to make sure the owner of the voice gets a good look.

“Mess with you?” The voice laughs. *“We’re not trying to mess with you. We’re just trying to put on a show! It’s what we do best, after all.”* It sighs, a singsong-like quality to the sound. *“It’s been so long since we’ve been able to put on a show, and then you all come along! You can’t blame us for wanting to have a little fun!”*

“Who are you, exactly?” Mumbo tries. If they can at least have some sort of identification, that’ll make this whole conversation a lot easier.

“Who am I? Well that’s easy. I’m the ringmaster, the one who runs this circus!” The stage trembles ever so slightly as the voice speaks. Mumbo gasps and ducks behind Etho as something begins to take shape on the stage. First a pair of dress shoes, followed by burgundy trousers, then a matching waistcoat...and finally a head, adorned with a silk top hat. The most striking feature are two scars running parallel along the side of the man’s face. He lifts his head up and grins down at the two of them, and it’s apparent that he’s completely translucent. Like a—no, no, no. That isn’t possible. *This* isn’t possible.

“Welcome all, ” the ringmaster declares, throwing his arms open wide, *“to the Scarnival!”*

“For the record,” a woman’s voice chimes in, *“it’s not actually called that.”*

“You’re offering me a séance?” Grian questions, sliding his backpack off of his shoulders and pulling it into his lap.

“It’s my job, after all,” Netty replies cheerfully. Pearly white teeth flash up at him from across the table. The smile fades as the ghost sobers. She sighs, then mumbles, *“at least it was. Long ago.”*

“Well, I’d be happy to, um, allow you to do your job once more,” he tries. “If it makes you happy, that is.”

“It would! Truly, it would. I don’t normally provide a séance for free, but since it’s been so long, I’ll give you one on the house. How does that sound?”

“It sounds lovely. I’d really appreciate it.” Grian chews on his lip, mulling over his next words. “Would you mind if I asked you some things about the carnival first, though?”

The woman shrugs, the translucent silks around her shoulders sliding with the motion. *“Go right ahead.”*

“Is it, um, is it just you out here? Or are there more of you?”

That was clearly much too straight to the point, as Netty leans forward, squinting at him. *“You’re*

not trying to get rid of us, are you?" Her eyes widen, and she slaps a hand to her mouth. "Me! I meant me! Oh, I'm such a dunce."

"No, no, I'm not here to exorcise you, I promise." Technically not a lie, though it sits uncomfortably in his stomach. Still, it's better than jeopardizing the entire operation. He's getting the strong sense that these ghosts won't like the suggestion of moving on, even peacefully. "My friends and I—you may have seen us coming in?—don't want to harm anyone."

Netty folds a hand under her chin, regarding him with mild skepticism. "*Hmm. Well, you certainly don't look like an exorcist.*" The corner of her mouth starts to turn upwards, and it occurs to Grian that she doesn't actually see him as any sort of threat.

"I'm not. I was just curious if you were the one behind all of that earlier. You know, messing with us when we arrived here."

"Oh, no, that wasn't me. Well, I was in on it, but—" She halts, pursing her lips together. "Ah, almost did it again! Saying more than I should. Maybe we should get on with that séance, hm? It only works around the peak of moonrise. We've only got a few more minutes, by the looks of it. Do you know who you'd like to speak to?"

Grian tilts his head, eyes drifting to the posters behind Netty. Most are barely visible, the ink long worn out, but a few of the event titles are still visible. *Hoops of Fire, Flying Trapeze, Ringmaster, Clowns on Stilts—*

Ah. There's his answer.

"Question," Grian starts, righting himself on the stool before he can lean off of it. "Do I need to know the person's name?"

"Usually, yes, but it depends on the situation. If you wanted to talk to, say, your grandmother on your mother's side, I can work with that." The medium folds her hands on the desk in front of her. "Why, what did you have in mind?"

"I was wondering if I could speak with the carnival's ringmaster."

Netty blinks in surprise. "*It's...you realize it doesn't have to be someone nearby, right? Well, it does but I have a lot more range than just this carnival. Being dead and all.*"

"I'm aware. I'm just..." Grian scrambles for a statement that's truthful. "I'd really like to speak with them. I'm sure they're a very interesting person."

The ghost rolls her eyes. "*That's one way of putting it. Alright, if that's what you want, I'll try to phone him.*"

She lifts her hands and brings them over the ball, closing her eyes. Something at the bottom of the ball begins to glow, casting the shattered bits in a purplish glow. Grian can just make out marks etched into the circumference of the base, not unlike the sigil he and Etho had worked out.

"I have to locate him first. Then, if he's willing to talk, I can ask him to come over here."

"I see." Grian tries to keep his voice even, despite just being told directly how mediums function. Well, at least ghost mediums. Did all mediums work this way? Is it really like calling someone up on the phone? Is the ball just decorative, or are both the ball and the sigil necessary to—

"Ah, seems like he's found your friends already. Hey, was the one with the mustache there when

you got here? I don't remember seeing him."

He snaps out of his thoughts to look down at the ball, which is displaying a shattered image of Etho and Mumbo, the latter hiding behind the former and attempting to make himself as small as possible. In front of them is a stage, seemingly housed inside some sort of tent. On the stage is a man, his tailored waistcoat and top hat certainly giving the impression of a ringmaster.

Grian looks again towards his friends, who are backing away slowly from the man, the ghost, whom they're both staring at.

"Can they see him?"

"Oh, yes, several of us can make ourselves visible. Myself and Scar included." Netty points at the man on the stage, her finger passing harmlessly through a shard of jagged glass. *"That's Scar, by the way. I'm sure you gathered, but he's the man you're looking for. And—ooo, yeah, sorry, doesn't look like he wants to talk right now. He's a bit busy terrorizing your friends and all."* She laughs. *"He takes all of this a little more seriously than the rest of us."*

Oh, dear.

Grian hastily jumps from the stool, shrugging on the straps of his backpack. "Um, do you know where in the carnival that is? I can just go speak to him directly."

"That's the main tent. But are you sure you want to leave now? The moon is almost past its peak."

"Well, I mean, the man I asked to speak to is right there."

Netty pouts. *"But I never got to conduct an actual séance? Isn't there anyone else you'd like to speak with?"*

Grian stills, the straps of his bag slowly sliding down his arms.

"Ah, there is! I'd recognize that look of remorse anywhere! You have someone you need to speak with, probably f—"

"I'm sorry," Grian says quickly, "but I don't know what you're talking about. Plus, my friends are my priority. I need to go help them." He rights his back and steps around the stool. "Thank you for your help, I truly do appreciate it. And I hope you get to conduct another séance soon. Have you considered asking a fellow ghost?"

He ducks through the flap of the tent, turning to give one last goodbye. Netty is still in her seat, watching him with a bemused expression.

"Thank you, really."

"It's no problem at all. Are you certain that—"

"I'm certain."

The medium shrugs lightly, giving him a small smile. *"Good luck."*

He steps out into the night, his stride firm despite the anxiety churning in his gut. Netty has been nothing but kind, but there's no telling what the ringmaster is like. Netty had even said he takes his hauntings seriously. His friends could be in serious danger, and it's up to him to—

He takes three whole steps before turning around and ducking his head back into the medium's

tent.

“Sorry to bother you again, but which way is the main tent?”

“Take your first left, then your first right, then your third left.”

“Ah, thank you!”

Grian had readied himself long before he heard the screams of his friends for whatever could be happening in the main tent. Their cries only added to his agitation as he approached the last turn, slowing his pace so as not to alert the ghost to his presence. If he could sneak in, maybe he could get right behind the ringmaster and—

He rounds the corner, and comes face to face with two full apparitions. Both of them are holding coils of rope.

“Well, thanks for making this easy for us, little fella!”

“Oh, crud,” he mutters.

“Is this really necessary?” Etho boredly asks from where he’s been tied up against the stands, watching as Mumbo frantically struggles with his own rope. “We just want to talk to you.”

“See, whenever people say that, they never stay for the main event! Say, can we still do the thing with the fire?”

“Fire?” Mumbo squeaks.

“Or,” Etho shrugs, “you could just let us go.”

“Yeah, you heard the guy, let us go!”

“Bdubs, you’re not even trapped.”

The ringmaster, who’d been engrossed in inspecting the metal hoops situated on the stage, pivots slowly to face Etho.

“That reminds me,” he drawls, rising slightly off the stage and floating over to Etho, *“Where exactly is this ghost friend of yours?”* He peers over Etho’s shoulder, then sticks his head through the stand. *“I haven’t seen anyone that isn’t already a part of my crew.”*

“That’s none of your business,” Etho says coldly, at the same time as Bdubs exclaims, *“Buzz off, carnival man!”*

The ghost watches them with an unimpressed stare.

“He’s possessing whatever that rectangular lump in your pocket is, isn’t he?”

“No,” Etho says, at the same time as Bdbus exclaims, “*Buzz off, carnival man!*”

“*Too late!*” The ghost sings, reaching into Etho’s pocket. He pulls out the phone, his gleeful expression turning into a frown the moment he lays eyes on the object.

“*This is one of those awful mini telephones, isn’t it?*” he mutters, oblivious to Etho now struggling wholeheartedly against the ropes.

“Let him go!” he snaps, grasping for the knots that are just out of reach with desperate fingers.

“*Awww, that’s sweet. Looks like you two really did bond in the fun house!*” He idly tosses the phone in the air, and Etho’s heart jumps into his throat in the split second before the ringmaster catches it again.

“*These things seemed rather annoying last time I saw them. Though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to try one out for myself. Ooo!*” He giggles as the screen lights up.

“*Hey! I’m the only ghost that non-consensually turns Etho’s phone on!*” Bdubs protests. The phone promptly shuts off. Then back on. Then off again. Then on again. Then off again. Then on again.

“*Stop that! Etho, tell him to stop it!*”

“Put. The phone. Down,” He spits out, glaring daggers at the ghost. Usually his death glares were enough to spook people into submission, but either it’s not an effective tactic against the dead or this guy just doesn’t care, because he merely sticks his lower lip out in a fake pout.

“*Miss him already?*” He shakes his head and begins to float around the tent, still grasping Bdubs’s vessel. “*You kids and your phones these days. Back when I was young, we would have actual fun. You know, go swimming, run around, tie ourselves to train tracks and try to worm our way out before a train came along. You know, that sort of thing!*”

Etho stops being pissed long enough to squint at him in confusion. “What?”

“*Of course, you younger generations just don’t understand the joy of swimming.*” The ghost sighs, casually tossing Etho’s phone between his hands. “*Did you even have a pool in your town? Or a lake? I bet not.*”

“*Can you put the phone down before you drop it? I don’t wanna hear Etho be all, ‘oh, woe is me!’ about it on the drive home.*”

The ringmaster pauses midair to look down at the phone. A slow, menacing smile spreads across his face.

“*What makes you think you’re going home?*”

Etho’s blood turns to ice. He turns to his left, to see that Mumbo has given up his futile attempts at escaping and is staring pointedly at the floor.

“*Oh, we’re going home, alright! Grian’s gonna burst in here any minute, all heroic and shit, and kick your sorry ass from here to—*”

A rustling noise to Etho’s left indicates that someone else has entered the tent, though from his

position tied to the seats, he can't see who until two translucent pairs of hands shove a tied-up figure further into the tent.

He sighs.

"Hi Grian."

"Hi Etho." His friend gives him a sheepish smile as he's tied to the pole of the stands.

"Really, Grian? Really?"

"Sorry."

"Excuse me," the ringmaster declares, still playing with Etho's phone, *"but now that you're all here, I'd like to get this show on the road."*

Grian turns to Etho, his expression a mix of confused and alarmed. Etho looks back with a similar expression and shrugs. Untying the knots seemed impossible, Bdubs couldn't really do anything from his position, and talking their way out...well, Grian's more likely to be successful with that.

"Um, it's Scar, right?"

The ringmaster pauses, hand raised above his head as if to gesture for the show to begin. He lowers it and scoffs. *"hat's my name, yes, but my stage name is Mr. Goodtimes, and I would prefer it if you referred to me as such."*

"Of course, Mr. Goodtimes," Grian responds reverently, and Etho has to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from snickering. "I'm sure your performance is lovely, but I'm worried about the enjoyment level you might receive. You see, my friend over there," he nods his head in Mumbo's direction, "doesn't believe in ghosts."

The ghost turns to look at the accused skeptic with an incredulous glare. *"Still? Even after I'm staring you in the face?"*

"This is all an elaborate ruse," Mumbo answers calmly. He is pointedly not looking at Scar. "Ghosts aren't real."

"Well that's just ridiculous! You can't enjoy my show if you don't acknowledge my existence!"

"Our show, you mean," a voice pipes up from the back of the stage.

"Yes, yes, Salem, our show. My apologies. Now, how do we convince this plebeian that we exist?"

"Excuse you, I am *not* a plebeian. I simply adhere to the natural laws of the world."

Etho, confused as to the point of starting such a pointless argument, peers over at Grian. His friend's eyes are following the back and forth of the conversation, seemingly engrossed in it, but Etho's side angle allows him to get a clear view of Grian's shoe slowly dragging through the dirt floor in a circular motion.

Underneath the mask, Etho grins.

"The concept of the dead continuing to haunt the Earth is simply improbable. I don't know how anyone expects to fool me with such pranks. I don't know why I'm even engaging in such a pointless conversation!"

“Pointless? Pointless? I am an excellent conversationalist, thank you very much!” Still clutched in Scar’s hand, Etho’s phone flickers on for a brief moment before going dark again. *“Every word I say has tact and purpose! How could anyone expect anything less from a ringleader?”*

“I’d expect him to pay more attention to his prisoners, that’s for sure,” Etho says. When Scar looks at him in confusion, he tilts his head in Grian’s direction.

Towards the finished sigil etched into the ground.

“You didn’t.”

Somewhere not too far from Etho, Bdubs cackles.

“Oh, he totally did.”

The sigil lights up, its twin appearing on the stage underneath Scar. The ringmaster floats backwards, eyeing the growing sigil with alarm, but not before the two circles overlap and the barrier cements.

“Wh–hey! What is that thing?” Etho watches as the woman from the fun house–Salem, Scar had called her–materializes next to the barrier. She pokes it with her finger, reeling back when her hand doesn’t go right through.

“That would be a trapping sigil,” Grian states matter-of-factly, but Etho can just make out the corner of his mouth turning upwards as he speaks. “It locks a ghost in place until the spellcaster disrupts the original sigil.” He sighs, pretending to sound disappointed. “We were hoping it wouldn’t come down to this, but...”

“But you proved to be a pain in the ass! So take this!”

“All we want to is to help you guys move on,” Etho says. “Was that not clear? We’re not trying to exorcise you.”

“Really not our style,” Grian adds.

“Oh, we’re aware,” Salem grumbles folding her arms. *“And perhaps it wasn’t clear on our part, but we have no intention of ‘moving on’ any time soon. So maybe you could just, I don’t know, let us go?”*

“Aren’t you tired of haunting an old, broken down carnival, though? No offense, but this place is a dump. Surely, the heavenly afterlife or sweet abyss of nothingness would be better?” Bdubs chimes in.

The woman raises an eyebrow, the arch of it visible even from across the tent. *“You’ve stuck around after death, haven’t you?”*

“Yeah, cause it’s fun...to...” Bdubs trails off. *“Yeah, okay, I see your point.”*

“Bdubs!” Etho hisses.

“What? She’s right!”

Before the argument can escalate any further, a low chuckle breaks up the conversation. All heads in the room turn to the source of the sound, locked safely behind the sigil’s barrier.

“What’s so funny?” Etho questions, an edge of nervousness to his voice.

“Oh, nothing,” Scar says, pretending to wipe a tear from his eye. *“You guys are just too much fun.”*

And then he steps right through the barrier.

Bdubs yelps, Mumbo lets out some sort of strangled squeak, and the confusion on Etho’s face quickly becomes alarm as he begins to struggle with the ropes once more. The sigil should have worked, it worked fine before, why not now?

“Etho,” Grian says, voice rising in pitch, “I thought you said it worked when you tested it with Bdubs?”

“Oh, this sort of sigil works fine on most ghosts, like your friend over there. Probably would have worked on the rest of my crew, too. But on someone as powerful as me?” He touches down at the front of the stage, spreading his arms wide, and smiles with teeth bared. *“You never stood a chance.”*

Behind him, the sound of a match being struck and a flash of light are the only warnings before the hoops at the back of the stage are alight with flame. The sigil dies out, and Etho turns to see the original scuffed as Grian attempts to push himself backwards and away from the fiery display.

“Now what?” he cries. “That was our backup plan!”

“Normally I would say run, but, uh,” Etho nods his head towards his tied arms. “You know.”

“Hey, why do you look all alarmed? I didn’t–” Scar cuts off and turns around. *“Salem! I was kidding about the fire!”*

He lets out an exasperated sigh. *“Every time I mention fire, someone here actually goes through with it. Seriously, you think they’d all learn after burning to death.”*

“Rude!” Salem huffs, throwing a pale of water at the hoops. *“ou’re lucky I can lift heavy things, Mr. Goodtimes.”*

“Don’t use my glorious stage name in a statement of mockery!”

“Uh, sorry to interrupt,” Mumbo says, clearly meaning to interrupt, “but are you trying to kill us or not? I’m a little confused on that aspect.”

Scar turns to look at him with a look of surprise, Salem turning visible to do the same. *“Kill you?”* The ringmaster says. *“Oh, gosh no.”*

“He was just being dramatic,” Salem adds.

“It’s called ‘being an incredible actor,’ thank you very much.”

“So, you don’t...want to harm us?” Grian questions, tense as if expecting more fire to appear at any moment.

“No! Have you been listening to me this whole time? I just want to put on a show for you!”

Etho squints. “I thought that was like, a metaphor or something. You know, a whole ‘we’re gonna make a whole thing out of torturing you’ kind of situation.”

“What on Earth gave you that impression?”

“Well, you did separate us, mess with us, and then tie us up once we reunited,” Grian supplies.

“They’ve got a point, we did do all that,” Salem says, nodding along.

“Well, we’re not here to kill or torture anyone. We just want a chance to put on a little show, even if it’s just for the four of you. How about it?”

Etho turns to Grian, who shrugs as best as he can with his arms tied together. “Sure,” Etho says, “we’ve got nothing better to do. Just put my phone down next to me, will you?”

“Oh, this thing! Forgot about that. Was never gonna break it, by the way.”

“But my show,” Mumbo mumbles glumly.

“This is your show now. Deal with it.”

“Okay, I have to admit, the tightrope walking was pretty cool. I could never do that.”

Etho looks down at his phone. “You can literally fly. So can they.”

“Eh. Still impressive.”

Mumbo walks a bit ahead of Etho and Grian, turning so he’s facing them. “Does no one else have an issue with the fact that we won’t be getting the second part of our payment?”

Etho and Grian look at each other, back at Mumbo, and shrug.

“They don’t want to go, and this is their home,” Grian says. “Who are we to make them leave?”

“Ghost hunters. You’re ghost hunters. That’s literally your job.”

“Aha, you said it! You admitted they hunt ghosts.”

“I do no such thing. Etho and Grian hold the job title of ghost hunter. Such a statement provides no indication of my actual beli—oh, for goodness’ sake! Not this thing again!”

Etho turns to see Mumbo sidestepping an old clown doll, disgust evident in the scrunch of his face.

“I nearly faceplanted into the ground because of this thing when I was running from all of those darts.” He gestures to an array of projectiles littering the ground. “These ones. The ones that could have killed me!”

Etho stops to bend down and pick one up. He inspects it, twirling it lazily between two fingers.

“Mumbo, these are made of foam.”

“What are you—” Mumbo takes the dart from Etho, inspecting it himself. His face goes red.

“He’s right, you know,” Grian calls, inspecting his own dart. “They wouldn’t even have bruised you. A few of them probably hit you and you didn’t even notice.”

“Oh, hush!” Mumbo turns away, huffing.

“It’s—hey, Bdubs, where are you going?” Etho watches as his phone flickers, and something cold rushes past him.”

“*Gimme a second.*” Etho turns in the vague direction he felt the ghost going, unsure exactly where he’s gone. As Grian comes over to peer over his shoulder, Etho holds up a hand, signaling him to wait.

“*Etho! Down here!*”

Etho looks down to see Mumbo’s aforementioned nasty clown doll on the ground, slightly muddled, twitching its flimsy arms at him.

“*Great news,*” Bdubs announces, “*I no longer need to haunt your phone.*”

Netty watches, perched on the roof of her tent, as the ghost hunters make their way back towards their car. The sun is finally rising, casting the ruined carnival in a soft orange light.

“*They seemed to like your show,*” she comments. When that gets no response, she waves her hand in her companion’s face.

“*Hmm?*” Scar says, pulling his gaze away from the ghost hunters. “*Oh, yes. Well, everyone always does.*”

“*Do they?*” Netty feels a smile creeping up her face. “*I seem to recall someone picking quite a few kernels of popcorn out of his hair after cruddy shows.*”

“*It didn’t even make sense!*” the man exclaims. “*How did they even get under the top hat?*”

He sighs and folds a hand under his chin, eyes drifting back to the ghost hunters. The white haired one is clutching some stuffed toy he must have grabbed from Zee’s area on the way out, saying something that makes the little doll in his hands shake with laughter audible all the way back to Netty’s tent.

The medium’s gaze drifts over the grounds she’s haunted for a century now, glazing over broken bottles and rotted wood to take in what used to be a glorious spectacle of rides and other amusements. Her eyes fall on the center of the circus.

“*It’s funny,*” she says, “*the main tent is still pretty intact, but it still always startles me to see it.*”

“*Mhm.*”

“*It’s like when I look, I expect everything to look the way it did when we set it all up. Sometimes, I’m even startled by how ruined everything truly is.*”

“*Mhm.*”

Netty sighs.

“*Are you going to wait until they get all the way to the car, or are you going to go and catch up with them now?*”

“What?” Scar looks up, caught off guard. *“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

“Yes, you do. I saw you saying goodbye to Salem.”

The showman’s persona drops, just for a moment. Just long enough for him to give her a small, bittersweet smile.

“You’re too good at reading people for me to slip past you, huh?”

“I would have found out anyway. You wouldn’t dare leave without saying goodbye.”

They both laugh at that, soft and a little bit sad, but still meaningful. Netty nearly chokes, startled by the sheer amount of emotion in her nonexistent chest. More had happened in a night than in the last decade, and now one of her only confidants is leaving her.

Not that she’ll make any effort to stop him. There’s no talking Mr. Goodtimes out of a plan.

“One thing before you go,” Netty says, her eyes trailing back to the ghost hunting crew. They’re nearly at their car now. When Scar looks at her questioningly, she points in their direction. *“Keep an eye on that one, hm?”*

“Netty, I know Etho looks scary, but I really don’t think he’s an actual threat.”

“Not him.” She adjusts her finger for his line of sight.

“Grian?” Scar raises an eyebrow at her. *“I doubt he could kill an ant without crying about it. You think he’s up to something?”*

She shakes her head. *“No, I don’t think he’s dangerous. I just...”* She mulls over her words. Thinks of the boy sat across from her, his carefully concealed guilt slipping through just long enough for her to see.

Netty watches as his gaze flits between his friends as they converse. There’s a nervousness to his stance that, when he’d first walked past her tent, she’d chalked up to a fear of the undead. Now, she has a much clearer picture.

“He’s running from something,” she says, finally.

“How can you tell?”

He reminds me of me.

She shrugs. *“Medium’s intuition.”*

A moment of comfortable silence befalls them, and Netty leans back against the roof, her ghostly form never quite touching the tarp. She should be upset, she thinks, and yet it’s the most peaceful sunrise she’s experienced in decades.

Scar breaks the silence first, as he always does. *“Well, my dear medium, I should be on my way if I don’t want to lose those hooligans down there.”*

The ringmaster rises, his translucent silhouette outlined in shimmering gold. With a wink and a smile, he tips his hat.

“Best of luck, Netty.”

“And you, as well.”

Then he’s gone, flying down after the four ghost hunters and nearly scaring the pants off the dark haired one. She smiles, shakes her head, and leans back. She should be upset, she thinks, except part of her had always known he would leave eventually. And who better to follow than living people who are willing to speak to the dead?

Netty tilts her head up towards the rising sun, and wishes, just for a moment, that she could feel its warmth on her skin.

“Say, you wouldn’t mind adding a fifth to your crew, would you?”

End Notes

everyone say thank u joey for suggesting many of the plot points and for being this fic’s wonderful beta. i pride myself on having fairly clean first drafts but when that fell through for this fic joey was there with a broom. this is a weird analogy. u get the point. hope u enjoyed my silly little words!

you can find additional info and art for team mortal under the tag "team mortal au" on joey and i’s tumblrs (@yoeyrt and @maybeanss, respectively).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!