

Aftermath

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20544398) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20544398>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Fablehaven Series - Brandon Mull
Relationships:	Warren Burgess/Vanessa Santoro , Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Characters:	Warren Burgess , Vanessa Santoro , Kendra Sorenson , Seth Sorenson , Elise (Fablehaven) , Mara Tabares
Additional Tags:	Ghosts , Character Death , Canon-Typical Violence , Angst , lowkey happy ending , Character Turned Into a Ghost , some non canon-typical swearing but what can ya do , Hopeful Ending , Angst with a Happy Ending
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-09-06 Words: 6,679 Chapters: 1/1

Aftermath

by [fablefighter](#)

Summary

(Warren always escapes death- until the time he doesn't.)

Notes

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

The warm sound of laughter follows him outside into the cool winter air of the porch. It's cold, but there's a heavy warmth and a flush across his cheeks that keeps the chill from hitting him- he's a little tipsy, he thinks. Not enough to feel it tomorrow, luckily, but just enough to take off the edge of nerves that still thrum through him before a mission (not that he'd ever admit to it). It's not top priority or particularly high difficulty, but since when do these ever go as planned?

He breathes a stream of fog into the night air and watches as it dissipates under the moonlight, snow sparkling in the absence of clouds, a frosted garden pristine even in the heart of winter. There are definitely perks to being in the center of a hidden magical world, even if it comes with the downfall of something trying to kill him around every corner. There's snow on the porch railing he's leaning on, but he's not cold, even without a coat. Not too far away is the looming barrier of trees that marks the edge of the protected yard. If he squints, he thinks he can see something flickering in the shadows of the boundary, shrouded in shadow, and Warren smiles. Chances are, it's probably taken a shot at him once or twice. Most things have, in fairness, but hey, he's still standing.

(Usually. He's just gotten out of crutches, and he hasn't forgotten it.)

The sounds of laughter and shouting slip out onto the porch as the door opens with a sliver of the hall light and shuts once more, followed closely by the sound of footsteps approaching to lean next to him on the railing. Warren smells Vanessa's strawberry shampoo before he sees her, tilting his chin up to look at the soft light framing her face.

"Hey," he says, and smiles up at her, because how can he not? There's the mischievous twinkle in her eyes even now, but there's a softness to her features that's taken him years to earn the right to see, and that he cherishes every day. A sharp facade falling away to sweet smiles, loud snorts of laughter at bad jokes at 3 a.m., pink flushed cheeks that she still tries to hide behind a curtain of hair to stop him from noticing. They've been together for years now, so of course he notices, but he lets her have it. After all, she pretends not to notice when he trips over air first thing in the morning on the way to get coffee, so it seems only fair.

"Warren," she teases. "You're staring again."

He laughs. "Maybe." Not many people notice that she has freckles, but he does. Every day. There are just a few scattered over her nose and dusted over her cheekbones, not very noticeable unless you're up close, and Warren loves them.

Well. He loves her.

Vanessa reaches out to flick him lightly on the nose and he realizes that he's spaced out again. "I swear, you're gonna start drooling. Are you drunk?"

With a grin, he manages to tear his eyes away from her face long enough to take another sip from the bottle dangling from his fingers. It's almost empty, but there wasn't much there to begin with. "Nah, not really."

“Good, you *really* don’t want to be hungover tomorrow.”

“I know, babe, don’t worry.”

Vanessa’s laugh is the most beautiful thing he’s ever heard. He hopes she knows that.

From inside down the hall he hears the sound of something heavy being dropped, followed closely by the unmistakable noise of a glass shattering and a loud but muffled “Nice *going*, Doren.” Vanessa sighs loudly through her nose and Warren lets his head fall to his folded arms on the railing with a snort.

“It’s like babysitting, I swear,” she groans, and he laughs in agreement.

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Mmm.” The sound of her voice carries out into the frozen yard, and in the silence that follows Warren feels a wave of sleepiness fall over him, warm like a blanket. It’s peaceful out here, a nice break from the chaotic mess inside, the smell of frozen sap and pine trees mixed with maybe a little hint of woodsmoke from the chimney. He could fall asleep right here like this, with only a thin shirt between his skin and the ice, and he honestly wouldn’t care. Maybe, he muses, he’s just a little bit more tipsy than he’d thought.

He feels a warm hand tangle in his hair and he hums quietly, leaning into the touch. He’s always been like a cat in this way, many a night spent with him falling asleep with his head in Vanessa’s lap while she holds a book with her free hand and messes with his hair with the other.

“Hey,” she whispers. “We should go back inside. You’re gonna freeze out here without a coat.”

“Mmm. I’ll be fine.”

She laughs again and tugs on his hair gently. “C’mon, there are still presents waiting inside, and we can’t leave Kendra alone to watch over everyone for much longer without it being considered cruel and unusual punishment.”

With a dramatic flourish he drains the last few drops from the bottle and heaves his weight off of the railing to face her, gently pulling her close to press a kiss to her forehead. “Next year we’ll remember not to invite them, I swear.”

When she pushes him away, it’s lighthearted and playful. “Stop being such a damn sap.”

“Sorry, no can do, babe!”

“Oh my *God*, I’m breaking up with you.”

He laughs again and ducks in to kiss her on the nose this time, pressing their foreheads together gently for a second. “Nah, you won’t. You love me.”

“Yeah,” she replies, a small but glowing smile spreading across her lips and holy shit he’ll never get used to how incredible it is to see her happy. “Yeah, I do.”

The snow has started to fall again by the time they end up going inside.

Warren has had a lot of experiences with near death.

It’s a near constant state for him, at this point; he’s been stabbed, poisoned, mauled, hell, even trapped in an extra-dimensional knapsack and almost starved to death (and who else can claim that?), so. Yeah, he’s used to it. That’s just who he is, he’s that guy who cheats death. The reason they keep an extra first aid kit in every room and the spare crutches in the broom closet. Seth keeps a list of his "top ten coolest injuries" with honorable mentions that take up three pages. There’s even a running game at Christmas parties where one person is designated to keep track of all his near death experiences from the previous year, and whoever guesses closest to the correct number gets a prize. (This year Kendra had narrowly won over Seth and subsequently caused a ruckus loud enough to result in Newel and Doren just managing to avoid getting their names taken off of the register. She accepted her set of- admittedly dangerous- sparkler candles with smug pride.)

And yet this time something is different, and he can feel it even now, a new type of stabbing pain in his gut that he hasn’t felt before and a new type of tingling numbness that cuts through his nerves and numbs his fingertips. It’s like being frozen, maybe- is it? It’s something similar but not similar enough to place and he *really* doesn’t like not being able to place it and oh *fuck* the stabbing sensation is back but worse, and suddenly he’s having trouble breathing.

His thoughts aren’t clear enough to form any coherent plans of action but they manage to string together the word *poison* before he registers the dark red stain soaking through his shirt. It’s pooling on the floor next to where he’s curled on his side, spreading out like syrup. Strawberry syrup, he thinks, dazed. Strawberry is Vanessa’s favorite flavor, her favorite smell. There was strawberry syrup at breakfast this morning, he recalls, and he spilled it on the floor. Vanessa had laughed.

It’s almost muscle memory at this point for his hands to find the wound and press down on it as firmly as he can to stop the flow of bleeding, but when his shaking hands move to his abdomen he finds that he can’t summon enough strength to press down. The blood continues to spread.

“Fuck,” he whispers, shakily, and the word falls from his lips as though foreign. His tongue feels numb and too dry, his lips somehow both ice cold and unfeeling at the same time. They feel just barely enough to register the small rivulet of blood that runs out of his mouth with a slight sputter.

Once, he remembers, from some deep part of his mind, Kendra had died in the winter. It had been fake, of course, a painfully well executed trick by the society, but it had still felt so real standing in the heavy and oppressive blanket of wet snow at the funeral. What’s worse is that he’d been there to watch it, watched the clone swallow the poison and convulse to her death

in his cousin's, his best friend's, room. That was all behind them now, and everybody had shelved their grief and pretended, after a while, that it hadn't been real. But he knew the overwhelming tidal wave of pain and sorrow that had overcome them all, from both Kendra's stingbulb and other friends and allies lost in the fight. No matter how hard they tried to box it up and place it away on a high shelf to gather dust, it was always prevalent, haunting.

With Kendra's clone, that grief had an expiration date, a wake up call. If he bled out here in this cave, there would be no hope of revival. Nobody would come knocking on the door later with talk of friends come back to life. Warren isn't that lucky, and he knows it.

Another curse falls from his lips and it's even less clear than before, slurred like he's been drinking heavily. Every noise he makes echoes in the empty cavern where they left him to bleed out after tearing blade from his chest and kicked him aside, leaving him in a helpless heap of blood belonging to friends, enemies, and him. He'd been the last line of defense against an unexpected army they never could have been prepared for, and he'd thrown himself into the battle knowing he was going to lose, but also knowing that he could give the others at least a little bit of warning and maybe enough time to escape, with or without him. What else could he have done? Kendra was behind him. Seth was behind him. God, Vanessa would have been trapped with them, and- and he couldn't handle it if they got hurt.

It's all he can do to cling to the last threads of hope inside of him borne from climbing his way back from the precipice of death that he'll get out of this, too. Scarred, bleeding, probably, but alive. This hope never leaves him.

And it never falters, not even when the heavy weight of his eyelids pull closed despite his efforts and his hand slackens against the bleeding wound. When the edges of Warren's vision turn dark in the strange glowing light of the moss lighting up the cave, flickers of misplaced green reflecting off of fallen warrior's armor and filtering through his eyelashes before they close. That thread of steadfast hope is still pulled taught inside of him when the poison spreads towards his heart and slows his breath to a thick crawl, consciousness slipping away amidst stinging pain, almost drowned out by ice.

I'll get through this, he thinks. He prays. *They got away, and it'll be ok. I'll get through this.*

Warren is strong. Warren has faced Death many times, looked It in the eye, and walked away with a smile.

Warren always escapes death.

Until the time he doesn't.

When he first opens his eyes, Warren thinks everything is fine. It almost could have been. He's not... cold, exactly, but empty, weightless. There's nothing solid about his movements like there used to be, and for a second he thinks that maybe somebody used a gaseous potion on him, which is, if he must say so himself, fucking ingenious. He hadn't had one on him at the time, but if he's floating like this then that means that someone must have gotten to him in time.

“Told ya’ I’d be fine,” he mutters, more to himself than to anyone else.

(If he was thinking more clearly, he’d realize that the logistics of a gaseous potion don’t allow for speech, or free movement; or really, anything he’s doing now.)

He wiggles his fingertips and blinks a few times, trying to orientate himself to where he is. He’s still on the rocky floor of the cavern from before, but on his back now instead of in the frankly embarrassing fetal position that he’d been in when he lost consciousness. Someone is crouched by him, and it takes only seconds for him to register the red dye-streaked hair belonging to Elise. Her face is tear streaked and her eyes blown wide and frozen, and Warren winces, imagining what he must look like, soaked in blood and half dead again. When the potion wears off, he’ll have to apologize.

Warren raises a hand and gives her a small wave to let her know he’s ok, that she doesn’t have to worry. To his unease, she doesn’t respond. In fact, she doesn’t seem to notice at all, still holding onto his wrist like a lifeline, almost as if she’s feeling for a pulse. She’s pale, trembling. Fragile.

This isn’t right.

“Elise,” he says, eyes tracing her face with concern. “Elise, did someone get hurt, what-”

Her words cut him off mid sentence like she can’t even hear him, and they’re so, so small. Trembling. “Oh God. Oh God, Warren, please, Warren, no-”

“Warren *what*? Elise, I’m right here, just because I’m in gaseous form doesn’t mean I can’t hear you, what is going on-”

“Warren, what did you *do*?” Elise continues on as if he’s not there, choking out a sob and pressing a shaking hand to her mouth. She falls back away from him to the ground and Warren reaches out for her, to try to comfort her even if he can’t touch her right now, and-

His.

Body.

Stays behind.

Warren would have choked, if he could, but all of a sudden he’s far too aware that there’s no longer any air in his lungs.

He’s sitting up now, and he can see his arms, parts of his torso, his hands, pale and translucent. It’s like there’s smoke drifting through his limbs instead of flesh and blood, insubstantial and weightless. Empty. There’s maybe a ghost of a feeling where he’s still connected with his body (part of his brain, the part still in shock, thinks the word ghost and wants to laugh), but it’s probably just all in his head. Like when you lose a limb but still feel it itch- what was that called? A phantom feeling? Again, he almosts laughs and is immediately overcome by a wave of nausea that he knows isn’t logical. A phantom feeling, except he’s missing his entire body.

Everything’s a phantom feeling now, he supposes.

Warren presses the hand (is it really his? He still can't believe that it really is) to the ground he knows to be cold and damp, but feels like nothing now, and shifts away from the body on the ground. Although he moves with the same weighted movements as he had before, it's more as if his ghostly muscle memory is simulating what it was like to feel gravity rather than actually being affected by it.

The sound of rapidly approaching boots can be heard through the horrifying lack of ringing in his ears and he looks to the tunnel mouth as Mara comes sprinting around the corner as fast as her swift legs can carry her. There's a cut across her cheek and browbone that have smeared blood on to the side of her face, but aside from that she seems uninjured. Good. That's... that's good. She'd been in danger the last time he'd seen her, and he... he made sure she was safe.

It doesn't mean anything anymore, an empty gesture, but Warren swallows, heavily. It feels hollow like the rest of him. He brings a shaking hand and presses it against his lips (funny, how you could still shake with emotion when you were dead) and tries to press back his thoughts. There's... there's no time for that now, because he can't process this. It won't sink in, or maybe he's not letting it, but does it matter anymore? Really, does anything he does or think matter anymore?

"Elise? Elise, are you here?" Mara shouts, and Elise nearly jumps out of her skin.

"I'm-" Elise's voice cracks and Warren watches as she squeezes her eyes shut and another tear falls from her lashes, heart breaking even more with every waver in her voice. "I'm here."

"Thank god you're ok, we couldn't find you and I thought for a minute that-"

"Don't," Elise squeaks. Warren has never once in his life heard her make that noise before. She is too strong, too tough for that. "Please don't say it, Mara, I can't-"

"Elise?" Mara rushes to be by her side, possibly going in to wrap her arms around her girlfriend's shoulders, but before she gets there she catches sight of Warren. Or at least, what's left of Warren for them to see, curled on the ground and unmoving. Her breath catches in her throat. "No."

Elise nods. Mara takes a small step forward, places a slightly shaking hand on the other girl's shoulder. "Is he...?" Another nod. Without another word, Mara kneels swiftly and gathers Elise in her arms, gently running a hand into red and black hair and holding her closely as her usual barriers collapse, slowly, and she sinks further towards the ground with silent, heartbreaking sobs wracking her body.

Next week, they'd had plans to go to paintball. It was Elise who had brought it up, almost jokingly, to go and enjoy something as normal as paintball after all the things they face on a daily basis, just to loosen up their spirits, lighten the stress.

Warren, by all logical reasoning, should not be able to feel pain anymore. And yet when he realizes that he will never again sit side by side with the fiery best friend that he's known since he was a teen, fought side by side with for years and forged trust with in bouts of

evaded dragonflame and sparks from enchanted steel, it feels like a stab to the chest more painful than the one that had claimed his final breath.

Warren is dead.

Fully dead. Not breathing. Going to be buried in the ground, never to speak another word, dead dead. As a doornail. Gone for good, kicked the proverbial bucket, croaked, cashed in his chips, etc. He's spent an embarrassing amount of time curled in a corner thinking of synonyms for 'dying' in an attempt to distract himself from the fact that he has been horribly torn out of his timeline and thrown into what he's beginning to think is his own personal hell (in hindsight, there are probably a lot of things he could have thought about that would have been more successful in the name of distraction from death).

Although, anything is a better alternative to watching over his body as it's transported, or watching the news of it spread. It's like the plague, he thinks, how it travels from person to person, from one shaky sentence to comforting arm, from cracking words over a telephone to the ears of a person miles away that still hit every bit as hard. And there are a lot. More than he expected. Warren has met a lot of people in his life, so many that he never really thought to keep track of, but as the cloud sweeps through them person by person it's like he's being stabbed all over again, each time in a new place until he's unsure of how he even had this much pain in him to feel.

Some, he's there for, and he almost wishes he wasn't. Outside the entrance of the cave system had been possibly the most painful, the first to know, to discover.

There had been a group gathered outside, a battered party of explorers in varying states of disarray, and smaller than it should have been. Kendra had a nasty cut on her arm that Tanu was tending to, focusing on the bandage with every ounce of his concentration to stop himself from thinking about anything else. (Warren knows this from the time he'd confessed how much he throws himself into any task on hand as a distraction. It had been a long night for the both of them, honesty the product of perhaps a little too much to drink.) He remembers Seth's joking that was halfhearted at best, through a forced smile and worried eyes in a small attempt to take attention away from the missing faces in the crowd that everybody acknowledged but didn't want to mention out loud for fear of making it real. He was more brave than he should have had to be at his age. Seth and his sister- both trying to take care of others before themselves. A dangerous family trait.

Warren saw what was about to happen before it happened. He had stumbled over his weightless feet out of the tunnel in front of them, part of his brain still clinging to a last desperate hope that maybe someone would be able to see him, to know he was there. He'd pushed and pulled at jackets, fabric, arms, anything in an attempt to hold on and let them know that he was standing with them, warn them about what was going to come out of the tunnel, but his hands melted like mist through their flesh.

Each footstep that Mara and Elise took through the tunnel echoed more than it should have. Kendra- god, why did it have to be Kendra- heard them first. She had leapt to her feet with wide worried eyes and darted around Tanu before either Mara or Elise had any time to call

out a warning. (What they would have warned her, Warren still doesn't know.) There was a half panicked cry of "Kendra, wait- don't-" before his cousin pushed her way into view.

Warren, to this day, is still haunted by the look on her face. The half second of blank shock, followed by disbelief and stumbled half step as if she was trying to go forwards and run backwards at the same time that led to her falling onto her knees on the stone. The look on her face, horror, grief, an internal battle being waged with no indication aside from her storming eyes. He had watched the color drain from her face, still motionless on the ground, and then the sudden lurch as she violently threw herself to the side to vomit.

Seth had raged. Seth was a tempest, every bit of emotion pouring out of him in a blazing fury and violent yells directed at their prisoner, fingers smashed against a rock wall and fists forcibly restrained by no less than three people before the rage bled into something else and he collapsed into sobs in his sister's arms.

And Warren hadn't been able to do a thing.

Not a single fucking thing.

They put together a very good funeral, at least from what he's seen of it. Warren's happy to claim it as his own. Each detail is perfect, painstakingly so- it's almost as if he planned it himself, which, in a way, he had. Of course, when he'd chosen the music and laughed about what would be written on his tombstone, it had all been a joke in passing, and he's somewhat surprised that people remembered. He's glad, though. Subconsciously there's always been a part of him that's known it was just a matter of time, and even though he'd never admitted it to himself when he was alive, Warren knows he's been planning for this for a long time now.

It's different to see it come to fruition, though. It's held at Fablehaven, of course, a gravesite decorated with a flourish of bright and beautiful out of season flowers thanks to the fairies, satyrs oddly somber in their best formal wear granted passes to the yard. For once, they're well behaved, and Warren casts his gaze elsewhere, not wanting to watch his friends, so normally upbeat and quick witted, so subdued. It's more a celebration of life than funeral, which eases the ache at least a little bit. Warren- Warren wants them to be happy. He wants them to be ok. He doesn't want them to cling to what once was but move forward, because he's... he's played his part already. *Fuck.*

There's hugging, and there are tears, some sad laughter as people share stories and memories, and he can't join in and it *hurts*. Up until now he's still tried to ignore the horrible truth of the matter, but seeing everybody in one place with dark formal wear and red eyes pushes the last piece of the puzzle into place. His hands, insubstantial and invisible to everybody he cares about, shake in the pockets of his bloodstained jeans that he hasn't yet figured out how to change, standing in the corner of a room filled with people that he loves so much it fills his incorporeal being over the top with emotion, so much he's begun to flicker around the edges. Maybe he's not stable anymore. Maybe he doesn't care.

He knows that there's someone missing from downstairs, someone he's been trying not to think about because he knows if he focuses on her then anything that's left of him will fall

apart completely, and he just- he can't lose this now, he can't leave before he knows she'll be ok. Warren grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes closed. Even standing in the corner of their living room (it's not his, not anymore) is too much, almost suffocating even in the absence of breath. Exiting the room is still an ordeal, preferring to weave around people instead of taking a more direct route that's only possible through death; Warren's found that the almost-there feeling of warmth and of life that people have sends him spiraling. His hands ghost over the doorframe with tiny notches in it from measuring his and Dale's heights when they were younger, the staircase railing filled with dents and notches, both from indoor football incidents that the nipsies have overlooked and from somewhat deadly traps set over the years. The stairs, no matter how often fixed or rebuilt, have never stopped creaking; he and Seth used to find patterns of running up them where the wood was silent. Warren no longer worries about skipped steps and old boards, taking the direct and noiseless path away from the living room, wondering if Seth will still bother to find those hidden paths without him.

He smells her before he sees her. (Sometimes, he can still recollect senses even with no body to process them. At first, he thought it a blessing, but now he thinks it's nothing but cruel.) Her scent has always been easily recognizable to him, anyway, that damn shampoo that she's teased him so mercilessly about liking and yet continues to buy anyway. She is and always has been a breath of fresh air in a world where nothing else makes sense, and especially now when he's nothing but a phantom wandering around a world where he no longer belongs.

The room is theirs. The airy but tucked away space, once used as a guest room, has slowly filled with their belongings and taken on a cozy feeling over the last few years as the two of them began to use the house as a home base, leaving and circling the world before both inevitably returning to the preserve as if drawn there- and they are. Up until very recently, it had kept the warm and comfortable feeling of belonging, of togetherness, a feeling that was only broken when one of the two broke their cycle and one day, didn't come home anymore. It's one of the many things that Warren feels guilty about. He knows Vanessa has been staying elsewhere since she heard, displaced from that safe space that had meant so much for her to create but is now tainted like the others that she's left.

Vanessa is sitting on the bed, the white sheets still made and unwrinkled from days of disuse and only disrupted by the slight dip on the mattress from her weight. Her hair is loose around her shoulders and forming a protective curtain around her, facing the wall and her body slumped in on itself. It is so far from the strong courageous woman that Warren knows and loves, and it stops him dead in his tracks, frozen in the doorway. There's a small amount of dust hanging in the air and settled on the top of the dresser, still holding his clothes-- nobody's cleaned it out, yet. He had heard Ruth and Stan's conversation the other day, hushed words in the kitchen. "If I get rid of it, it'll feel like he's really gone. I... don't think I can handle that. Not yet."

Warren had left them alone, after that.

One foot in front of the other, he steps soundlessly into the room that he still thinks of as his home. Slowly, as steadily as he can manage, he makes his way around the bedframe until he's standing next to her hunched form. When he comes into view of her face, his teeth catch his bottom lip and bite down so hard that had there been any blood left in his body, it would have cut and bled.

She's crying silently and without moving a muscle. There are tear tracks caught on her cheekbones and tracing their way down her nose and over her lips, falling over her jawline and catching in the soft fabric of her shirt. In her hands is clutched a small velvet box, lid open to reveal the simple silver band of metal with several small inset jewels that catch the light from the window and sparkle like Vanessa's eyes do when she's happy; that's why Warren had picked it out in the first place. It was the easiest decision he'd ever made, to get the ring. They knew where they were headed and what they wanted with their lives, and they both knew that they wanted to be together for the rest of their lives. Still, there were nerves that came with the act of proposal, and he'd lost track of the time spent turning the box over in his hands trying to think of the perfect way to ask her. There's still some wear on the corners of the velvet from spending time in his coat pocket.

But he'd never had the chance to ask. He should've, and he knows it, because he'd wanted to for so long, but damn it, no time had ever seemed perfect enough to ask, even though he knew that Vanessa wouldn't mind when or where he proposed in the first place, Warren had wanted it to be as special as she was. There hadn't been any rush then, there was time for planning, and so the ring had been placed carefully in his nightstand on the morning after Christmas when they set out for their mission, for Vanessa to find in the worst possible circumstances.

"Damn it, Warren," Vanessa says, and it comes out as a choked sob that would've been too quiet to hear unless they were as close as Warren is, sitting next to her on her bed, the bed that used to be theirs. "I would've said yes, you know I would have said yes, why didn't you-" She cuts off her own words with a broken sob and Warren aches.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry, god I'm so sorry-"

And now he's sobbing too, but the difference between them is that she can't see him. To her, she's alone in the room where everything reminds her of her dead almost-fiance, and Warren digs his fingernails into his palms and yells because he's nothing anymore. Warren yells until the sound is all he can hear like he's trying to fill the empty room not for him but for her but he knows she can only hear her own quiet pained crying and there's nothing he can do but fold in on himself and let the pain wash over him.

It could have been hours as they sit there side by side like they used to. Neither are counting their tears. Warren's hand hovers uselessly over hers, as close to holding her as he can get without passing through her arm like the apparition he is. Somewhere in the midst of their muffled sobs, Warren breaks.

There is nothing left for him here.

Warren knows this. He is aware of this every second of every cursed day that he is forced to remain on a plane of existence that he has been lingering in for too long, and it is evidenced in the blurry edges of his limbs and the transparency of his being that is fading more and more with every passing day. What will happen, he wonders, with just a little more time? Will he fade to nothingness completely? Will his consciousness remain, untethered to anything, invisible to not only the rest of the world but to him as well? Is there a way out of

this, or will he be forced to watch as the world forgets him, watch the ties he had break down until all that's left of him is a cold gravestone slowly being claimed by time and a collection of old pictures yellowing and gathering dust as they sit untouched in an attic?

He's never believed in hell, not... truly, but now? Now, Warren wonders. He wonders if any of this is even real, or if he's trapped in a prison of his own making and forced to flicker into nonexistence for all eternity. He thinks of Vanessa, who he hasn't seen in weeks, and of Kendra and Seth, now returned to Wyrmoost to face responsibilities they grow into more and more as they grow up. For a while he had considered staying with them and watching over them, if for no other reason than to make sure they didn't do anything too stupid, but really, there's nothing he can do to stop them even if they do. He is so, so proud of them and of every single thing they do. Warren just wishes that he could tell them that, at least one last time.

But he can't, and he will never be able to, and so he finds himself sitting (of all places) on the cliffs of the Shoreless Isles, staring out over the foggy beach and jagged rocks jutting out of the water. It had taken him a while to get here, but he has nothing but time, and he just kept moving. The last time he was here the wind had been biting. Now, the wind goes straight through him and he doesn't really bother to imagine what it would have felt like anymore, because he knows there's not really a point.

The people around him are moving on, and Warren is glad. He's never wanted anything but for the people he loves to be happy and safe, and even though he can't ensure their safety anymore, he can take comfort in the fact that they are strong spirited and surrounded by support, and they will be ok without him. It would be a lie if he told himself that he didn't miss them, or want them back, but to wish that they'd stay hung up on him? That would be cruel. Cruel and selfish. He doesn't want that for them.

He stares out over the ocean, fog still hanging around without enough sun to burn it off. Somewhere out there there's a haunted pirate ship, an entrance to the fairy realm, a fated battleground where good and evil once clashed. Somewhere out there is a future. Absentmindedly, he brushes his fingers along the ground, over the tiny grains of sand and through the rough beach grass that used to cut his feet when he ran over them as a child. A bird cries in the distance, buffeted by the winds. They'll be ok. And they will be. As he closes his eyes, listening to the wind and taking in a deep breath that's not actually breathing but still feels like a grounding habit, Warren hears something whisper over the crashing of the waves and roll over the sand dunes to rustle by his ears.

It could be the wind. It could be a person. Warren has seen enough and experienced enough to know that anything is possible, and the sheer amount of unknown around them at any given moment is staggering. So, maybe it is something- or someone- calling out to him from an unknown place, extending a whisper like an olive branch, waiting for him to accept it. *Move on*, it sighs, the sound surrounding him, and Warren closes his eyes. He crumples against the sand. *Move on*, it says, and Warren curls into himself, and sobs.

He cries like he's never thought possible before. The tears are more real than anything about him has been since he died, cold and clear but still somehow shimmering in the gray light of a beach haunted by him, now. Warren cries for his brother, who had collapsed on his grave

and apologized to thin air for things that weren't his fault, his brother who still isn't himself yet and maybe never will be again; he cries for Kendra and Seth still growing up in a world that's deadly even to the grown but still stronger than anybody will ever know; he cries for Vanessa, trying her best to move on but still wearing the silver band on a chain around her neck, who holds it close and smiles softly sometimes, eyes open but seeing something far away. Warren cries for Elise, whose wedding he's going to miss, for Tanu, who he never got to say goodbye to, and Warren cries for himself. He cries for lost moments and dreams that he'd barely even thought to have before they were cut off, a marriage and a *life* that he was never allowed to live.

Move on, the voice whispers, and Warren looks up and far away, into a light that only he can see.

Move on, it calls, and Warren reaches up towards a window that might've been there the whole time. He grabs on to the offered ray of hope, and holds on tight.

When the light clears, the beach is empty save for a few shells and a small breeze.

(Sometimes, there are things that the human mind can't even imagine. Warren has been surrounded by the impossible since he was born, and kept discovering more and more even after the day he died. So, some uncountable years later, when the light around him shimmers and twists into the smile that Warren still loves more than the world and afterlife itself, he discovers that after everything he's been through and every moment he's lived, that the word 'impossible' no longer holds any meaning.)

End Notes

You should know that every descriptor of “ghosting” or “haunted” and the like were 100% intentional and that I was cackling loudly when I wrote them.

You can yell at me for this on tumblr @ fablefighters lmao

(I've been working on this for so fucking long dude, you can tell where I edited and where I just gave up but tbh I Just Do Not Care Anymore!)

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