Welcome, one and all, to Relativity Falls! Here you will find the adventures of a certain dynamic duo as they spend the summer at their Grauntie Mabel's utterly tacky tourist trap. Updates will be every Friday, and after each episode there will be a “Short”, a much shorter original fanfiction which occurs in the time between the episodes. See you in a few days, and enjoy All Hallow's Eve!

Warning:
*This fanfiction may trigger feels, warm fuzzies, and certain amounts of deja vu.
*May cause minor amounts of time travel (forward only)
*Author does not claim responsibility for any sightings of ghosts, triangles, or woodpeckers that may or may not occur during or after the reading of this text.
Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
"AAAAAAAH!"

The golf cart plunged over a cliff, punched straight through a billboard, and landed with a squeal on the road below. The two boys in the cart held on for dear life.

"WE'RE GONNA DIE WE'RE GONNA DIE WE'RE GONNA DIE!" Stanley screamed.

Ford jerked the wheel, fishtailing around a hairpin turn. "Hold on!"

The ground shook with an ominous thumping.

Stanley twisted around, gripping the seat's back so hard his knuckles went white. "Floor it, Ford, it's gaining on us!"

A huge monster rose behind them, throwing a massive shadow over the road. The thing was over thirty feet tall, a crazy conglomerate of glaring eyes, sharp teeth, and bright red hats.

It ripped up a redwood as easily as a dandelion, took aim, and threw. Ford looked up and gasped as the tree soared right over their heads, landing so hard it bounced on the road in front of them.

"Look out!"

Ford jerked the wheel. The golf cart careened, tipping left, then right, skidding crazily. The tree's huge trunk loomed like a brick wall. They braced themselves against the dash and screamed.

A few days earlier...

The bus pulled away from the stop sign, leaving Ford and his brother standing alone on the sidewalk. Stanley had his sleeves rolled up, revealing the superhero-themed band-aids on his arms, and the suitcase sitting next to him was covered with half-chewed gum.

Ford was wearing his signature aviator jacket, his notebook sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. His suitcase was covered with stickers of ghosts and monsters.

Ford shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, looking around expectantly. The town's main road was lined with a few stores, most of them restaurants, plus some arcades, a couple of hardware stores, and a grocery store. Aside from a few random pedestrians, the street was empty.

"She does know we're coming, right?" he asked anxiously.

"Dude, who cares?" Stanley put a foot on his suitcase and struck a heroic pose, shading his eyes like an explorer in a new land. He peered at the redwoods that surrounded the town. "Did you even see this place? It's got nothing but forest for miles! It's the perfectly place for buried treasure!"

Ford rolled his eyes, grinning. "Stanley, we don't have treasure yet."

"Not yet we don't, but I'll bet you anything we'll find it!" Just then Stan's stomach rumbled. He looked down at it. "Right. First things first. Food time!"

Ford opened his mouth to say they should wait to be picked up, but his stomach cut him off. It had
been an eight-hour bus ride and he was seriously hungry. He looked around.

“I think I saw a diner around here...”

“There!” Stanley pointed. There was a restaurant set back against the woods, with a flickering neon sign that read Greasy's Diner.

“Sounds...greasy. We don't even have any money.” Ford pointed out. “You spent our food allowance buying those dumb scratch cards. And all they had on 'em were football players with omelettes.”

Stanley shrugged cheerfully. “Don't worry, Sixer, the puppy-dog face works every time! Race you to the door!” He ran into the street.

There was a roar and a screech of tires. Ford yelled. Stanley jumped back, narrowly avoiding a bright purple motorcycle. Stan lay on the ground, shaking a little, and Ford ran to help him up. He glared at the driver.

“Hey, watch where you're going!” he growled.

The rider, a heavy-set woman in a blue blazer and pink skirt, revved the engine. “‘Scuse you,” the lady grumped, her voice muffled. “What were ya tryin' to do, kid? That is not how you paint the town red.”

“Guh-guh-guh,” Stanley stammered.

The rider paused, then flicked up the visor. She blinked. “Stanley?”

He stared at her. “Huh?”

“It is you!” She whipped off the helmet. Her gray hair was pulled back in a messy bun, and she had a heart-shaped face with light green eyes that glowed with warmth. “And you must be Stanford!” she said to Ford. “You two have grown so much I didn't even recognize you!”

The twins gaped.

“Grauntie Mabel?” Ford finally asked.

“The one and only! Hop aboard, kids, we got a lot of work to do at the Shack!”

They looked at the bike. It wasn't just purple. It was glittery purple, with a chrome finish and a matching sidecar so rusted it looked ready to disintegrate on the spot.

“Um, there's just one seat,” Ford said.

“Meh, you're each, like, half of an adult! So together you'll be fine!”

A slow grin spread across Stanley's face. “She's got you there, Sixer!” He scrambled to his feet. “So you're really Grauntie Mabel? I don't remember you being so fat.”

“And I don't remember you being so ugly,” she said cheerfully. “Now grab your gear and get in, time is money!”

They hauled their suitcases into the sidecar. It was so small they had to sit with their knees pressed to their chest and they couldn't even take a deep breath. She tossed them a couple of helmets and then took off with a roar, tearing down the quiet road at a decidedly illegal speed.
The bike's engine was too loud for talking, but the town had sights enough to keep them occupied. There was a church, a deserted convenience store, a junkyard, and a gigantic mall. Ford caught his brother staring at the mall, mouthing “babes” with a familiar gleam in his eye. Ford laughed.

The buildings petered out as they turned onto Gopher Road. The forest, which was always in the background of the town, now loomed up around them. The redwoods spiced the air with a sharp, earthy smell. Beams of sunlight sliced the forest with bars of yellow light. Motes of dust and quick-winged birds darted through the canopy, and wind rustled the treetops, which were high enough to touch the clouds.

But the trees grew so thick that they cast deep shadows starting just a few feet from the road. More than once Ford thought he saw movement in those shadows – things that scuttled and crepted and seemed to be watching them as they passed. He shivered.

The sudden appearance of the clearing drove the thought from his mind. Mostly because of what was in the clearing.

A two-story, steeple-roofed cabin stood in the middle of the lawn, completely covered in hot pink glitter, right up to the weathervane (which, instead of the cardinal directions, had the letters W, H, A, and T). Under the gaudy sparkles, he could make out a large sign reading “MYSTERY SHACK” positioned on the roof, with a dozen smaller advertisements above the front and side entrances. An enormous pig lounged on the front porch, with a sign next to it saying 'Picture With Pig - $50!' A Native American totem pole was rose a few yards away, but it was hard to tell what the animals were, since all of them were wearing sweaters of various neon colors.

“Um, wow,” Stan said dubiously, as soon as the engine died.

“Don't mind the glitter,” Mabel said cheerfully. “The girls and I just went a little nuts on our last sleepover.”

“Sleepover?” Stanley muttered to Ford. “But she's, like, grandma-age.”

They got out of the sidecar, grabbed their suitcases, and followed their great-aunt. The pig opened one eye and oinked at them, but otherwise didn’t move.

The inside, at least, was less sparkly. They'd entered through the Mystery Shack's Gift Shop. Wood floors, wood walls, and a wood ceiling gave off a definite 'cabin' vibe. Most of the walls were covered in overpriced merchandise and taxidermy monstrosities. There were some clothing racks on the right, next to some tables loaded with snowglobes and Grauntie Mabel bobbleheads. The back wall had a vending machine and two doorways, one marked “Employees Only” and the other marked “Museum”. The cash register was on their left, under a stuffed bear head with a narwhal horn glued to its brow. A red-haired teenager in a flannel shirt sat behind the register, his face jammed into a Manly Muscles magazine.

Their great-aunt stood in the center of the shop, legs planted wide and hands at her hips. “Alright, kids, welcome to the Mystery Shack!” she said, gesturing grandly. “Meet our first underpaid employee: Flannel Man!”

“It's 'Boyish Dan','” the teen grunted, without glancing up.

“I'll call you that when you stop reading at work!” Mabel sang. “Flannel Man, meet my great-nephews...my grephews...Stanley and Stanford Pines!”

“Just 'Ford','” Ford said, at the same time Stan said, “Just 'Stan'. “
“We also have a mechanic around here somewhere,” Mabel told them. “She's usually fixing things, or breaking them, or both at the same time...oh, Maria! Perfect timing!”

The Employees Only door opened, and a woman in her early twenties stepped through. She wore a faded green hat over her curly dark brown hair, a size-XXXL Mystery Shack shirt, and khaki shorts. One hand gripped a tool box, and the other held a broom.

Grauntie Mabel smiled. “Ria, this is Stan and Ford! My grephews! I told you they'd be coming today.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ria said politely. “Mrs. Pines, I fixed the pipes, but I might've broken the copy machine.”

“Oh, that wasn't you, it's been broken for ages,” Mabel assured her. “Anyway, you two boys go throw your stuff in the attic, and then come back down. I've got a tour bus coming at eleven hundred sharp and I need this place to look spic 'n' span!”

“Wait-wait-wait,” Stan said quickly, holding up his hands. “You mean we're gonna do chores?! But we're on summer vacation!”

Their great-aunt pulled two orange coveralls from behind her back. They had black letters on the front reading “Unpaid Intern #1” and “Unpaid Intern #2” on them in big black letters. She grinned mischievously.

“Not anymore! Now get to work, suckers!”

Stanley managed to talk Grauntie Mabel out of the overalls, but she wasn't kidding about making them work. In the first two days of their stay, they scrubbed the Shack from roof to lawn, swept the house, cleaned out the fridge (Ford swore that was actual glitter in that chicken casserole), and reorganized practically the entire Gift Shop. The only thing they didn't clean was the vending machine, which Mabel declared off-limits after she caught Stan stealing twelve candy bars at a time. They'd even had to re-sew some of the taxidermic monstrosities in the Museum.

The exhibits in there drove Ford crazy. It was all he could do not to shout out corrections when she guided tourists through, calling jackalopes “Antelabbits” and introducing them to bizarre creatures like the “Centaurtaur.” Ford was pretty sure she'd just made that up.

Stan, however, loved it. There was at least one hot babe per bus, and he was determined to make a move on every single one.

Ford watched his brother approach a blue-eyed brunette who was browsing through the shirt rack.

“Do you know a good dentist?” Stan asked, leaning casually on the rack and grinning. “'Cuz you're so sweet I'm gonna get cavities.”

She leaned away from him. “Um, ew.”

Stan didn't give up. “So do you have a name, or should I just call you 'mine’?”

“You can call a lawyer, 'cuz I'm about to sue for harassment,” she snapped, and stalked out of the shop.

This had happened so many times that Stanley didn't even look fazed. He scoffed, turned to the
window, and eyed the next busload of tourists shuffling around the lawn.

“Welp,” he said, “one babe down, thirteen to go!”

Ford rolled his eyes. “Stan, some of those girls are like, Mom's age.” He wiped off a jar of eyeballs (which he was convinced watched him when he wasn't looking). “I know you're getting all girl-crazy, but could you turn it down a notch?”

“Not until I get a girlfriend,” Stan said with determination. “All those girls in Jersey were stupid-heads. Now that we're here, I'm going to find the perfect girl to date me.”

“That doesn't mean flirting with every girl you see. Remember when you hit on that lady with a pet turtle? She looked ten years older than you!”

“So I have a thing for older women.” Stan threw one arm around his brother. “Come on, Sixer, I need a wingman! We can both land a hot girl this summer!”

Ford glanced reflexively at his hands, but Stan didn't notice.

“Besides,” he went on, “I got a good feeling about this summer! I wouldn't be surprised if the girl of my dreams walked through that door right now!”

The second Stan pointed to the front door, Grauntie Mabel walked through it and belched up a handful of glitter.

“Ugh, eating actual glitter, not good, ow,” she grumbled.


“Alright, people,” Mabel announced, “I need someone to go hammer these signs in the spooky part of the forest!”

“Not it!” Stan yelled.

“Not it!” Ford echoed.

“Oh, also not it!” Ria called, nailing up a new shelf on the wall.

“No worries, Ria. Flannel Man, I need you to put up these signs for me, please!”

He glanced up. “That's a left-handed hammer. I only use my right hand! The manly hand!” He leaped to his feet. “I'm gonna go make a right-handed hammer right now! HYAAAH!” He ran out the door.

“Oh, not again,” Mabel muttered. “Alright, let's make it eenie, meenie, miney...you.” She pointed to Ford.

He flinched. “What? But Grauntie Mabel, whenever I'm in those woods I feel like I'm being watched.”

“I've been in those woods a hundred times, kiddo. How many times do I have to tell you there's nothing scary in there?”

“Except maybe bears,” Stan added.

“Why don't you do it?” Ford demanded, looking at Stan. “You're the one who wanted to hunt for
buried treasure!"

“Nope, she picked you, sucker! See ya!” He dashed out the door after Boyish Dan.

“But it's creepy!” Ford insisted. “I'm telling you, there's something weird about this town. Look – yesterday my mosquito bites spelled out 'BEWARE'!” He pulled up his sleeve to show Mabel.

She peered at it. “First, that says 'BEWARB.' Second, there's no such thing as the supernatural. And third, the longer you wait, the darker it'll get, so hop to it!” She dumped the signs into his arms and moved past him to handle the tourists.

“This is so not fair,” Ford grumbled, hammering up another sign. This deep into the forest, the thick trees cast an eerie shadow over everything. Even the sky looked tombstone gray. “Why doesn't anyone believe me when it comes to the supernatural? I know something's not right here...”

Clang.

Ford blinked. The tree he'd just hammered sounded...metallic. He leaned closer and tapped it again with the hammer.

Clang, clang.

“...huh.”

He ran his fingers over the bark, leaving trails through the dust and dirt. His fingers caught on something and he pulled.

A portion of the tree trunk swung open.

There was a rectangular compartment lined with metal recessed into the tree. Centered on the bottom was some kind of control box, with a dusty screen, a few weird buttons, and a couple of levers. With growing fascination, Ford leaned forward, tapping the buttons and toggling one of the levers.

WHIRRRR!

Ford spun around. A section of the grass had retracted, revealing another compartment set into the ground.

Grauntie Mabel's pig, which had apparently followed him out here with surprising stealth, gave a startled oink and waddled quickly away.

Ford hurried over.

The compartment was full of cobwebs, millipedes, beetles – and one very old, very filthy book, covered in layers of dirt and dust. Ford picked it up carefully and blew the dust away.

The book was bound in deep blue leather, the corners reinforced with a dull bronze-colored metal. In the middle of the cover was a gold pine tree with the number “3” written on it, shimmering against the blue background. The book looked very old, and very strange, like an ancient tome from some kind of secret society.

“Whoa,” he breathed. He laid it carefully on the grass. His head was spinning with questions. Who would hide a book way out here, in such an elaborate hiding spot? Who built the mechanisms? What amazing secrets were written on these very pages?
He opened the book.

The inside cover had an owner's label, but the name had been ripped off. There was a monocle attached to the binding. He picked it up for a moment, weighing it in his hand, before he turned the page and began reading aloud.

“'It's hard to believe it's been six years since I began studying the strange and wondrous secrets of Gravity Falls, Oregon.'”

Secrets? Ford was right – there was something going on in Gravity Falls!

He flipped eagerly through the pages. They were filled with illustrations of strange beasts – eyebats, gnomes, gremloblins, with notes taken in precise cursive. There were also several lines of strange symbols and numbers, obviously some kind of code.

“What is all this?” Ford whispered.

He stopped flipping the pages and started to read again. A bold subtitle had caught his eye: Trust no one.

“'Unfortunately, my suspicions have been confirmed. I'm being watched. I must hide this journal before he finds it. Remember, in Gravity Falls, there is no one you can trust!'” He picked up the book and stared at the words. “No one you can trust...”

“HELLO!”

“GAH!” Ford jumped and nearly dropped the book.

Stan sat on the log behind him, grinning from ear to ear. “I swear, Sixer, I shoulda pretended to be a bear. Betcha woulda peed your pants! Hey –” He caught sight of the book in Ford's hands.

“What, are you actually not gonna show me?”

Ford felt a slight tugging on his book. Grauntie Mabel's stealth pig had come back and was chewing the cover.

He tugged it away. “Let's go somewhere private.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “We're in the middle of the forest, bro,” he pointed out. But he followed Ford back to the Shack.

Since the pig wasn't allowed in the house, Ford went to the Shack's living room to show Stan the journal. There was a tour bus out front, so he figured their great-aunt would be busy for a while. He didn't really want to share the journal with her. She didn't believe in the supernatural, anyway.

“Ok, so what's the big thing with some dumb book?” Stan asked impatiently, jumping onto their Grauntie's orange chair.

He took the book out of his jacket, smiling down at it. “It's amazing – Grauntie Mabel said there's no such thing as the supernatural, but according to this book, Gravity Falls has a secret dark side.”
“Whoa, shut up!”

“And get this! After a certain point, the pages just – stop, like the guy who was writing it mysteriously disappeared!” He held up the blank pages to show his brother.

“Do you think he was eaten by one of those monsters?” Stan asked.

“Hey – maybe!” Ford said. He hadn't thought of that. “But he hid it first, so I don't think he got eaten. Plus, the author says he was being watched, so I don't think it was a random monster.” He started pacing as he talked. “If he knew he was being watched, did he take steps to protect himself? Is the author still around somewhere? Could he be someone in town? There are some coded parts of the journal in here. I bet if I could crack them, I could figure out what happened, maybe who the author really is!”

Stanley grinned at him. “If anybody can do it, it's you! You're the smartest guy I know!”

Ding dong.

Ford looked up. “Who's that?”

His brother grinned. “Welp, time to spill the beans!” He reached over and flicked an empty can of beans sitting on Mabel's stack of romance novels. The can tipped over. “Haha, beans. This guy's got a date with destiny!”

Ford raised his eyebrows. “Let me get this straight. In the thirty minutes I've been gone, you've already managed to find a girlfriend?”

“Well, not exactly.” Stan ran off to answer the door. Ford hopped up on the chair and sat down to read.

Grauntie Mabel walked in. “What'cha readin' there, kiddo?” she asked.

He jumped. “Oh – uh, uh –” Ford hid the book behind him and grabbed a novel from the stack. “Just reading, um... Wolf Man, Big Chest?”

“That's a good series,” she commented, taking a swig of Pit Cola.

“Alright, family!” Stan announced, marching proudly into the room. “Say hello to my new buddy, Norman!”

A slouching, black-hoodied teenager shuffled into the room. He wore dark pants and a black hoodie, all covered with bits of dirt and grass, with an actual tree root sticking out of his hood. When he turned to greet them, his face was paper-white, and his eyes were round and bloodshot.

He looked at them. “’Sup.”

“Hey,” Ford said, just as Mabel said, “Hi there!”

“We met at the cemetery,” Stan said. “He hangs out there all the time. Isn't that cool?”

“Um, are you bleeding, Norman?” Ford asked, pointing to something red and drippy on Norman's chin.

Norman's eyes darted nervously. “It's jam,” he rasped.

“Anyway, we're going treasure-hunting!” Stan declared. “You wanna come, Ford?”
The journal pressed into Ford's back. “Um...maybe later,” he said.

“Aw, come on! We were gonna go hunt for treasure! You know you're gonna love it.”

“No thanks,” Ford said, a little more firmly. “I've got...summer reading to do.”

“Oh...” Stan looked dubiously to the book's hiding place. “Fine. Come on, Norman!” he yelled, racing for the door. “Last one out's a rotten egg!”

Norman raised a hand in farewell, walked into a wall, and stumbled after Stan.

Ford got up from the chair, hiding the journal in his jacket, and went to the window. He frowned, watching them leave. “Did Norman seem...normal, to you?” he asked Grauntie Mabel. But he wasn't really expecting an answer. She'd already started rereading that lame romance novel.

He touched the journal, thinking hard. If there was something supernatural about Norman, maybe it could give him some clues.

Half of the upstairs attic was taken up by his and Stan's bedroom. The other half was empty, utterly devoid of furniture with the exception of a single bay window, with stained red glass decorated with a triangular design. Ford sat on the cushioned seat, scooting close to the window to make the most of the light.

He flipped through the book until he found something that caught his eye. It was a hunched figure with its limbs held out stiffly, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Norman.

He started to read. “'Known for their pale skin and bad attitude, these monsters are commonly mistaken for teenagers. Beware of Gravity Falls' notorious —“ he gasped. “ZOMBIE?!”

Grauntie Mabel looked up from the bathroom mirror.

“What was that? 'Crombie'?” she wondered. “No, maybe it was chompy. Or maybe hungry. Hey, I should finish off that Chicken-Glitter Casserole!”

Ford jumped up to a kneeling position and pressed against the glass. There! Stanley was sitting on the picnic table, concentrating on a piece of paper spread out before him. Norman was stalking towards him, arms outstretched, grunting with every step. Stanley was so focused that he was utterly oblivious to the danger.

“Oh no – Stanley!” Ford shouted, but his brother couldn't hear him.

Norman came closer. He loomed over Stanley.

He grabbed him —

Ford yelled —

And Norman pulled back, a miner's helmet on Stan's head. Stanley turned around, grinning and feeling his new hat.
“Is this a real miner's helmet?!” he asked, reaching up to flick the light. It blinked on and off, visible even in the bright sunshine. “Wow! Where did you get this? It's so cool!”

Ford slumped with relief, watching for a few seconds longer as the two of them started pointing to stuff on the paper. From here, it looked like it was some kind of map.

He drew back, shutting the book and sticking it under his arm. For all he knew, the teen was just another emo teenager. But he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. He held the journal more tightly.

“Is Norman really a zombie,” he muttered, “or am I just going nuts?”

“It's a dilemma, to be sure.”

Ford jumped and spun around. Ria was on a step stool, changing the bulb in the attic's ceiling lamp. Ford hadn't even heard her come in.

He hesitated, but he needed to think this through with someone. “Ria, you've seen Norman, right?” he asked. “He's gotta be a zombie!”

“Hmm. How many brains have you seen him eat?” she asked politely.

He sighed. “Zero.”

She stepped off the stool, wiping the dust from her hands. “Don't fret, chiquito. I do believe you. There are many strange things that happen in this town. The florist, for example. I am almost certain that he is a satyr.”

Ford knew who she was talking about. The florist's shoes made weird clopping noises, he always wore a hat even indoors, and he had flower petals everywhere – even between his teeth.

“But you must have evidence,” Ria continued. “Otherwise, people will simply believe that you are one piece shy of a chess set.”

“I guess you're right,” Ford conceded.

She nodded sagely. “Wisdom is both a blessing and a curse.”

Grauntie Mabel's voice called up to them. “Ria! The portable toilets are clogged again!”

Ria straightened her hat. “I must get the special vacuum.” She held the step stool like a shield and marched out of the room.

Ford looked after her, thinking hard. Ria was right. He'd need some actual proof that Norman was a zombie...hadn't he seen a camera left in the Lost 'N' Found box in the Gift Shop? Grauntie Mabel always waited until the end of the day, then emptied the box, stuck price tags on everything, and resold it as “haunted merchandise”. He could borrow the camera and return it later for her to sell. If he followed Norman around, he'd be able to film actual proof that Norman really was a zombie.

A slow smile spread over his face. He'd be a hero – he could protect his brother, prove the existence of the supernatural to his great-aunt, maybe even get an article published in the newspaper. This was definitely a good plan.

It was time to collect some evidence!
“Here, let's take this one, too,” Stanley said. He and Norman had gone straight to the closest hardware store and begun stocking up on supplies, using Norman's zipped-up jacket as their shopping cart. He shoved a second flashlight down Norman's collar and stood back to admire the effect. With all the stuff they'd packed in, the jacket bulged in unlikely places, but they could just say he'd broken both arms or something. “Perfect,” he decided. “Man, how do you fit all that stuff in there?”

Norman eyed the next item doubtfully. Stanley was holding a shovel almost as tall as himself – three and a half feet long with a wide, pointy steel blade. “Uh, I don't know about the shovel...”

“Well I'm not paying for a perfectly stealable shovel. Are you?” Stanley twirled it like a baton. “Won't we need two of these?”

Norman grunted. “You dig it up, you get 80% of the gold.”

“Well hot dog! You got yourself a deal!” Stanley practically danced with glee – then remembered not to do that. Ford was the only one who didn't laugh when he danced.

Thinking of Ford made his chest twinge. If his brother hadn't found that stupid book with its stupid mysteries, maybe they'd be doing this together...

He gave himself a good mental shake. So what? He and Norman would dig up the gold using the treasure map they'd found, and they'd get filthy rich and Ford would be incredibly jealous, and then Stan could use the gold to buy all the fancy monster-hunting equipment Ford wanted and they'd go exploring the forest together for the rest of their natural lives. In a limo. In two limos!

“C'mon, c'mon, let's get out of here!” Stanley whispered excitedly. “We got some gold to find!”

They picked the lock on the Emergency Exit door and snuck out. Norman insisted they pick up provisions at “the place with ingredients for pie”, which Stan guessed meant the grocery store. But first they decided to dump their equipment at the cemetery. There was a tombstone with a winged angel pointing at something, and her wings were big enough to hide their stuff behind.

Stan threw the shovel in the dirt like a harpoon. A pile of blankets was already stacked there, plus a wagon loaded with a pickaxe and a coil of rope from their previous tool heist.

“Dude, you're like, an expert at this,” Stan said. “By the end of the day, we're gonna be filthy ri–”

“WAGH!”

Stan turned right as Norman did a face-plant in an open grave, spraying him with dirt and gravel. After a second, Norman crawled his way to the surface. Stan burst out laughing.

“Oh, man, that was hilarious!” he gasped, bent double from laughing so hard.

Norman laughed along with him. Stan knelt by the edge of the grave. “Dude, you are covered in dirt. You look like a zombie! Wait – it's like a zombie swimming pool! Swim through the dirt!” He started chanting. “Swim through the dirt! Swim through the dirt!”

Norman grunted and tried to pull himself out. Tools fell out of his jacket and pants. Stan looked down at the grave in dismay.

“Aw, man, you dumped it all.”

Norman handed him the shovel. “Here. Practice.”
“Uh, you're the one who dumped it.”

“I'm...like...not crawling back into an open grave.”

Stan scoffed. “Chicken.” He jumped in feet-first. The dirt was all soft on top, soft enough to move with his hands, so digging was no problem. He brought up their flashlights, thermoses, and a waterproof watch before he noticed Norman watching him. There was a hungry kind of look in his eyes.

“Um...dude. You're freaking me out.”

“Sorry. You're really good at digging.”

“Whatever. Get the stuff and pull me out, would you?”

Norman put a hand down, but when Stan went to grab it, he somehow lost his grip and went tumbling back in the grave. He banged the shovel on his knee.

“Ow!”

“You okay?”

“Ugh...” Stan rubbed the back of his head. “I swear I'm gonna have, like, three concussions and amnesia by the time this summer's over. Get a better grip this time, okay?”

Norman helped him out of the grave and they piled all their stuff in the wagon. By that point, they both looked so filthy that Stan knew they'd never make it in and out of the grocery store without getting caught. You had to look nice and respectable for people's eyes to glaze over you, and somehow grave dirt just wasn't the fashion style of the season.

Fashion style? Ew! Grauntie Mae's rubbing off on me. Definitely time for some manly gold-digging.

Aaand that sounded wrong.

“Let's just get back to the Shack,” Stan said angrily, scowling at the wagon. “You pull, I'll push. We can just grab some stuff from the kitchen and fill up our thermoses there.”

Ford paced the living room angrily, the camera in his hands, disgusted with the wasted day. He'd followed Stan around for the past five hours, and while he'd gotten plenty of evidence of Stan's sticky fingers, there was absolutely nothing to suggest that Norman was anything other than a very awkward teenager.

He heard Stanley slam the back door. It was easy to tell who it was, since he grumbled under his breath the whole way up the stairs. Ford headed up as well and entered their bedroom just as Stanley was putting on a fresh shirt.

“Stanley!” Ford said. “We've gotta talk about Norman.”

“Isn't he the coolest?” Stan asked. He held up his right forearm and pointed. “Check out this neat scar I got!”

“Gah!” Ford stared, alarmed. The scar was at least a foot long and bright pink, the skin around it mottled and purple.
“Haha! Gullible.” Stanley put his arm down and rubbed it. “It's just some paint, see? We painted the wagon we're using. I called it 'The Stanleymobile!'”

Right. Ford had seen Stan and Norman outside earlier, messing around with paint and a rickety-looking wagon. They'd tried to use a leaf blower to make it dry faster and ended up having a sword fight with the blower and a shovel.

Stanley smiled. “That was fun, Sixer, you shoulda joined us!”

Ford shook his head. “No, Stanley, listen – I'm trying to tell you that Norman is not what he seems!” He pulled out the journal, its gold-leaf pine tree glinting ominously.

Stan thought for a second. “Do you think he could be a werewolf? That would be so awesome!”

“Guess again, Stanley,” Ford said, and flipped quickly through the pages. He held it up dramatically. “Sha-BAM!”

Stan yelled in surprise, then frowned. “Wait, what?”

Ford checked the page. “Oh, oh wait, hang on –” He had flipped it to that page about gnomes, all chubby-cheeked and starry-eyed. He turned the pages back until he found the one on zombies. “Okay, sha-BAM!”

Stan was not impressed. “A zombie? That is not funny, Ford.”

“I'm not joking!” Ford started to pace the room. Why didn't anyone believe him? Not Grauntie Mabel, and now not Stan?! He knew what he was talking about! “Look, it all adds up – the bleeding, the limp... He never blinks! Have you noticed that?”

“Maybe he's blinking when you're blinking,” Stanley said.

“Stanley, remember what the book said?” Ford whispered urgently. “‘Trust no one!’”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Well what about me, huh? Why can't you trust me?”

Ford grabbed his brother by the shoulders. “Stanley, he's gonna eat your brain!”

Stanley frowned and pushed his hands away. “Stanford, listen to me. You can join us or not, but Norman and I are going treasure-hunting at five o’clock.” He started marching toward Stanford, who was forced to back up a step at a time. “And we're gonna find an awesome pile of gold,” Stan continued, “and we're gonna spend it however we want, and I'm not gonna let you ruin it with your crazy conspiracies!”

Stan slammed the bedroom door in Ford's face.

Ford sighed and slid to the floor, sitting against the door. “Oh man...what am I gonna do?”

Eventually he pulled himself to his feet and dragged himself downstairs, where he flopped on the yellow armchair. He pulled out the video camera and flipped open the viewing screen, glumly rewinding and fast-forwarding various moments of the day. There wasn't even a shred of proof...

The doorbell rang.

“Coming!” Stan yelled.

Ford glanced over the arm of the chair. He had a pretty good view of the front door. Norman was
standing in the entrance, as pale and creepy as ever.

Stanley ran to the door, wearing clean(ish) clothes and his miner's helmet. “How do I look?” Stan asked, adjusting the hat. “Do I look like a real treasure-hunter?”

“Cool,” Norman grunted.

“The map's on the picnic table. Let's grab it and get hunting!” He grabbed Norman's sleeve and yanked him outside. Ford kept watching as they grabbed a wagon loaded with food and tools and started lugging it into the forest.

Ford turned away from the door with a groan. “Ugh, maybe Ria was right. I don't have any real evidence...” He watched a brief clip of Stan teaching Norman how to play cards while they ate stolen candy bars. He thumbed the fast-forward button absently. It reached the part where he'd been spying on the two of them in the cemetery. Ford watched as Norman fell into the grave, then climbed out. Totally creepy, but nothing supernatural about it at all. He sank a little lower in the chair. “I guess I can be kind of paranoid sometimes and...”

On the screen, Norman try to pull Stan out of the grave. Norman pulled and his hand popped off just as Stan slipped, falling back into –

“Wait. WHAT!?!”

He rewound it again, watching closely. Just as Norman started to pull Stan out of the grave, Norman's hand fell off his wrist! Norman quickly popped it back on when Stan wasn't looking!

Ford yelled in triumph and actually knocked over the chair.

“I was right!” he shouted, scrambling to climb over the seat. “I was right, I knew it, I was –” He stopped short. His brother was out there right now, in a creepy forest with a zombie who wanted to eat his brains!

“Omigosh, omigosh!” He darted for the door. He had to get help! “Grauntie Mabel, Grauntie Mabel!”

He sprinted around the Shack. His great-aunt was giving a tour to some sweaty-looking tourists. She led them to a rather large rock set atop a thick pole, sitting in front of the Shack.


One of the tourists raised his hand. “Does it look like a rock?” he asked, his accent twanging.

“What?” Mabel frowned at him. “No, it looks like a face.”

“Is it a face?” asked another tourist.

“It's a rock that looks like a face.”

Ford rushed up and tried to get around them, but there was no room. He jumped up and down, waving his arms from the back of the crowd. “Over here! Grauntie Mabel!”

She was too engrossed in her argument with the tourists. “For the fifth time, it's not an actual face!”

Ford ground his teeth in frustration.
Stan wiped the sweat from his forehead, leaving a long streak of black dirt on his face. The hole he'd dug was five feet wide and just as deep, with one side of it slanted so he could go up and down like a ramp. The sun was slowly going down, so half of the hole got some good shade, but the other half was right in the sun's path. Every time he stood on that side he got blinded. Sweat rolled down his face and back, making his shirt stick to him like the wrapper on a pastrami sandwich.

“This is taking forever!” Stan complained. He glared up at Norman. “Why aren't you helping more?”

Norman knelt at the side of the hole and handed him a water bottle. “I am helping. Besides, you're almost there.”

“Where, the center of the earth?” Stan threw down the water bottle and stabbed at the ground with the shovel. “Come on! I've been digging solo this whole time, and there's nothing even here –”

TWANG.

The shovel bounced back in Stan's hand. They both stared at the ground.

Stan's eyes went wide. “Is that...?”

“Grauntie Mabel, Grauntie Mabel!” Ford shouted, but he still couldn't get her attention and he knew time had to be running out!

A sudden movement caught his eye. Boyish Dan was parking the golf cart next to the “Pet the Pig” sign.

“Boyish Dan!” Ford ran over to him. “Dan, I need to borrow the golf cart so I can save my brother from a zombie!”

Dan squinted at him. Then he shrugged and dropped the keys into Ford's hand. “Don't hit pedestrians!” he barked, stalking toward the Gift Shop. Ford smiled with relief. Dan was pretty cool.

He hopped in the cart. It was almost exactly like that bumper car he'd ridden at the fair when he was six. He turned the key, shifted the gear stick, and hit the gas, heading straight for the forest.

“Chiquito, it's me, Ria.”

Ford hit the breaks. What was Ria doing just standing in the middle of the lawn?

“This is in case you see a zombie,” Ria said, handing him a large shovel.

“Thanks.” He stowed it in the back seat of the cart.

“And this is in case you see a pinata.” She handed him a baseball bat.

“Uh...thanks?” He put it by the shovel and hit the gas.

“Better safe than sorry!” she called cheerfully, as he zoomed towards the forest.

“Oh, man, I've never seen this much gold in my life!” Stan laughed. He'd dumped the treasure chest
out on the bottom of the hole and was digging through the pile of gold coins, running them through his fingers. They glittered in the orange light of the setting sun. He grabbed two fistfuls and threw them up in the air, yelling with delight until they fell back down and pummeled him on the head.

“Ow!”

“This is amazing!” Norman said. “I can't believe you dug this up all by yourself!”

“I know, right!” Stan paused, squinting up at Norman. “Yeah, I did do all the work myself. You know, I'm thinking we may need to renegotiate our shares, here.”

“Oh, you can hang on to all of it.”

Stanley stared at him. “Huh?”

Norman seemed not to hear. “Man, look at this! And this was supposed to be one of the harder ones to dig up, too. You did it in an hour flat!”

“...Yeah...” Stan looked from the gold to Norman and back again. Norman really wasn't making any kind of grab for it. He'd just said Stan could have it all, just like that. Something was definitely fishy here. Was it possible Norman had tricked him?

He picked up an old-looking coin. It was worn smooth on one side, but the other side had some kind of sketchy engraving he couldn't quite make out. He knew better than to bite it – if it really was gold, he would dent the metal and decrease the coin's value. He weighed it in his palm. He'd gotten pretty good at that while working at the family pawn shop, and this felt like real gold.

So why would Norman just...?

He looked up. A bunch of foot-high men in bright red caps were standing exactly where Norman had been.

Stan shrieked and fell back on his butt.

“Relax, kid, wouldja?” one of the short guys said impatiently.

It was Norman! Or at least Norman's face and voice.

“You – you –” Stan sputtered.

“Right, right, I'll explain.” Norman brushed the hair out of his eyes and smacked one hand with the other. “So! We're gnomes! Got that one out of the way.” He nodded at the other gnomes, all of whom were standing on stilts or carrying fake plastic arms. “I'm Jeff,” he said, “And that's Carson, Steve, Jason, and...I'm sorry, I always forget your name.”

The last gnome, who looked like a wild-eyed Santa Claus, blinked slowly. “Schmebulock,” he said, with a voice like a bunch of falling gravel.

Jeff snapped his fingers. “Right! Schmebulock! Yes! Anyway...” He turned back to Stan.

Stanley blinked rapidly, trying to put it all together. If that was Norman's face...then...Norman had really been a bunch of gnomes the whole time?!

“I still keep the gold,” Stan said flatly. “You said I could, and I did all the digging, and you didn't even pay for the stuff we stole, so –”

“Relax, kid, you can have all that and more!”
Stan blinked again, stunned. “There's more?”

“Sure!” Jeff pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and waved it around. “Us gnomes got into a fight with a giant hellhound a while ago, and long story short, it buried all our treasure. We've got whole boxes of the stuff buried all over the forest!”

Stan's eyes gleamed. “More gold, huh? You don't say.”

“Yep! But we're not exactly cut out to be diggers, and any tools we steal are definitely not gnome-sized. That's why us gnomes have been looking for a new servant!”

“Say what now?”

“Well, more like slave-labor, really. But it's a great deal!” Jeff nodded enthusiastically. “We offer full medical and dental coverage, plus all the pie we can steal. All you have to do is dig up all of our gold and guard it for the rest of eternity!”

“Are you crazy?” Stan demanded. “I get enough of that child labor stuff from Grauntie Mabel. You're lucky I don't sue your red-capped butts right now! I'm takin' my gold and I'm outta here.”

“We understand.” Jeff and his gnome friends glanced at each other. “Well, Stan...we tried it the easy way.”

Stan backed up. “Huh?”

All five gnomes bared teeth as sharp as a shark's. Stan yelled and threw up his arms as they jumped into the hole, their beady eyes glittering with greed.

“Don't worry, Stanley!” Ford shouted, his foot pressed to the gas. “I'll save you from that zombie!” Luckily, he'd seen the map they'd been using from the window of the attic. He had a pretty good memory. He knew he was to be close to wherever Stan and that zombie were trying to go.

Suddenly Stan's voice echoed through the trees to Ford's left. “Help!” he cried.

“Hold on!” Ford veered off the trail and drove into the trees, heading deeper and deeper into the shadows. The farther he went, the more he noticed an odd bluish light that seemed to come from the forest around him, tinting the foliage mint-green and aqua. The pine-needle carpet was swiftly replaced with odd blue mosses dotted with pink flowers and the occasional clump of mushrooms. There was an off-road path through the trees wide enough for the golf cart, and Ford pressed the accelerator, listening for his brother.

There was a clearing of sorts up ahead. A bunch of tiny red-capped creatures were swarming around a pile of gold. To the left, the rest of the creatures were clustered around Stanley, who was trying to fight them off, throwing punches left and right.

“The more you struggle, the more awkward this is gonna be for everybody!” warned one of the tiny creatures. “Okay, just – get his arm, there, Steve!”

A creature jumped up and tried bite Stan's arm. “Gah! HEY! Let go of me!” he shouted angrily. Another one attacked his midriff and he caught it mid-air with a strong left hook. The thing flew four feet, bounced twice, and landed on its feet next to a tree. It immediately vomited a viscous multicolored bile.
Ford hopped out of the cart and stared. “What the heck is going on here?!”

One of the creatures – men, they looked like little men – scuttled passed and hissed at him. Ford flinched back, dropping the shovel.

“Sixer!” Stanley called. “Norman turned out to be a bunch of gnomes! And they're total jerks!”

Three gnomes stacked themselves up and grabbed Stanley by the hair, swinging from it like monkeys. He yelped and went down.

“Gnomes?” Ford repeated, pulling out the journal. He flipped to the right page – ironically, the same page he’d accidentally shown his brother earlier. The same chubby-cheeked, starry-eyed drawing stared up at him. It was adorable in a creepy, infest-your-grandma’s-lawn kind of way. “’Gnomes,’” he read aloud, “’Little men of the Gravity Falls forest. Weaknesses: Unknown.’”

Well that was unhelpful, Ford thought. When he glanced up, the gnomes had tied Stanley to the ground with a bunch of string, like a miniature Gulliver.

“Oh, come on!” Stanley shouted.

“Hey, hey!” Ford marched up to the lead gnome, shovel in hand. “Let go of my brother!”

“Oh, hehe, hey there!” The gnome smiled a little too stiffly. “You know, this is all just a big misunderstanding! Y’see, your brother’s not in danger. He’s just enslaved to all one thousand of us to become our gold miner for all eternity! Isn't that right, Stan-O?”

“You guys are butt faces!” Stan shouted. A gnome slapped his hands over Stan's mouth.

“Let go of him right now, or else!” Ford threatened.

Jeff glared at him, his face growing darker by the minute. “You think you can stop us, boy? You have no idea what we're capable of. The gnomes are a powerful race! Do not trifle with the –”

Ford scooped him up with the shovel and dumped him to the side.

He yelped indignantly. Ford ignored him and headed straight for Stan, lifting the shovel high and bringing the edge of it down on the strings. Stan jumped up and lashed out at the gnomes, knocking them down and giving them enough time to get away. He stopped to pick something up and Ford grabbed his arm, pulling him towards the golf cart.

“Forget it, Stan, just go!” Ford said.

“He's getting away with our servant!” Jeff yelled. “No, no, no!”

They scrambled into the golf cart. “Seat belt!” Ford barked.

“Mama's boy!” Stan barked back, but he put on the belt and Ford threw it in reverse.

Jeff watched them go, a dark fire burning in his eyes. “You messed with the wrong creatures, boy,” he growled. “Gnomes of the forest, ASSEMBLE!”

Instantly, gnome faces popped out from every nook and crevice in the clearing, crawling from the shadows, literally popping out of the woodwork in the trees. They scuttled towards him, linking arms, climbing onto each other's shoulders, as their collective shadow grew and spread over the ground...
Stan gripped the seat so hard his fingertips went numb. “Hurry, hurry, before they come after us!”

Ford grinned at him. “I wouldn't worry about it. Did you see those little legs? Those suckers are tiny!”

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Ford braked as the whole ground shuddered under their wheels. A shadow fell over the cart and they turned.

Stan gaped. “Dang.”

A thirty-foot conglomeration of gnomes loomed over them, with fingers as thick as telephone poles, arms and legs as thick as train cars, and a huge, sharp-toothed face that came to a hat-shaped point.

Jeff sat at the very top of the point. “Alright, guys, like we practiced!” he called, and yanked a gnome's hat. The giant roared and lifted a huge fist.

“Go go go!” Stan yelled. Ford floored it just in time, and the fist hit the ground where they'd been just a split-second earlier. The fist smashed apart into a pile of angry gnomes. Stanley grabbed the seat for balance and watched, still looking back, as the gnomes quickly regrouped and thundered after them.

“Stanley what's happening?” Ford shouted.

“COME BACK WITH OUR SERVANT!” Jeff howled, his black eyes madder than ever. The gnome giant ran with incredible speed, closing the gap between them in a matter of seconds.

Stan blanched. “Hit the gas hit the gas!”

The giant whipped its arm at them and several razor-toothed gnomes snapped off its fingers and went flying straight for the cart.

Stan grabbed a bat from the back seat. “We got incoming!”

He unbuckled and stood in one smooth motion, hitting the first gnome in the gut with a perfect swing. It went flying into the trees.

“Home run, suckah!”

“Stanley!”

He turned. His brother was fighting off the rest – they were tearing through the cloth roof and climbing down the sides of the cart, shredding whatever they could reach with their teeth. Stanley grinned and wielded the bat like a spear, punching the stupid gnomes flat in the face with the blunt end. One of them tried to bite the bat and Stan smashed the end of it against the hood of the cart, squishing the gnome, which let go and bounced off into the road.

Another gnome swung down from the roof right next to Ford. He yelled, but before Stan could get to it Ford grabbed it by the back of its stupid little jacket and banged it several times against the steering wheel.

“Schmebulock,” groaned the gnome.
Ford smashed it one more time and let it go, and it rebounded off the cart and went tumbling in their dust.

Stan grinned at him. “Way to go, Fo–”

“SCREEEEE!”

A gnome came flying out of nowhere and landed right on Ford's face, squeezing Ford's ears in its vice-like grip.

“I'll save you Ford!!” Stan dropped the bat and pummeled the gnome with both fists until he dislodged it with a killer left hook.

“Th-thanks, Stanley,” Ford stammered, swaying slightly and blinking several times.

“Don't mention it.” Stanley had been standing on the seat, but now he crouched down and peered out the back of the cart.

The gnome giant had been gaining all the time, but now it paused and grabbed the nearest tree. It was a redwood at least four stories tall, looked like it had been growing for over a century – and the giant just grabbed it and pulled it up like it was picking daisies! It took aim and threw the tree like a javelin.

“WATCH OUT!” Stan shouted.

Ford glanced back over his shoulder and the two of them yelled with fear as the tree sailed towards them – and then over them. It landed with an incredible BANG in the middle of the path ahead, completely blocking the road.

Stanley threw up his arms as Ford swerved, desperately trying to avoid the tree, screaming as it loomed closer and closer.

The tree had landed with one end propped up on a boulder, with just the smallest gap between the tree and the ground. Ford yanked the wheel hard to the right and the cart skidded under the tree, scraping off bits of bark with the roof of the cart. Ford lost control and the cart started tipping, zooming down the road on just its two right wheels. Stan grabbed the seat – he couldn't reach for the seatbelt or he'd fall out – and Ford pumped the brakes and the gas, trying to regain control. The cart fishtailed, skidding over the road, and finally tipped over, sliding the last ten feet to the Shack.

It took a full minute for Stanley to realize they weren't moving. His head was pounding and the ground spun underneath him. He pulled himself, groaning, from the wreckage of the cart. He glanced over to see his brother standing up shakily, grabbing the bent metal poles of the cart for balance.

The giant gnome stomped towards them, its huge shadow swallowing them up. At its top, Jeff's eyes glittered maliciously. The boys backed up until they were pressed against the wall of the Shack.

“Oh, stay back, gnomes!” Ford yelled shakily. He grabbed the shovel from the back of the cart and threw it.

The giant hit it in mid-air and punched it to the ground.

“AGH!” Ford and Stan jumped.

Inside the Gift Shop, Mabel Pines was demonstrating the newest merchandise to a trio of slack-jawed visitors.

“Behold!” she declared, holding up a toy that looked like a plastic lollipop. It had a swirl pattern decorating the candy part and a string dangling from one side. “The world's most distracting object!”

She pulled the string and the swirl began to turn.

“Ooooh,” the tourists said in unison.

Mabel grinned. “Just try to look away, you can't!” They all stared at the toy, including Mabel. “...Wow, I can't even remember what I was talking about.”

Stan and Ford were trapped between the trash cans and some bushes at the side of the Shack. There was nowhere for them to run, and nothing they could use as a weapon. Stan stood partly in front of his brother, one arm thrown out to protect him. How the heck was he supposed to get them out of this?

“It's the end of the line, kids!” Jeff yelled, looming over them. “Stanley, get over here before we do something crazy!”

“There's gotta be a way outta this,” Ford whispered. He slid the journal partway out of his jacket.

Stan set his jaw. “I gotta do it.”

“What?” Ford grabbed Stan's shoulder. “Stanley, don't do this, are you crazy?”

“Trust me.”

“What?”

“Sixer, just this once.” He turned to look his brother in the eye. “Trust me.”

Ford looked from the monster to Stan and back again. He slowly released Stan's shoulder and backed up.

Stan strode forward. “Alright, Jeff,” he said loudly. “I'll sign your contract.”

Jeff frowned at him. “Contract?”

“Well sure. This is like, a legal agreement, right? I'm going to work for you for eternity and all. Any good boss knows we need a contract to make it legally binding, so I can't run away.”

Jeff rubbed his chin, considering. “I like the way you think, kid!” he said finally. He clapped his hands and started climbing down the giant. “Help me down there, Jason, thanks Andy, whoops – hey Jorge – whoa, watch those fingers, Mike.” He reached the bottom and headed for Stanley, practically strutting, while the gnome-giant stood silently behind him. Stan was thinking furiously, but it looked like he was right – the other gnomes were all staring at Jeff like they didn't know what to do without him. That's what he was counting on.

“Alright kid, where's the contract?”
“You're in luck! We can use the map we left behind earlier,” Stan said. He reached behind the trash cans. “I've got the map and a pen right here…”

He whipped out the leaf blower and switched it on in reverse. Immediately the suction began drawing Jeff towards the blower.

“I-h-hey, what's going on?!” Jeff tried to back up but slipped on the grass. He grabbed for the ground with his fingers, but the wind was too strong. It yanked him up and he was sucked straight down the pipe. The other gnomes gasped.

“That's for lying to me!” Stan shouted.

He cranked the suction to full. Jeff's body got sucked in until only his cheeks bulged over the rim.

“Ow, my face!”

“That's for taking my gold!”

Stan aimed the blower at the giant gnome monster. It grunted in surprise.

“And this is for messing with my brother!” He glanced at Ford and grinned. “Care to do the honors?”

Ford smiled back. “On three!”

“One!”

“Two!”

“Three!”

Ford flipped the switch to 'blow'. Jeff shot out of the blower like a high-powered rocket. He crashed straight through the giant's chest and out its back.

“I'll get you back for thiiiiis!” he howled, flying at high speed over the treetops and out of sight.

The impact shattered the giant gnome to bits. They broke apart, gnomes falling around them like very ugly confetti. In seconds the lawn was covered with battered gnomes. Their red hats were bent and grass stuck to their sweaty hands and faces. They blinked and looked around blearily, groaning and rubbing their arms and shoulders.

“Ugh…”

“My arms are tired,” one mumbled.

“Who's giving orders?” whined another gnome. “I need orders!”

Stanley shoved the blower at Ford and grabbed his bat. “Anybody else want a piece of this?!” he demanded, swinging the bat like a golf club. He smacked quite a few gnomes on the butt. Ford joined in on the fun, cranking the blower to maximum.

“Yeah, come on!” Ford shouted, laughing.

The gnomes squealed and fled, most of them scampering on all fours into the forest. The twins ran after them, whooping and hollering like maniacs. Even Waddles got in on the action, showing up just in time to drag the last gnome off by its hat.
Ford headed back to the house to replace the leaf blower.

Stan bit his lip. “Hey, Ford.”

His brother turned. Stan shouldered his bat and shoved his free hand into his pocket. “Um. Sorry for getting on your case earlier. I know you were just looking out for me.”

“Come on, don't be like that!” Ford said, smiling. “Did you see what a great team we made? That was awesome!”

Stan grinned a little. “Yeah...hey, wanna see something?” He brought his hand out of his pocket. Resting on his palm was an old, misshapen, yet unmistakably gold coin.

“Whoa, neat-o!” Ford said, bending for a closer look. “You think it's real gold?”

“You bet! I bet you could do some science-y thing to check the weight, but it definitely looks real. The gnomes said there was a ton of it buried all around the forest, but they couldn't dig it up. That's why they wanted me in the first place.”

“You know, I bet we could find it on our own,” Ford mused. “We could get a metal detector or something and go exploring in the woods. We could even make maps like real explorers so we'd know where we'd already checked.”

Stan looked up hopefully. “You mean it? We'll go hunting together?”

“Sure! I bet we'll find a ton of treasure.”

Stanley's smile widened. He felt like fireworks were going off in his chest. “Alright! High six?”

Ford grinned back. “High six.”

They smacked hands.

Grauntie Mabel was counting the day's profits when they walked in. She took one look at them and laughed.

“Whoa, what happened to you?” she asked. “Didja get hit by a bus or something?” She chuckled at her own wit.

Stan grunted for the both of them and the trudged towards the kitchen. Normally he shared her love of terrible jokes, but at the moment he was too beat-up and tired to care. For once he would probably go to bed almost willingly.

“Uh – hey!”

He and Ford turned back. Their great-aunt was rubbing the back of her neck like she was anxious. “W-wouldn't you know it, I accidentally overstocked some inventory!” she said awkwardly. “So, uh, why don't the two of you take one item from the shop. On the house, you know?”

Stan's eyes widened. “Like, for free?”

“What's the catch?” Ford asked, folding his arms.

She frowned at him. “The catch is do it before I change my mind. Now take something.” She
smacked the register with her elbow and started organizing the bills.

Stan sped straight for the priciest items in the shop. A talking fish on a plaque? A stuffed frogadillo riding a unicycle? He could take whatever he wanted for free!

“Neat-o!” Ford said.

Stan looked over. His brother had found a keychain shaped like a flying saucer. Ford clicked a small button on the side and the whole thing lit up light blue, making the perfect paranormal-themed flashlight. He slipped a finger through the keychain's ring and spun it, making a circle of light shimmer in the air.

“This is so cool!” Ford turned to Stan. “What did you get, Stanley?”

Stan looked around. “Um...I think I'll get...”

Something caught his eye. A glint of metal from the Bargain Box, shoved to the back of a store. He leaned closer to check...and a smile spread over his face.

“I will have a...grappling hook!”

He aimed the weapon around the shop, pretending he was a fighter in the Ol' West. “Pew, pew, pew! Take that!”

Ford and Grauntie Mabel glanced at each other in surprise.

“Wouldn't you rather have, like, a T-shirt or something?” Grauntie Mabel asked.

“Are you kidding?” Stanley aimed at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. The hooks shot up, latched onto the roof beam, and yanked him ten feet in the air, where he dangled one-handedly from the ceiling. “GRAPPLING HOOK!” he shouted.

She laughed. “Fair enough!”

Ford sat in his bed later that evening, the blankets pulled over his knees as he wrote in the journal. He'd already filled in the “Weakness” areas of the gnome page: Leaf blowers and baseball bats!

He flipped to the first blank page, halfway through the book.

*This journal told me there was no one in Gravity Falls I could trust*, he wrote. *But when you battle a hundred gnomes side-by-side with someone, you realize they've probably always got your back.*

“Hey, Stan, can you get the lights?” he asked.

Stan had been bouncing energetically on his bed, grappling hook in hand.

“I'm on it!” he said. He'd already impaled a stuffed bear with it earlier, and its cotton innards clung to the hooks. He aimed at the lamp and fired.

The hook shot straight through the lamp and smashed the window behind it. The lamp sparked and died.

“It worked!” Stan shouted, and they laughed.
Ford slipped the journal under his pillow and laid back, his arms crossed under his head. He heard a rustling and knew that Stan had taken up an identical pose.

“This summer's gonna be awesome, Stan,” Ford said.

“Duh!” He could hear his brother's smile in his voice. “We're gonna find tons of buried treasure.”

“And monsters.”

“And babes!”

Ford threw a pillow at him. He heard a fwump and muffled laughter.

Ford closed his eyes, still smiling, thinking back to the last thing he wrote in the journal.

*Grauntie Mabel told me there's nothing weird going on in Gravity Falls, but who knows what other secrets are waiting to be unlocked?*
Stan had been lying awake for a full thirty minutes, waiting until the house was completely quiet. He knew Ford was awake. Stan could practically hear his brother's nerd-brain churning away over the day's events.

Stan had already shoved the gnomes in the part of his brain marked “fuhgeddaboutit”. After all, the little farts would probably leave them alone, since he and Ford had thoroughly whupped their butts.

The weirder part was the fact that the gnome giant had been right outside the Shack – and their gruntsie hadn't even noticed. It was like she was totally oblivious to all things cool or crazy...but if there was a chore undone she could zero in on it like a seagull on a hot dog. Then again, that was most adults, so maybe he was overthinking it.

He listened to the house creak and moan until he couldn't stand the quiet anymore. Then he flicked on the light. Sure enough, Ford was awake and staring at the ceiling, his legs crossed and arms behind his head.

“So whaddaya think?” Stan asked him. Ford always knew what he meant.

“About Mabel?” Ford asked, and scrunched up his nose. “She smells like formaldehyde.”

“What's that?”

“It's what they use in mummies to keep the flesh from rotting.”

Stan pondered this, sitting cross-legged on his bed. There were gnomes in the forest. Maybe werewolves. Why not mummies?

“Maybe she really is a mummy,” he said finally. “She did say her joints were all stiff. Bet she's like a zombie or something. A zombie-mummy. A zummy!”

Ford had taken out the journal while Stan was talking. “A zummy. That might actually be possible, given some of the crazy stuff in here.” He waved the journal. “Those gnomes were just the tip of the iceberg.”

Stan hopped off the bed and ambled over. “What's in there, anyway?” he asked, leaning over his brother to peer at the pages.

Ford tilted the book so Stan could see. “Vampire bats, cursed doors, scampfires...I don't even understand how some of this stuff exists, but now that we've verified the existence of the gnomes, bet you anything the rest of this is real, too.”

Stanley grinned. “They said there was way more gold in the forest. We should totally go treasure-hunting! You could look for more supernatural weirdness and I could get filthy stinkin' rich!”
Ford hesitated. “I dunno, Stan. Maybe that's not such a good ide–”

“All ideas are good ideas!”

“Shh!” Ford hissed, whacking him with the book.

They listened for a minute, perfectly still. But Stan's shout didn't seem to have roused Grauntie Zummy. The house continued its usual groaning.

“Anyway, there's some crazy stuff living in the forest,” Ford continued in a whisper. “Look – there's this thing in there, Steve, that eats cars!”

Stan snorted. “What kind of name is 'Steve'? Like I'm gonna take that seriously?”

“That's just a name to lull you into thinking he's safe and trustworthy,” Ford said solemnly. “And did you miss the part about eating cars?”

“So what?” Stan shrugged. “Ford. There is gold. In the forest. For free.” Stan pushed away from the bed and started pacing. “I mean, think what we could do with the stuff! We could move away from home. Buy our own house. With a pool. And babes! I'm talkin' bleach-blond beach bunnies, Ford. Beach bunnies. We'd never have to go to school again!”

Ford was starting to look interested. “We could buy our own laptops,” Ford suggested. “We could – we could build our own research labs! Or have our own ghost hunting show!”

“We could own cable. We could put our show on every channel!”

“The Ghostbusting Brothers!”

“The Ghothers!”

Ford laughed.

“Wait, wait, we need a real thinking place.” Stan scrambled to get to his suitcase and dragged it out from under his bed. He pulled out the string he’d “borrowed” from Dan's back pocket – some sort of fishing wire, probably. He tied one end to each of their beds while Ford pulled off their blankets. Ford threw them over the string and Stan weighted down the corners with their suitcases, the broken lamp, and the laundry basket. (It was empty, but still big enough to be heavy.) They crawled in, lying side by side on their stomachs.

Ford got out his trusty notebook. He started drawing up plans. “Okay, we gotta make a schedule for when to go treasure-hunting.”

“Easy – all the time, every day!”

“We have to be around some of the time. Otherwise Mabel will get suspicious.”

Yeah, right. Like she'd notice them treasure-hunting...then again, she'd definitely notice if they didn't do their chores. “Gotcha. Okay, from eleven in the morning until ten at night!”

“Why eleven?”

“It's summer, Poindexter,” Stan said, rolling his eyes. “I wanna sleep in.”

“Fair enough.” He wrote 11 A.M. – 10 P.M. “What about supplies?”
“I got some canteens from the hardware store when I was hanging out with Norman. We can use those for water.”

“What about food? We can't exactly raid the fridge,” Ford pointed out. “I'm not even sure what Mabel makes is edible.”

“Hmm...” Stan closed his eyes, thinking hard. “What about the vending machine in the Gift Shop? We could get candy bars and stuff from there.”

“With what money?”

“The money we'd make treasure-hunting!”

“We'd have to dig it up first.”

“Oh yeah...”

“We can work that out later.” Ford wrote Food and skipped three lines to leave space. “What about tools? Do you still have that shovel?”

Stan grimaced. “Sort of. We have it, but the giant gnome monster totally smashed the handle, and the blade's kind of bent. It would be way easier to get like, a jackhammer or something, to make digging faster.”

“I thought jackhammers were just for cement.”

“Well, what if it's buried under rocks or something?”

“Noted.” Jackhammer went on the list, just under New Shovels. “Hey! Why don't we get a metal detector, too? Two of 'em. Then we can just walk around to find the gold instead of digging up every square inch of dirt.”

Stanley grinned. “Awright! Where are we gonna get 'em? I didn't see any at the hardware store.”

“We could order it off the internet or something,” Ford said, chewing the end of his pen. He looked over the list. “Are we forgetting anything?”

Stan hooked his chin over his brother's shoulder. “Maybe another one of those miner's helmets. And a big wooden chest to put all our gold in.”

Ford smacked his forehead. “Of course! We need a wheelbarrow or something, a wagon maybe. We can't carry all this stuff around all day.” He scribbled furiously.

“How soon d'you think we'll find treasure?” Stan asked.

“I dunno. It depends on how much of it there is, and how far it is from the Mystery Shack. We might have to walk for days to get there. Plus we still have to get all this stuff. I don't even know how to pay for it.”

“I thought the internet gave you stuff for free?”

“No, you have to use a – wait, what about your gold coin?” Ford asked excitedly.

Stan blinked. “My coin?”

“Sure! We could sell it to get money and buy all the supplies and food we want! And we'd dig up
hundreds more coins, so you could replace it easily. What do you think?”

“Well...” Stan pulled the coin out of his pocket, holding it between his finger and his thumb. It caught the dim red light that filtered through the blanket, shining dully. He angled it, studying the ridges on the sides. He turned it over.

The coin had been worn smooth by time, but delicate lines of black dust had covered it and caught along the edges of the engraving. It was easy to see what it was. Ford gasped.

“Holy Moses! Stanley, this thing’s amazing! We've gotta sell it, we've gotta get the money to find more, who knows what else we'll find...”

Ford trailed off, but Stan didn't look at him, just kept staring at that stupid gold coin. Ford was right – he was always right – but he didn't want to let go of it. He remembered digging it up. And before that, wanting to be a treasure-hunter. And before that, listening to Ford read Treasure Island and The Odyssey. And there was the gold, right there, that he found, and dug up, and he had it, and as long as he had it...just a little, he was like those guys from the books.

“Stan,” Ford said.

“Mm. Yeah.”

Ford bumped Stanley's shoulder with his own. “Put it away, Stan. We don't have to sell it.”

Stan turned it back over. He was pretty sure he knew how badly Ford wanted to sell it. Plus, it really was their only way to get more money for supplies. “You sure?”

In answer, Ford knocked his head lightly against his brother's. Their bangs flattened and scratched lightly at their foreheads. Ford felt warm.

They stayed like that for a minute. Then Stanley put the coin back in his pocket.

“I could lift Mabel's credit card,” Stan offered, trying to make up for it. “Bet it wouldn't be too hard.”

“I dunno...what if she sends us back?”

“We'd have the gold. We could live in the forest if we wanted,” Stanley pointed out.

Ford tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Mayyyyybe. That can be our backup plan. We could ask Dan if there's a good way to get money. Or maybe we could rig the vending machine so that the coins went straight to the little dish at the bottom, but the dish wouldn't open, and then we could get it when they walked away.”

Stanley grinned. “Now that sounds more my style! You know how to rig it?”

“Well, no. But we could give it a try. It's like the same thing Mabel does with that penny machine out front – you stick in your money and get nothing back but bitter disappointment.”

Stanley laughed.

They stayed up late into the night, making plans and deciding the best way to spend their future wealth. It was near dawn when they finally fell asleep, and Mabel found them lying side by side in Fort Stan, their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, their heads bent together as if sharing the same dream.
Any thoughts on what they’re dreaming about?
Heeeeeere's Crazy Chu!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Are you ready for the ultimate challenge?”

“I'm always ready!”

Stan and Ford sat at the kitchen table, a massive sandwich in front of each of them. Ford's sandwich was layered with baloney, cheese, and tomato. Stan's sandwich was layered with pepperoni, pickles, cheese, jam, peanut butter, and a leftover slice of zucchini-and-orange bread. Both sandwiches were over six inches tall. Waddles the Pig sat close by, oinking to egg them on.

“Ready?” Ford picked up his sandwich.

Stan did the same, grinning. “And...GO!”

They chowed their food as fast as they could, spilling nearly half of it onto the floor. Waddles snarfed it with equal enthusiasm. It almost looked like Ford would win, so Stan quickly fed his sandwich to the pig and crammed the last slice of pepperoni into his mouth.

“Yes! I won!” he exclaimed, his mouth full. He choked and coughed as a slice of meat went down the wrong pipe.

Ford rolled his eyes and picked up the magazine he'd been reading before they'd made their sandwiches. It was the most recent copy of Wacky News, featuring stories of paranormal activity in the Oregon area. Ford liked trying to figure out which stories had been obviously faked and which ones were real.

He turned the page. “Whoa! Stanley, look at this!” He held it up.

Stan's eyes went straight to the neon advertisement. “Wow! A miniature 1965 El Diablo convertible!”

“Wha...?” Ford checked the page again. “No no, Stan – this!” He pointed to the previous page. The monthly “Monster Photo Contest” was coming up, and the prize for first place was $1,000.00. There was a picture of last month's winner, along with his entry – some kind of furry blob with horns, blank white eyes, and a forked tongue lolling out like a dog's. “We see weirder stuff than that every day!” Ford said. “We didn’t get any photos of those gnomes, did we?”

“Nope, just my lucky coin!” Stan said cheerfully, pulling it out of his pocket, along with a small clump of white fur. “Oh – and this beard hair!”

Stan held it out and Ford leaned back quickly. “Ew. Why would you save that?”

Stan shrugged.
Grauntie Mabel shuffled into the kitchen, stretching out her back with a grunt. “Good mornin’, knuckleheads!” she chirped, waving with a rolled-up newspaper. “You two know what day it is?”

“Um, Happy...Anniversary?” Ford guessed.

“Mazel tov!”

Mabel whacked Ford on the head. “It's Family Fun Day, genius!” She tossed the paper on the table and went to rummage in the fridge. She pulled out a pitcher of Mabel Juice. “I'm cuttin' off work to have one of those corny family bonding days!”

Ford winced. “Grauntie Mabel, is this going to be anything like our last Family Bonding Day?”

_Grauntie Mabel released the tomcat, a portrait of the town's mayor painted on its stomach. It flipped over, scratched her face, and sprinted to the opposite end of the attic. By now the room was literally swarming with angry alley cats, half of them with caricatures painted on their bellies. Ford and Stan stood back-to-back in the center of the room, surrounded by hissing balls of fur._

“C'mon, guys!” Grauntie Mabel called, her hair standing on end. One of the cats had clawed the top off her fez, and it dangled on a few strands of felt, making her look even crazier than usual. “These humanicaticatures aren't going to paint themselves!”

_Stan gave a war cry and leaped, body-slamming a large hissing calico. It squealed and dug its claws into Stan's head. Stan howled and started punching frantically as the cat turned his body into a massive scratching post._

Stan's expression turned grim. “That calico is now my sworn enemy,” he growled.

“Alright alright, maybe that could've gone better,” Grauntie conceded. “But I swear – today we're going to have some real family fun! Now who wants to put on some blindfolds and hop onto my motorbike?”

“Yay!” they cheered.

Ford did a double-take. “Wait, what?”

_The twins sat crammed in the sidecar of El Diablo, which was only slightly easier now that they didn't have luggage. But they still had to sit with their legs folded up. Ford gripped onto the side of the car as hard as he could, trying to see around his blindfold. He flinched as the bike turned sharply, throwing Stanley against him for the fifth time in a row._

Ford pushed him off. “Blindfolds never lead to anything good,” he muttered nervously.

“Whoa, I feel like all my other senses are heightened!” Stan said. “I can see with my fingers!” Ford felt Stan's hands tickling his face and laughed – before the bike hit a nasty bump in the road, jolting them sharply against the shared seatbelt. They grunted in unison.

“Um, Grauntie Mabel?” Ford called over the wind. “Are you wearing a blindfold?”

“Nope!” she said cheerfully. “But with these cataracts, I might as well be! What is that, a woodpecker?”

Suddenly there was a crunch and a shower of splintered wood over Ford's face and arms. All three
of them yelled as they plowed through a fence.

A harrowing fifteen minutes later, their great-aunt had parked the car and bodily lifted the twins from their seats. She insisted they leave the blindfolds on until she told them otherwise. Ford heard a lot of rustling and a couple of curse words Ford knew his brother had instantly committed to memory.

“Okay,” Mabel said at last. “Open ’em up!”

Ford peeled off his blindfold, and he and Stanley looked around.

“Oh, yay, a parking lot,” Stan said doubtfully. Grauntie Mabel had parked her bike in the handicapped spot of a small, overcrowded parking lot, thickly fenced with the usual towering redwoods.

Grauntie Mabel was standing in front of them. She'd changed out of her usual skirt and blazer into a lavender blouse and a pair of bedazzled jeans. A wide-brimmed sunhat shaded her eyes and a woven picnic basket hung on her arm.

She wagged her finger at Stanley. “This ain't the surprise, numbskull! We're gonna go hiking around Gravity Falls Lake!”

That got their attention.

“There's a lake?” Stan asked eagerly.

“Can we go swimming in it?” Ford pleaded. Their parents never let them play in the ocean back home, but the two of them had always loved the water.

Mabel grinned wider. “Sure, why not?” She started leading them to a narrow opening between the redwoods, where dozens of feet had worn a thin trail over the years. “Hurry up, midgets! The lake's this way – you're gonna love it! It's big and it's beautiful and it's...”

The trees parted, and the boys gasped.

The lake was huge, so big it actually had a few small islands in the middle, each with their own miniature forests of redwoods and shrub. There was even a totem pole on the tip of the biggest one. The far side of the lake was bordered by massive granite cliffs, so sheer that no trees could grow, cut only by the shining ribbon of a roaring waterfall. It foamed and thundered where it met the lake below, spreading a soft haze of mist across the far side of the lake, so the air shimmered with rainbows.

But there was something even better than the lake: the boats! The lake was loaded with people in boats of all shapes and sizes, from little wooden rowboats a luxury yacht the size of a three-story house. There were easily over three dozen people out on the lake, fishing and sailing and laughing like they'd just found heaven on earth.

Several more would-be fishermen were mingling on the beach on the near side of the lake. There was a bait shop set off to one side, and a huge canvas banner spread over the pier proudly announced the opening of –

“Fishing Season?” Grauntie Mabel looked around, surprised. “Already? The whole town's out here...”

“Wooow!” Ford and Stan breathed.
“Grauntie Mabel, you gotta let us fish!” Stanley begged. He put on his best puppy-dog eyes and even made them go all shiny with tears.

“But – we were gonna go hiking,” Mabel said, looking a little thrown. “I-I've never had any hiking buddies around here. This was gonna be our thing. I packed us sunscreen and a picnic and there’s this great trail that leads straight to –”

“At least let us swim or something!” Ford cut in, grabbing her sleeve. “This place is amazing!”

Mabel frowned slightly at the lake. “There's a lot of boats with motors out there. It's probably not a good idea to go swimming today...”

“Then fishing!” Stan repeated. “C'mon, Grauntie Mabel!”

“Mrs. Pines!”

The three of them turned. Boyish Dan was walking over to them from the gift shop, a keg of fish bait on either shoulder. A fishing pole stuck out of his back pocket and he wore a canvas hat studded with hooks.

“Boyish Dan!” Ford and Stan cried.

“Are you going fishing?” Stan asked eagerly.

“YEAH!” They followed him over to a medium-sized wooden boat, equipped with both oars and a motor. It was pulled right up onto the gravel, a few yards from the bait shop. “I'm gonna catch the biggest thing in the lake. I'm guessing it'll be a catfish twelve feet long!”

“But your boat's only ten feet long,” Ford pointed out.

“Nuts to that, Sixer!” Stan jumped into the boat and mimed reeling in a fish. “We'll drag it in behind the boat like the Old Man and the Sea!”

“NO!” Dan shouted. “You won't need fishing poles. I'll show you how a REAL man fishes!”

The twins cheered.

“Hey!” Grauntie Mabel grabbed the edge of the boat. “What happened to our hike? Look! I got you Pines family hiking hats!”

She pulled two sorry-looking sunhats out of the basket. They'd been badly squished, but unfolding them made them look worse: Stan's hat read Stan in curly pink puff paint, while Ford's said Ford in blue rhinestones.

“That's hand-crafting, ya know!” she added.

A rhinestone popped off Ford's hat.

Ford shared a Look with his brother. This Look very clearly said: We are not wearing these hats and they must be destroyed at all costs. But before they could say a word, a shout cut through the air.

“I SEEN IT!” someone shouted from the pier. “I seen it again!”

They turned. An old woman in faded denim overalls was jumping up and down at the end of the pier. The fishermen standing next to her slowly backed away. Her white hair stuck out in all directions under a dark blue hat with a crumbled-up crown and a wide brim. One hand and both of
her feet were wrapped in dirty gauze, like she used it instead of gloves or shoes. She pushed the
other fishermen aside and sprinted to the shore of the lake. She knocked over a table of fish, upset a
row of fishing poles, and slapped a sandwich from another man's hand, heading straight for the bait
shop.

“It's the Gravity Falls Gobblewonker!” she shouted, grabbing a fisherman by the shoulders. “Come
quick before it scrab-doodles away!” She squealed something in Korean and started dancing,
slapping at her knees. Ford backed up slightly: she was close enough to smell.

“Well, that's a funky-lookin' jig,” Stan said.

“Nooo!” The woman grabbed Stan's shoulders. “It's a jig of grave daaaanger!”

“Hey, hey!”

The Bait Shop lady came out. She had long bangs, a pressed collared shirt, and a spray bottle. “What
did I tell you about scaring my customers?” she said, squirting the crazy lady. “This is your last
warning, Mom!”

The woman yelped at the water. “But I got proof this time, by gumminy!”

Ford glanced at Stan and raised his eyebrows. There was proof of an actual lake monster?

The crowd of fishermen, with the twins in front, followed the old woman back to the pier. By this
time, she'd also drawn the attention of the police, who motored over in a green police boat with
flashing red and blue lights. The cops looked bored, like they'd seen the crazy lady's antics a dozen
times before.

“Behold!” she cried, pointing down. The shattered remains of a small rowboat bobbed gently on the
water's surface. It looked like something had smashed it in half with a hammer. “It's the Gobbledy-
wonker what done did it!” she insisted. “It had a long neck like a gee-raff! And wrinkly skin, like –
like this lady right here!” She pointed to Mabel, who was absently rearranging the rhinestones on
Ford's hat.

She looked up. “Eh?”

“It chawed mah boat up to smitheroons! Then shim-shammed over to Scuttlebutt Island!” The old
woman waved frantically at the lake's largest island, the one with the totem pole. The woman
grabbed her daughter's arm. “Ya gotta believe me!”

The Sheriff, rolled his eyes. “Attention all units...we got ourselves a crazy old lady.”

Right up until then, Ford had been thinking the same thing himself. She smelled, she ran sideways
like a crab, she was clearly a few stars short of a constellation. But when the Sheriff called her crazy,
the whole crowd laughed, pointing at the woman like...like she was some kind of freak. Ford
frowned angrily, stuffed his hands in his pockets and did not laugh. Neither did Stanley.

The twins stayed put as the rest of the crowd wandered off, talking about lunch plans and suntan
lotion. Even the woman's daughter left, shaking her head in disgust.

“Aw...donkey spittle!” the lady groaned in Korean. Her shoulders slumped and she trudged down the
pier. “Nobody ever believes anything I say...”

Mabel cleared her throat. “Well that happened. Now let's get those hats on and go for a seven-hour
hike!”
Ford looked down at the boat again. Then back at the island. Then the old lady. Crazy or not, there was no way her skinny little arms could've smashed up that boat. It was clearly destroyed by something much bigger and stronger, which meant there had to be something else in the lake. Something way more massive than a 12-foot catfish!

He grabbed Stan's arm. “Stanley, did you hear what that old lady said?”

“Aw...donkey spittle,” Stanley repeated in Korean, with a perfect accent.

“No! The other thing! About the monster!” He pulled the magazine out of his jacket. “If we can snag a photo of it, we can split the prize fifty-fifty!”

Stan gasped. “That's two fifties!”

“Imagine what you could do with five hundred dollars!”

Stanley grinned, and Ford could practically see the daydream playing out on his brother's face. It involved a shiny miniature El Diablo convertible, two very fine ladies, and a successful pick-up job. In seconds, Stan was all but drooling.

Ford snapped his fingers in front of his brother's face. “Stanley? Earth to Stanley...”

Stan grabbed Ford's shoulders. “Ford, I am one million percent on board with this!”

“Grauntie Mabel!” Ford said, grinning widely. He hooked an arm around her shoulders when she bent to pick up her basket. “Change of plans! We're renting a boat and heading to Scuttlebutt island, and we're gonna find that Gobblewonker!”

The twins started chanting. “Mon-ster Hunt! Mon-ster Hunt!”

“Mon-ster Hunt!” chimed the old lady. They looked at her. “Mon-ster...ehm...I'll go...”

A flash of plaid caught Ford's eye. Dan was shoving his boat into the water.

“Boyish Dan!” he called.

“Dude, can we use your boat for a monster hunt?” Stan asked.

Dan squinted at them. “A what?”

“Monster hunt! You said you wanted to catch the biggest thing in the lake,” Ford reminded him. “I'd say a monster definitely qualifies!”

“Bet you could catch it with just your bare hands!” Stan added.

His face lit up at the challenge. “I like it! CLIMB ABOARD!”

“Woohoo!”

Ford and Stan started sprinting for the boat – but Mabel caught them by the backs of their shirts.

“Hooold it right there, kiddos,” she said sternly. “Now let's think this through. You kids could go waste your time on some...'Epic Monster-Fighting Adventure',” she said, with air quotes. “OR – you could spend the day hauling bottled water and getting sunburned with your Great-Auntie Mabel!”

Ford frowned. He looked at Dan, who plunged his hand into the lake and pulled out a fish. He
looked at his great-aunt, who pulled a baggy of brown apple slices out of the basket and sniffed them. Then he looked at the island, shrouded in mist, mystery, and potential fame and fortune.

Stan caught his eye and shared a Look.

Grauntie Mabel re-packed the apples. “So whaddaya say –”

But Ford didn't hear the rest. He jumped in the boat with his brother and Dan cranked the motor. Yelling with excitement, they shot off towards the island.

“We made the right choice!” Stanley shouted, practically shaking Ford with excitement.

Grauntie Mabel watched them go, the smile dropping off her face. “Ingrates!” she shouted. She scooped up her basket and readjusted her hat, cramming it onto her head. “Aw, who needs ’em. I got a whole picnic basket stuffed with goodies to keep me company!”

She opened the lid to the basket. The peanut butter and jelly sandwiches had gotten squished and were bleeding jelly into the cheese-and-pineapple coleslaw.

She wrinkled her nose. “Ew. Jelly does not go with cheese.” She paused. “Although...”

“Hoist the anchor!” Ford shouted from the prow. Dan hauled up a kelp-covered cinderblock. “Raise the flag!” Stan propped up a fishing pole and tied a flag that said “FISHING” to the top.

“We're gonna find that Gobblewonker!” Stan said, pumping his fist.

“We're gonna win that contest!” Ford cheered.

“Where's the sunscreen?” Dan barked.

Ford looked around. “We're gonna...go get sunscreen!”

He and Stanley cheered as Dan turned the boat expertly, adjusting the motor and sending them zooming towards the bait shop.

Twenty minutes later, the three of them were back out on the water, the hot sun beating down on their freshly protected faces. Ford had tied his jacket under the “FISHING” flag, since it was too hot to wear and it didn't fit well under his life jacket, anyway.

He paced the deck. Dan was kneeling on the starboard quarter, watching the water intently, one hand ready to plunge down for a fish. Stan playing sword-fight with himself with a couple of fish hooks.

“Allright,” Ford said, grabbing their attention. “If we wanna win this contest, we've gotta do it right. Think – what's the number one problem with most monster hunts?”

“Oh!” Stan waved his arms. “If you're a side character, you die in the first five minutes of the movie!” He looked at Dan. “Sorry, Dan, but the show must go on!”

Ford shook his head. “No no no – camera trouble! Say a Wolfman shows up – Dan, be a Wolfman.”

He curled his arms, flexing, his red beard bristling. “HRRRR!”
“Close enough. There he is, Wolfman!” Ford pretended to search his life vest. “Oh, no, no camera. Wait, there it is!” He pulled one out. “Oh, no film. Y’see, you see what I’m doing, here?”

Dan hmmm’d, rubbing his chin, while Stanley nodded. “Yep, yep, dude’s got a point.”

“That's why I bought seventeen disposable cameras!” He quickly began pointing them out. “Two on my ankle, three in my jacket, four for each of you, three extras in this bag, and one – taped to my back.”

Stan laughed. “How are you even gonna take pictures with that?”

“It's so nothing can sneak up on me,” Ford explained. “There's no way we're gonna miss this! Okay everybody, let's test our cameras out!”

Dan tried to get at the button with his thick fingers, frowning in concentration. It flashed in his face. “AGH!” He threw it, startled, and it landed in the water thirty feet away.

“Y’see?” Ford said. “This is exactly why we need backup cameras. We still have six–”

“I can beat that!” Stan shouted, and hurled a camera like a frisbee. It skipped like a stone and fell into the water, slightly farther than Dan's.

“Fifteen! Guys!” Ford barked. “Don't lose the cameras!”

Dan grunted. “Lose the cameras?”

“Don't!”

“REAL men don't NEED cameras to catch fish!” He threw two overboard before Ford could stop him, but Stan jumped up and hung on Dan's arm right before he could throw a third.

“Dude!” Stan said. “The cameras will be proof that you're the one who caught it.”

Dan grunted. “YOU hold the cameras. I got some fish to catch!”

He dumped his cameras, and Stan, onto the deck and reached for the two kegs of fish food they'd bought at the shop.

Dan and Ford had reasoned that the biggest fish had to eat a lot of food, so it wouldn't go after something small like a few worms. They had to get a lot of bait to draw it out. Two kegs was a bare minimum.

Ford nodded, relieved that the camera crisis was over. “Right. We still have thirteen camer–” he brought down his fist for emphasis and accidentally smashed another camera. His face twitched. “Twelve. We have twelve cameras.”

“So what's the plan?” Stan asked. “Throw more cameras overboard, or what?”

“No! No. Okay, you'll drop fish food into the lake, Dan can work the steering, and I'll be Captain.”


Ford winced. He knew how distracted his brother could get. “I'm not so sure that's a good idea.”

“What about 'Co-Captain'?”
Ford rolled his eyes. “There’s no such thing as co-captain.”

Stan dangled a camera by two fingers. “Uh, whoops.” He tossed it overboard.

“Okay, fine!” Ford said quickly. “You can be co-captain.”

“Sweet! What do I get to do?”

“How about handling that fish food?”

Stan opened his mouth to object, but before he could, Dan picked him up by the back of his life jacket. He legs dangled.

“Whoa!” Stan said, excited. “Do I even weigh anything to you?”

“I’m handling the fish food!” Dan barked. “I need to watch the water in case a huge fish shows up. You’re handling the steering!”

Stan squealed. “I’m the helmsman?!”

Dan plopped him down by the motor and showed him how to control the rudder and adjust their speed.

“Dude, this is awesome!” Stan’s face shone as he gripped the rudder’s handle in his hands. “Forget Captain! Helms-man! Helms-man!”

Mabel finished climbing a steep part of Gnome-Man's Trail. (She guessed the name was supposed to be some kind of punny joke.) The trail had started near the Bait Shop and snaked up the side of the cliffs, and while it did have some great views, it was a tough walk. That was fine. But it meant there weren't a lot of other hikers to hang out with.

She was high enough on the cliff that the boughs of the redwoods were starting to thin out, and she could see between the tree tops. She caught sight of the lake below, a cool blue wedge through the dark branches. It was easy to tell which boat was Dan's – his bright red hair flashed like a beacon. It looked like they were getting pretty close to Scuttlebutt Island, too.

“Traitors,” she grumbled, adjusting her basket on her arm. “Aw, who needs ’em? I've got a whole list of campfire songs to get through!”

As she drew a deep breath to start singing, she heard some noises. A second later, she glimpsed a backpack on the road ahead.

“Al-right!” She ran up the trail and looked around. There were a couple of hikers perched on a rock together, enjoying the view of the lake. The man was leaning close to the woman, and she was resting her head on his shoulder. Perfect! A cute couple like that would love a sing-along!

The mist clung to the surface of the water, turning the huge trees around them into the dagger-like shadows. Ford kept a sharp eye for shapes in the water. Dan had been shoveling handful after handful of fish food over the side, but there was still no sign of it, even though they had to be very close the island’s shore, but it was hard to tell because the mist was so thick. At this rate, Ford would have to be careful they didn't run aground.
Stanley had been singing “A Pirate's Life for Me” for 20 minute straight.

“Stanley, would you cut that out?” Ford asked, peering into the white fog. “I'm trying to concentrate!”

“Sorry, bro-bro, no can do! Steering got boring.”

Ford could practically feel his brother squirming. He had to admit, it was pretty boring now that they could barely see a foot around the boat.

“When are we gonna catch monsters?” Stan whined.

“I don't know, I'm trying to find it...”

Ford stared hard at the water, straining his ears. Maybe if he could just catch an odd sound, a ripple or a splash that didn't belong, he could figure out where the monster was. But everything was eerily quiet, muffled by the mist. At least Stanley had finally stopped singing.

Wait...

He looked over his shoulder just in time to see Stanley dip his hand into a keg of fish food.

“Wait, Stanley, don't –” Ford started. But Stan shoved it in his mouth.

“PLEGH!” Stanley gagged and sputtered, leaning over to spray it over the water.

Ford burst out laughing. “Aw, man, why did you do it?” Ford gasped, bent double with laughter.

Stanley sputtered and hacked. “Yuck, gross, I don't know what I expected that to taste like!”

Dan looked up. “HEY! Watch the –”

The whole boat shuddered and stopped so fast it jerked them off their feet. Ford and Stan hit the deck as the motor sputtered and died.

Stan jumped up. “Finally! We're here!” He grabbed the railing and swung himself over the side. Dan growled with exasperation and followed suit. Ford got one leg over the railing and then got stuck, Stanley held out his hand to help.

“Thanks.” Ford got down onto the beach and looked around. There was practically no sand, just a lot of short grasses that quickly gave way to heavy shrubbery and conifers. The trees were massive, easily 200 years old at least, but there were a lot of pine trees mixed in with the redwood. The mist was thinner here, but still thick enough to cast everything in a grayish-blue gloom. And the island was weirdly quiet. No insects. No leaves rustling. A crow cawed, and it was like a rocket going off in the stillness. Even the sound of their footsteps was muffled, like they were walking on the dirt of a freshly filled grave.

Dan looked around. “Where's the fish?”

“Maybe it's got some kind of lair or something further in,” Ford said. “A lot of marine life makes its home on the beach, but the dirt here looks untouched. I'm guessing there might be a cove on the other side of the island.”

Stanley had climbed back into the boat and dug up a lantern. He jumped back down. “C'mon, fellow pirates! There be treasure a-waitin’!” He took the lead and they started walking deeper into the island's forest.
At least it wasn't a tough hike, like Grauntie Mabel had wanted them to do. There was a pretty big space between the trees, like a giant trail had been carved through the forest a long time ago, and new trees had just decided not to grow there. It was odd. Something about it bothered Ford. Some clue about the Gobblewonker and the trail...he just couldn't figure out the connection.

“Dudes, check it out!” Stan ran over to a tree. A huge sign had been nailed to its trunk reading “Scuttlebutt Island” in huge black letters. A smaller sign next to it read, “Beware.”

Stan covered part of the first sign. “Butt island!” he crowed. Dan snorted, which for him was like laughing out loud.

Ford was still looking around. He was starting to get the feeling that they were being watched.

“Yo, Sixer!” Stan nudged him. “Why aren't you laughing? Are you...scared?”

Ford jumped. “What? Oh, I'm not – I mean –”


“Stanley, I'm not scared!”

“Yeah you are!” Stan dropped the lantern and started poking him everywhere, blowing raspberries. Ford tried to shove him away, but Stan poked him in all his ticklish spots and pretty soon he was bent double with laughter.

“Stanley, stop, I mean it!” Ford wheezed, still laughing.

“Never!”

Suddenly a sound ripped through the trees.

RRRRRRRRRRrrrr...

They froze. Dan looked toward the noise, frowning. “Did you guys hear that?”

Stan stepped closer to Dan. He looked nervous. “What was that? Dan, tell me that was your stomach.”

RRRRRRRRRRrrrr...

Suddenly a possum scurried out of the trees. It grabbed the lantern and darted off into the shadows.

“Oh no, our lantern!” Ford looked around, squinting. “Geez, I can't see anything!”

“I don't think this is a good idea,” Dan said.

Ford turned. “What? Of course it is! Just imagine what could happen if we get that photo!”

His mind filled with images of newspapers, with his name on the cover. He imagined people recognizing him on the street, begging for his autograph, looking at his hands and envying his connection with the paranormal. He imagined appearing on the Late Night Talk Show, where show host Charlie McGuire would introduce him as the “Brave adventurer who captured the elusive Gobblewonker on film.”

“Tell us,” Charlie would say, “what is the secret to your success?”
“Well, I run away from nothing,” Ford would answer, all casual, as if he wasn't the coolest kid on
the planet. “Nothing except for my great-aunt Mabel whom I ditched in order to pursue that photo.”

“How right you were to do so. She sounds like a real piece of work.” Charlie stood up. “I don't
normally do this, but I feel the need to give you an award.”

He draped a solid-gold medal over Ford's chest and they posed as dozens of photographers
scrambled to snap pictures.

Suddenly the back wall of the studio exploded. Stanley revved the motor and drove his miniature car
onto the stage. “HEY CHARLIE!” he shouted. “CHECK THIS OUT!” He drove like a maniac and
they scrambled for cover –

Ford was jolted out of his daydream by Stan's arm thrown around his shoulders. “Man that Charlie
show would rock!” he sighed.

Ford grinned. Figures they'd have the exact same daydream. “C'mon, bro-bro, we got a monster to
hunt!”

They ran down the trail, whooping and cheering.

It might've been Stan's imagination, but the island seemed even bigger than it had from the bait shop.
They'd been walking for almost fifteen minutes and still hadn't reached the other side.

Or they'd just been going in circles.

Meh. At least the fog had cleared up, so they didn't need the lantern. And since Ford didn't need to
keep a lookout anymore, Stanley had gone back to singing as a way to keep himself entertained.

“...that gets on everybody's nerves!” he sang. “Everybody's nerves, everybody's nerves!”

Everybody's except Dan, apparently, who was swinging his arms in time to the beat.

“Guys guys guys!” Ford whispered quickly, getting out a camera. “You hear something?”

There was a noise – a low roaring noise, like something growling so deep it was almost out of the
range of human ears. It seemed to come from all around them, distorted by the shreds of mist that
clung to the trees like shrouds.

Suddenly a murder of crows rose in a dark wave, just to their left, cawing loudly like something had
just scared them off.

Ford gasped with excitement. “This is it, this is it!” he whispered.

“Yes yes yesss!” Stan whispered back. They thumped each other on the arm excitedly. Dan grabbed
a huge stick, like a baseball bat on steroids, and followed them cautiously.

The mist thickened the farther in they went. Then, just yards ahead of them, the forest broke away on
either side, revealing a small beach strewn with dead trees and jagged rocks. They'd reached he other
side of the island. The lake was almost completely still, an eerie green mirror reflecting the heavy
fog.

And, shrouded by the mist, a massive shape rested silently on the water.
The three of them instantly dove behind a log. Stan peeked over the bark to get a better look. It definitely looked like a monster—it had a weird humped back and a really long neck, like a gee-raff, and a little dinosaur head sprouting weird tentacles.

Ford and Dan popped up next to him.

“Everyone,” Ford whispered, “get your cameras ready!”

Ford already had his out. Stan passed one to Dan, who was frowning with worry. Scaredy-cats, Stan thought, shaking his head. He got out his own camera, holding his breath with anticipation. He was just one photo away from a girl-catching convertible!

“Ready?” Ford whispered. “And...NOW!”

Dan leaped over the log and ran towards the monster. “AAAAAAAAAH!” he screamed.

Ford and Stan scrambled after him, snapping pictures frantically. Any second that thing could see them and decide it was getting a free afternoon snack!

They ran right up to the edge of the water, and the mist parted, and they gazed with horror upon...

...a wrecked ship, its overturned hull and broken mast positioned in the exact shape of a monster. Even worse, the wreck was overrun with cutesy little beavers, who were actually frolicking. Like they had no respect for a real monster hunt.

“Ugh, man, what the heck!” Stan growled, lowering his camera. “The lake is haunted by beavers?!”

Ford looked just short of devastated. “But...what was noise? I heard a monster noise!”

RRRRRRRRrrrrr...

They turned. On a nearby rock, a beaver was trying to eat a chain saw. Every now and then, it would chew the “on” switch, and the saw would grind against the rock for a few seconds before the battery died. The beaver waited and then went right back to chewing.

“HEY!” Dan ran towards the beaver. “That's my chainsaw! BACK YE BEAST OF THE NETHERWORLDS!!”

Dan did heroic battle with the beaver, which put up a surprisingly good fight and went straight for Dan's face, sinking its two long teeth into his beard. Dan hollered and struggled to fend off the beaver's flapping tail, with one hand while yanking it off with the other.

“Woo-hoo!” Stan shouted, snapping pictures. “Fight, fight, fight!”

It took him a minute to realize that Ford wasn't joining in. He'd gone to sit on a rock, dangling his feet into the water, socks, shoes, and all.

Stan walked over and put a hand on Ford's back. “Hey, bro, we'll find the monster, alright?”

“Who knows if there even is a monster,” Ford said glumly, kicking his feet. “Maybe that old lady was just crazy after all.”

Stan nodded sadly. “She did seem even crazier than Grauntie Mabel.”
“Look, when you're going hiking, a lot of people don't know this, but you don't want to wear new shoes,” Mabel explained to a little girl with a pony tail. The girl had been sitting at the foot of a huge oak tree. Mabel thought she could use some friendly advice.

“The shoes might chafe at your feet,” she continued, “and then you'll be stuck in them for hours! You always want to take a good walk around your neighborhood first, to test them out and break them in. That's a secret from one hiker to another!”

“Um...” The girl looked really nervous. “I, um, who are you exactly?”

“Aw, sweetie, you can just call me your Grauntie Mabel!”

“Hey – ma'am, ma'am!”

A pair of angry parents strode over, the mom leading the charge. She stepped in front of the girl and put her hands on her hips. “Why are you talking to our daughter?” she demanded.

Mabel smiled cheerfully. “She looked a little down, so I thought I'd share my expert hiker's knowledge!” she said. “Did you know that every hour hiking is basically as hard as shoveling wet sand?”

The mother was not impressed. “If you don't leave right now, I'm calling the park rangers!” she threatened, whipping out her phone.

“But don't you want to hear about –”

The mother started dialing.

“Alright, alright, I'm goin'!”

Mabel continued up the trail, quickly. After that last incident with the bananas, she was pretty sure the ranger wouldn't be happy to see her again.

“Go bother your own kids!” the mother called after her.

Mabel avoided looking at the lake through the trees.

Dan had succeeded in vanquishing the beaver and was celebrating by testing out the chainsaw on the nearest dead trees.

“Dead trees could fall and kill a grown man!” he'd shouted. “I'm making this island as safe as I can!”

He'd cut one down but then spent most of the time just chopping the branches off of fallen trees and piling them up, like he was making the world's biggest bonfire. It was like cutting stuff up was his idea of fun. Stan could respect that.

But his attention was still focused on his brother. Ford was all slumped over like he'd just lost a chess tournament.

“Hey, bro, don't take it so hard. I got tons of pictures of that beaver fight!” Stan waved his camera. “We could totally sell those!”

Ford sighed. “What're we gonna say to Grauntie Mabel?” he groaned. “We ditched her over nothing.” He grabbed a rock and threw it in the water.
Stan opened his mouth. Before he could say anything, the water rippled, and the ground started to vibrate. Was he imagining it?

“Hey, Ford, did you feel –”

The ground shook so hard Ford fell off the rock and into the water. Stan pulled him out and they scrambled back. A massive, grayish-green thing swiped at the air where they’d just been, the wind blowing back Stan’s hair.

Dan ran over and they looked out at the lake. A massive shape was swimming through the water, something as long as three buses, with an enormous humped back covered in pebbly gray skin. A massive tail with a huge rubber flipper cut the water's surface.

Stan suddenly wondered if a monster hunt was a good idea.

Ford, however, was the world's dumbest genius. “This is it!” he whispered, holding up his camera. He started snapping pictures as the thing swam in a wide arc around the beach. He glanced back to look at Stan and Dan. “C'mon, this is our chance!”

The thing had swung back around. It was heading straight for the shore, its underwater shadow getting bigger every second. Stan backed up nervously. Boyish Dan did likewise.

“What's wrong with you guys?” Ford demanded, turning to look at them.

A huge head broke the water's surface. Huge teeth jutted from its mouth, wiggling antennae sprouted from its head, and its eyes glowed a sickly yellow-green. It rose up, and up, and up, its shadow looming over them.

“F-F-Ford,” Stanley squeaked.

His brother was starting to get annoyed. “It's not that hard, okay?” he said.

Behind him, the monster swayed slowly, coming closer inch by inch, like a deadly gray-green python. Ford held up the camera.

“All you gotta do is point, and shoot. Like this!”

He turned. And looked up.

The monster opened its huge jaws, fangs glinting, and let out a howl like a psychotic T-Rex.

Dan dropped the saw. “For the love of all that's holy, RUN!”

They ran, sprinting down the trail was fast as they could. Stan heard the crash of water as the monster heaved itself out of the lake. He glanced over his shoulder. The thing propelled itself forward on four flippers the size of tractor shovels. But the monster wasn't as coordinated on land as it was in the water. It rumbled towards them and ran straight into a redwood. The tree shuddered, cracked, and began to fall – heading straight for Ford!

Stan swerved and hurled himself at his brother just as the top of the tree came smashing down. It hit the ground behind them with an explosion of leaves and branches. They rolled and landed on their feet, still running, as tree after tree fell around them. The Gobblewonker was knocking them over as it ran. No wonder the path was so wide!

They caught up with Dan.
“Get back to the boat!” he shouted.

The Gobblewonker lunged, stretching its long neck, snapping at Stan with foot-long fangs, just missing his legs.

“AAAH!”

Dan grabbed him and threw him on his back. Stan clung to his collar for dear life, but he twisted back, frantically checking for his brother.

Click! Click!

Stan couldn't believe it. His stupid brother was still trying to take pictures!

“FORD!” he bellowed. “SURVIVAL FIRST, FAME SECOND!”

Ford tripped and went sprawling, the camera bouncing back towards the Gobblewonker.

“No, my photos!” Ford yelped, and started to run back to the monster.

Stan grabbed Dan's collar and twisted, steering him like a horse. Dan grabbed the back of his life jacket, yanking him out of the way just as the monster lunged. Its jaws snapped at empty air.

“Agh! Dan!” Ford yelped in protest.

“If it makes you feel better I got photos of the beavers!” Stan shouted.

“How is that supposed to help?!” Ford shouted back.

They screamed as the Gobblewonker lunged again.

Boyish Dan raced over the ground, but they were just barely ahead of the monster. It swept its long neck back and forth like it was hunting them by smell. Stan gripped Dan's collar tighter – that thing could just pluck him off Dan's back and swallow him whole –

The boat came into view, still smashed up against the shore and very thoroughly beached.

“Get on, get on!” Dan shouted. He threw Ford on board and Stan climbed off his back. Dan shoved his shoulder against the boat and pushed. It started ground against the rocky shore, moving slowly back into the water.

Stan raced to the motor and worked the buttons, eyes focused on the water behind them. What if the motor was too bashed-up to work? They could be fish food in seconds!

He pulled the cover off and jigged a few wires until they snapped back in place. “Please, please, James Cook, if you're up there please let this work!”

The motor roared to life.

“YES!” Stan shouted.

Dan gave the boat a final shove and swung himself on board. “GO GO GO!”

“Going!” Stan threw the thing in full reverse and steered. The boat zoomed away from the island just as the Gobblewonker emerged from the trees. It was nearly as huge as the island's small mountain, hurling itself along so fast that a huge cloud of dust hung in its wake.
“Alright, this is it!” Ford exclaimed, grabbing a camera from his jacket. He held it up. “Cracked lens!? Dan! Get a photo!”

Dan had grabbed the cameras and was already throwing them at the monster like bright yellow missiles.

“What're you doing!!” Ford shrieked.

“Slowing it down!” Dan threw the last camera, grabbed the fish food barrels and threw them, too.

Stan grabbed his last camera from the bag at his feet. “Sixer, catch!” He threw it, but Ford wasn't ready and it smashed against the railing.

The monster roared with rage and plunged into the water, stretching out its neck as far as it could go. It bit down on the tip of the prow and they shouted with fear, but it broke off and the monster kept going and hit the water. The huge wage from its momentum shoved them a few feet away, putting them a few seconds farther from imminent death-by-fish. Dan grabbed the motor's lever and threw it in, hitting it until it cranked into high gear. The motor's little screen glowed reddish-green, warning that it was starting to overheat. Stan swung the rudder, whipping them around so fast they nearly capsized. The boat shot across the lake.

“Go go go go go!” Ford yelled.

Stan hung on to the rudder. “Oh NOW you want to go!”

The Gobblewonker screeched with fury, swimming after them, its long head weaving and its massive teeth bared. It was faster in the water – too fast, it was gaining on them every second. Stan and Ford grabbed each other and hit the deck as the thing lunged, snapping its dagger-like teeth. They screamed.

Mabel had stopped to rest at the picnic area at the end of the trail. Well – the end of the official trail. She'd been hiking out here for years, and she happened to know of one very tiny path leading... Well, she'd been saving that for her grephews, but there was really no point in going there alone.

There were five or six picnic benches crammed into the small clearing. The trail had gone uphill for a while, but here it had dipped down close to the waterfall, so the spray of the water sparkled in the air. The granite cliffs rose on one side of the picnic area, and a thin fence of shrubbery lined the other. The bright blue lake glittered just beyond the plants, rippling when dragonflies dipped down to sip the water, flashing like jewels in the sun.

It was picture-perfect, but for once Mabel wasn't in the mood to enjoy it.

A chubby-looking grandma and her two cutesy little offspring were sitting at a table not far away. Chubster had just finished telling them some kind of sitcom-quality story about her golden years. The little dorklets were giggling at all the funny parts.

“Will you please tell us more funny stories, gam-gam?” one of the dorklets begged, his eyes shining with love.

Chubster chuckled. “Anything for my hiking buddies!” she said.

Mabel ground her dentures.
The other dorklet spoke up. “Gam-gam?” she said quietly. She put her tiny little doll hand on her grandmother's arm. “I just realized that...I love you.”

“Oh come on!” Mabel jumped to her feet. “Are you trying to make me throw up?! I'm eatin' over here!”

“Hey now, what's the big idea?” Chubster demanded.

The second dorklet spoke up again. “Maybe she has no one to love her, Gam-gam.”

Mabel bristled. “Yeah, well I – I –”

A motorboat roared past them on the lake, followed by something huge and gray. Before Mabel could turn to look, the entire picnic area was smashed with a huge wave. It soaked the bushes, turned the dirt to mud and thoroughly drenched Mabel and her basket.

The dorklets, of course, immediately checked to make sure their “Gam-gam” made sure she was alright. They started helping her back down the trail, each of them taking one of her hands to support her. Mabel's jaw clenched. That was supposed to be her with her stupid dorklet grephews.

She threw down her hat as hard as she could, grunting with frustration. But it didn't make her feel any better.

Dan steered them sharply around another island, but the monster could turn just as fast as the boat. Its huge maw hung open, its dark throat gleaming wetly and its blank eyes glaring like search lights.

Dan grabbed the side of the boat with one hand, hanging on to Ford with the other.

“Dan! Beavers!” Ford shouted.

They'd steered right back to the other side of Scuttlebutt Island. The beaver-covered wreckage seemed to jump out of the lake, right in their way. The beavers chittered, apparently unconcerned with the monster hurtling towards them.

Dan struggled to turn, but they were going to fast. The boat swung sideways and broadsided the wreck, plowing straight through the rotting wood. The good news: it didn't slow them down for a second. The bad news: the wreck practically exploded with beavers, and several dozen of them landed on boat and started chewing and biting anything they could.

One of them landed on Stan's arm, digging its claws into his flesh. Stan panicked and punched it, then bashed it against the railing as hard as he could. It fell off. A second the beaver tried to bite him with those powerful jaws. Stan bashed it until it let go and hurled it, dazed, back into the lake.

Ford was busy smacking two beavers with the butt of their flag-fishing pole. One of the beavers had landed on Dan's face and gotten caught in his hair. Dan yelled in pain and struggled to pull it off, letting go of the motor. The boat started to swing wildly.

“GET THE MOTOR!” Stan shrieked, lunging for it. He grabbed the controls and steered, but overcompensated and almost tipped the boat. The Gobblewonker snapped, biting off a chunk of boat not an inch from Stanley's arm. “GYAAAAAAAH!” Their boat was still covered with beavers – why couldn't the Gobblewonker take a bite of one of them??

Dan finally yanked off his furred attacker and threw it at the monster, but the beaver just bounced off it like a rubber ball. Dan grabbed beaver after beaver and threw it, while Ford finally ditched the
broken pole and used his bare hands to pry the beavers from the boat.

Stan watched with growing horror as the lake monster sank under the surface of the water. He craned his neck to follow it – first it was yards away, then meters, then feet. The thing was even faster than the water!

Stan faced forward and blanched. There were at least three dozen other boats out on the lake, all clustered together, and Stan was steering the boat straight towards them!

“WE'RE GONNA DIEEEEE!!” he screeched, holding onto the rudder to dear life.

It was an obstacle course of death – death by boat crash, death by monster, death by deranged beaver. He steered desperately, swerving around boat after boat, looking three or four or five boats ahead so he could adjust the angle of each turn to set up for the next one. The Gobblewonker followed in their wake, so close to the surface that it created a huge mound of water which overturned every boat it passed – not to mention spraying the air with some very surprised fish.

The monster reared its head again, its huge tail thrashing with rage. It lunged, trying to knock them off the boat with one swipe of its head. Stan yanked the rudder, swerving the boat to the left, then right.

“HAH! I don't play video games all day for nothing!” Stan yelled at it. The Gobblewonker promptly smashed its face into the water right next to them, and the boat jumped a solid foot into the air before slamming back into the water. The whole boat shuddered and creaked and motor made a sound like a rock-filled meat grinder. It choked and whined under his hands, slowing them enough for the Gobblewonker to catch up. It swiped at them again and they ducked, Dan throwing himself bodily to the deck, as the monster's jaw took off the railing all the way around the boat. The motor was barely attached, but it ground back to life, still whining like it could break at any second.

“Look out!” Ford shouted.

On the lake in front of them, two guys in separate boats were blocking their path, holding a very large plate of glass between them for no discernible reason.

“Get down!” Stan shouted, smacking his brother's head against the deck. The window pane shattered on impact, scraping up the boat and covering Stan's arms and legs with thin bloody cuts. The impact jolted one very angry beaver from under a loose pile of netting. It flew straight at Dan's face – the man had serious beaver attraction issues – and promptly began trying to eat his nose.

Stan leaped back to the motor. It was whining even louder and at a higher pitch. The monster was closing fast. They were nearly at the falls now and the shores of the lake narrowed, forming walls of lumpy granite on either side with the falls right in front of them. No way there was enough room to turn the boat, not at the speed they were going, but Stan looked from left to right and back and saw nowhere they could hide.

“Where do I go?!” he screamed. Dan didn't answer. He was too busy punching himself repeatedly in the face to try and dislodge the beaver.

Ford crouched on the deck, pulled the journal from his vest and started flipping frantically through its pages. “Quick! Go into the falls!” he shouted. “I think there might be a cave behind there!”

“MIGHT BE'?!”

Stan steered straight for the falls. The three of them screamed as the monster roared behind them and the falls thundered with the sound of certain death –
Water pounded Stan's arms and neck and head and they were through. He had just a split second to take in the surroundings – a huge, spherical cave lined with glittering stalagmites – before the boat smashed into the rocky shore of the cave. The impact jolted them from the boat and they flew several feet, landing hard, gasping and trying to catch their breath.

Stan got shakily to his feet, his knees turned to jelly. “Ford,” he gasped, but his brother was already standing up and dusting himself off – no broken bones, it looked like, and even his glasses looked fine. The same could not be said for Dan. Somehow that beaver had yanked out a good junk of beard hair and ripped off one of his sleeves.

Suddenly the cave lit up with a familiar sickly glow. Stan spun around just as the Gobblewonker's lamplike eyes burned through the falls. The monster burst into the cave, roaring so loud the cave walls shook.

Dan shouted and grabbed the twins, hunkering down to protect them and they screamed with fear – And nothing happened.

Stanley cracked an eye open.

The thing was so huge it had gotten stuck in the cave's entrance. It was squirming and paddling uselessly with its blubbery fins, trying to scoot forward or backward and getting absolutely nowhere.

“HAH! It's stuck!” Stan shouted gleefully.

Ford laughed. “Yeah!” he yelled, fist-pumping. “Wait...it's stuck!” Ford ran to the side of the cave, where the ground lifted up in a small cliff. Stan and Dan followed. From here, they had a pretty good view of the monster, still wriggling to get loose.

Ford reached into his jacket for a camera – and then realized they weren't there. He started checking himself over frantically.

Stan was almost about to let him keep searching, it was so funny, but he couldn't resist helping him out. He tugged the last camera off of the back of Ford's vest.

“Tada!” he said.

Ford laughed with triumph, grabbed the camera and started taking picture after picture, practically dancing with glee. The monster snapped at them, making Ford jump back, but they were well beyond the monster's reach.

“Didja get a good one?” Stan asked.

“They're all good ones!”

Stan whooped and they linked arms, swinging each other in a circle, shouting about magazine headlines and mini-convertibles as the monster roared behind them.

Suddenly a huge chunk of rock fell from the roof of the cave, dislodged by the Gobblewonker's struggles. The rock hit the monster square on the snout. Its jaws snapped shut. Bright green sparks flew from its jaws. It lowered its head for a minute, then, with a thunk, the head fell to the shallow water with a loud splash. It whirred like a TV getting turned off and its eyes went dark.

Stan frowned. Did monsters normally make weird machine noises when they got knocked out?

Ford looked down at it. “What the...?”
Stan stayed put, but Ford climbed down from the cliff and hopped onto the Gobblewonker's flipper. Now that Stan could get a good look at it, the thing's skin looked kind of weird — less like a lizard's and more like textured rubber. The monster's belly and the underside of its flippers looked covered in barnacles, and they grew in weird places, along creases in the skin that almost looked like the seams on a robot.

Ford touched the side of the monster and jumped back.

“What's wrong?” Stan called.

Ford banged on it. It made a hollow metallic sound. He frowned and started climbing up the side.

“Careful, man!” Dan said.

“I got this!” Ford called back. “Hold on!” He crawled over the monster's back and out of sight.

Stan watched nervously for his brother to reappear. What if it woke up angry and realized there was a very edible nerd on its back?

Ford's head popped back up. “Hey, guys!” he called, motioning them over. “Come check this out!”

Stan and Dan climbed down the cliff and headed over to Ford. This close up, the skin on the monster's back didn't even look like skin at all — more like a patchwork quilt of metal plates bolted together. There was even a wheel sticking up, like the kind you'd see on an old-fashioned bank vault in the movies.

Stan and Ford glanced at each other. What the heck?

Ford reached over and turned the wheel. It squeaked but moved easily. A flash of bright light and a hiss of steam escaped from the metal seams. Ford flung the plate open and a cloud of smoke rushed out. They coughed. When it cleared, they got a good look at the monster's innards.

It was not, Stan saw, made of super-cool alien guts. It looked more like the control room of a vintage fighter 'bot from an anime. It was cluttered with gears, levers, pulleys, and pipes that hissed white steam from their joints. A mound of coal was piled in one corner, next to an old banjo. Filling one whole wall were the controls: several small computer screens crammed together like a bunch of security cameras, each showing a different angle of the cave from the Gobblewonker's perspective. Three or four pedals were nestled under the computers, and there was even a shift stick topped with an 8 ball, like the monster was some kind of really weird car.

In the middle of the room, sitting in front of the computer screens, was the crazy old lady from the pier.

She'd been fiddling frantically with the controls, toggling tiny levers and pressing the pedals with her gauze-wrapped feet. But the sound of the plate opening made her turn. She shrank back a little when she saw them. “Aw, banjo polish,” she groaned.

Stan gaping.


“Well, I –” She tapped her fingers together nervously, glancing down and then back up again. “I, eh...”

They waited, speechless.
Finally she looked back down, squeezing her eyes shut. “...I just wanted attention.”

Ford shook his head. “I still don't understand!”

“Welp, first I just hootinanied up a biomechanical brainwave generator, and then I learned to operate a stick shift with my hair!”

Stan cocked his head. “Okay, yeah,” he said. “But why did you do it?”

She took off her hat, scratching at her scalp and shedding dandruff like snow. “Well,” she explained, “when you get to be an old woman like me, nobody pays any attention to you anymore. My own daughter hasn't visited me in months. So I figured I'd catch her fancy with a fifteen-ton aquatic robot!” She cackled crazily for a minute. Then she sighed. “In retrospect, it seems a bit contrived.”

Stan opened his mouth to ask what she'd just said, but she kept talking.

“You just don't know the lengths us old timers go through for a little quality time with our families.”

Stan's stomach did something funny. He glanced over at Ford, who looked just as guilty as he felt. Ford pulled the hat that Mabel had made him out of his back pocket. Stan had forgotten they'd even had the ugly things. Some of the blue rhinestones had come off of Ford's hat, but that was actually a minor improvement.

Stan pulled out his own hat. His name stared back at him in cracked pink puff paint. It looked as bad as that time their mother had dressed them up as tea cups for Halloween.

They sighed in unison.

“I didn't get a hat,” Dan grumbled behind them.

“So...” Stan looked back at the crazy old lady. “Did you ever, um, ask your daughter to spend time with you or bribe her with stupid hats?”

“Nossir, I got straight to work on my robot!” she said cheerfully. She flipped a hidden switch. A random projector appeared from nowhere, flashing images on the lifted metal plate. “Like when my husband left me and I created a homocidal pterodactyl-tron. Oh and my pal Grenda didn't come to my retirement party, and I constructed an 80-ton Shame Bot that EXPLODED THE ENTIRE DOWNTOWN AREA!” She cackled madly again.

Stan backed up, just in case she decided to go all Gobblewonker on them and smack them with her hat or something.

“Welp, time to get to work on my death ray!” she said, and ducked back down into the control room. I immediately the sounds of whirring and sawing filled the air. She stuck her hand back out. “Any o’ you kids got a screw driver?” she asked.

“Is it just me or is she few coins short of the whole dollar?” Stan whispered.

Ford's shoulders sagged. He took out the camera. “Well...so much for the photo contest.”

Stan looked over his shoulder. Most of the photos were unused. “Still got one roll of film left,” he pointed out.

Ford looked at him. “What do you wanna do with it?”
Mabel was thoroughly dry by now. She hadn't bothered making the trek back to the Bait Shop. What for? It wasn't like there'd be anybody waiting for her.

The sun was starting to set. The whole wall of granite glowed with a pinkish-orange light. If she didn't leave the picnic area now, she'd never make it back to the Shack before dark.

She sighed and started to get up.

Suddenly there was a rustling off to her right. She looked up. Ford, Stan, and Boyish Dan were staggering out of the bushes, from the exact same secret path she'd been planning to show them earlier.

“Kids?” she said, gaping.

“Grauntie Mabel!” They ran over, Dan following a short ways behind. Ford snapped a photo of her.

She set her mouth in a grim line. “Whadda you want?” she said. “I thought you two were off playing Spin-the-Bottle with Dan.”

Ford smiled weakly. “Well, we spent all day hunting for a legendary dinosaur...”

“But,” Stan said, “we realized the only dinosaur we want to hang out with is right here.”

She waved them off. “Save your sympathy! I've been having a great time without you. Making friends, matchmaking with squirrels – I had a run-in with the Park Ranger! Guess I gotta wear a tracker when I hike now, so that'll be fun.” She glanced at the tracker bracelet strapped to her ankle.

“So, I guess we can't hike back with you?” Ford asked hopefully.

Mabel looked at them.

Both boys put on their hats.

She couldn't help it. Her heart went all warm and gooey.

“...You knuckleheads ever seen me identify a bird from fifty feet away?”

Ford smiled. “Bet you five bucks you can't do it,” he challenged. Stan grinned. He and Ford had been betting the same five dollars back and forth for years.

She ruffled Ford's hair. “You're on!”

Stan wanted in. “Bet you five more bucks you can't do it from fifty feet, plus me jumping around and waving my arms!”

“I like those odds!” Mabel laughed. Then she caught sight of Dan's beard and half-eaten shirt. “Whoa, what happened to you?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Beavers,” he said, in a low, menacing growl.

“Oookay...”

Ford whipped out the camera. “Okay, everybody get together! Say, 'Hiking!'”

“Hiking!” they echoed.
Ford snapped a picture of Dan, Stan, and Mabel all grouped together, smiling as wide as they could.

He snapped another picture of Mabel grabbing a bird by the leg, in an attempt to give it a makeover.

Stan grabbed the camera when they stopped to rest and took successive pictures of Mabel unpacking the grossness that was the picnic basket. They had a contest to see which food was grossest (the coleslaw won), and then he and Ford raced to see who could eat their peanut butter, jelly, and coleslaw sandwiches the fastest. Dan tried to join in and almost got sick, which everyone found hilarious.

Stan was surprised and slightly disappointed when they reached the parking lot in the gathering dusk. Mabel offered to give Dan a ride back to his house, but he said he was going to run home to work off the ‘slaw.

Stan and his bro-bro squeezed into Mabel's sidecar. Now that he was done walking, he realized how tired he was. His shoulders and hands hurt from gripping the motor so hard, and his legs and feet were sore from all that walking. It was too bad they'd lost those photos of Dan fighting the beavers. Those things would've made a fortune on the internet.

Still...

He glanced at Ford. The nerd had fallen asleep, even with the roaring and the rattling of the motorcycle, all slumped over with his head on Stan's shoulder. He was wearing his aviator jacket, which they'd managed to salvage from Dan's busted boat. The camera was peeking out of one pocket. Stan smiled sleepily.

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until Mabel was shaking him awake.

“C'mon, short stuff,” she whispered gruffly. “Let's get you inside.”

Stan let his great-aunt lift him out of the side car. They were back at the Shack, and Waddles the Pig was standing guard at the front door, oinking and snorting.

“Grauntie Mabel?” Stan mumbled, as she lifted Ford out and set him on his feet. Ford swayed, his eyes still closed, and leaned against Stanley.

She went around to grab the picnic basket. “Yeah?”

“Are we gonna go hiking again?”

She came up next to him and put one hand on his back, propelling him gently towards the shack. “Maybe, short stuff. Would you want to?”

He yawned hugely. “I wouldn't mind,” he mumbled. He was so tired he could practically fall asleep standing up. He looped one arm around Ford's shoulders, so he wouldn't keel over, and grabbed Mabel's sleeve for balance. The three of them headed inside.

Chapter End Notes

Mabel totally seems like the type to love a good hike! She's energetic, loves nature,
loves matchmaking in nature, and can apparently go the whole day without using the bathroom! There's no Port-a-Potty on those trails, folks!
“Ugh...why is it...so heavy...?”

Stan grunted as the two of them worked to pull the half-eaten boat from the lake. Since it was obviously no longer seaworthy (or lake-worthy, or bathtub-worthy), Dan had agreed to let them have it. For free!

They managed to shove the boat a whole foot above the waterline before Ford collapsed, wheezing, and face-planted in the sand.

Stan nudged him with a foot.

“Woohoo!” he shouted, when Ford didn’t move. “I'm an only child! I claim all of Ford's stuff including that comic he's been hiding in his mattress!”

“Stanley!” Ford sat up quickly, red in the face. “You went through my mattress?!”

“It lives!” Stan cried, and scampered out of reach before Ford could chuck sand at him. “C’mon, bro, we got a messed-up boat to fix!”

They looked at it. The whole back half was chomped off, it had no railing, the motor was gone, and the bottom was so badly cracked it was a miracle the thing had stayed floating at all.

“...a really messed-up boat,” San amended. “Alright, Sixer, what's the first step?”

Ford considered it. “Well, we're obviously going to need wood. And something to seal it with. And sandpaper, nails, a hammer, working knowledge of carpentry –”

“Sounds like a job for Boyish Dan!” Stan turned to sprint away but Ford grabbed his collar so fast Stan actually flipped onto his back, coughing.

“Ow! What the heck, Ford?”

“We're gonna need wood if we want him to carve it,” Ford pointed out, calmly continuing to examine the boat.

Stan sat up and rubbed his neck. “So? We just go buy some.”

“We have zero money.”

“So we grab a tree and start chopping.”

“Into perfectly even planks exactly the right size and shape?” Ford shook his head. “With no cash, our best bet is to head into town and find some wooden chairs or something that people have thrown away. It'll probably be all different sizes, but it'll be a lot easier to work with and we can just fit it
together like a jigsaw puzzle. Dan could even teach us how to nail it all together.”

Stan jumped to his feet. “Hang on. If we’re gonna lug a bunch of broken wood around, we’ll need the wagon. Let’s go grab it from the Shack.”

Ria was raking leaves when she heard a noise from the side of the Shack. She cocked her head, listening. She heard very quiet steps and the rattle of the tin trash can.

It had to be those weird wandering fires again. Mrs. Pines never believed her, but the last time Ria had heard a noise like that, she’d lifted the lid to the trash can and found a bright yellow fire crackling happily to itself on last night’s leftovers. And the really weird part was that as soon as Ria saw it, on of its logs gave an extra-loud pop and it jumped out of the can and scampered away! Cute as it was, she’d have to teach it not to come back, or it might accidentally burn the house down.

Very quietly, she went over to the garden hose and slowly turned it on. She watched the hose inflate slightly as it filled with running water. She set the hose head to “shower”. Holding the rake prongs-up in one hand, and the hose in the other, she crept up against the Shack, edging along until she was right at the corner of the wall. She steadied her hand on the hose’s trigger – and jumped around the corner.

“UGABUGABUGAH!” she shouted.

“AAAAAAAH!” the boys yelled.

“AAAAAAAHH!” she yelled back, and squeezed the hose head in surprise. Water shot out and drenched them from head to toe.

“Sorry, chiquitos,” Ria said, hastily lowering her weapons.

“No worries!” Stan chirped. “I just got my bath for the week and I didn't even have to use soap!”

Ria snorted. “I thought the two of you were wild animals. Why are you sneaking around back here?”

Ford gestured to the wagon they’d pulled out from the bushes. “We’re heading into town for wood to rebuild our boat, and we needed something to carry it in.”

“You have a boat?”

“We got it from Boyish Dan,” Stan explained. “It’s seriously cool. It had a motor and chairs and kegs of fish bait! Or, you know, it did until...” He gestured with his hands, like a crocodile’s jaws snapping shut. Had Dan’s 12-foot catfish mistaken the boat for a sandwich?

“That would explain his current funk,” she mused. “Well, if you'd like some free wood, my abuelito has a whole pile of wood planks left over from the fortress he built in the back yard.”

“Awes— I’m sorry did you say fortress?” Stan repeated.

She smiled. “Let me grab the truck keys and I’ll give you a ride.”

Ria's house was surprisingly normal. Small, pink, one-story, with a neat little garden and an old-fashioned mailbox in front. Stan was disappointed. When she'd said “fortress”, he'd pictured a two-story castle with a moat full of robot frogs and laser cannons shooting from the turrets. Possibly the
kind that gave you superpowers. Instead it looked like somebody's grandma lived there, right down to the little pink tea roses by the door.

(Stan was embarrassed that he even knew what a tea rose was.)

Ria's abuelito, however, showed slightly more promise. He answered the door wearing a Tiger Fist T-shirt and carried a game console in one hand.

He looked down at them. “Finally! Human mitosis has been achieved!”

“No, abuelito, they're twins,” Ria said. She put a hand on their shoulders. “Meet Stan and Ford, Mrs. Pines' great-nephews.”

“Sup, tiny Pines?” Soos shook their hands. “Wanna play a few rounds of Jungle Cat Karate?”

Ria had warned them of this. Saying “yes” meant being sucked into a minimum of a 3-hour gaming marathon, sitting and eating barbeque-flavored chips until their butts went numb and their thumbs got repetitive stress injuries.

“I really want to say yes,” Stan muttered.

Ford stepped up. “Sorry, Mr. Ramirez, but we were hoping to work on our boat today.”

“I told them they could use the spare lumber from your fort,” Ria explained.

“Oh, sure, doods, come in, come in!” He turned and led them inside. The house was covered in little lace doilies and smelled like stale corn chips. They followed him through the living room to the short hallway that led to the backyard.

Mr. Ramirez paused, his hand on the doorknob. “Behold,” he said grandly, “Every FCLORPer's dream!”

The door swung open. Stan's jaw dropped.

“Whoa,” Ford breathed.

The backyard was filled with a wooden fort at least half the size of the actual house, built like a square-shaped castle with laser pointers mounted on each of its four corners. There was even an actual drawbridge that lowered over a moat filled with koi fish and rubber ducks.

“It's beautiful,” Stan said.

“It's amazing!” Ford said at the same time. “You built all this?”

Ria smiled. “How do you think I learned to be a handyman? My abuelito taught me all that I know.”

“Just watch out for the rubber ducks,” Mr. Ramirez said. “I'm ninety percent sure they're secretly alive. One time when I was working on the drawbridge, three of them followed me around for like an hour.”

“Can we go inside?” Ford asked eagerly.

“Sure, doods!”

Stan and Ford whooped and ran straight for the drawbridge. Stan jumped the moat and turned the crank, lowering the bridge for Ford, who immediately raced into the fort. Stan hurried after him.
The fort had four wooden stairways, one in each corner leading straight to the laser pointers. There was a kind of shelf built all the way around the top so you could walk from one laser to the next. Each staircase had a cupboard built under it, and in the middle of the fort was a wobbly wooden table with two waterproof beanbag chairs.

Stan ran straight up the nearest staircase. “Whoa!” he shouted to Ria. “I can see your house from here!”

She laughed and waved at him.

“Hey, Stan!” Ford called. He’d started exploring the cupboards, probably looking for books on how to build forts. “We got ammo down here!”

Stan knelt down and craned his neck to see. “We got what?”

“Ammo! Styrofoam balls in this one, and that one, and over here —” he raced to the third staircase. “There's Nyarf guns and a ton of those little foam bullets!”

“What about the last one?” Stan asked.

Ford opened it. “It’s... got a sewing kit?”

They looked at each other. “Ria,” they said.

“Hey, dudes!” Mr. Ramirez called. He and Ria were standing by a pile of wooden planks at the side of the yard. He held up a short piece of wood. “You guys want to look through this for your boat?”

Hmm, Stan thought. Work on the boat... or play in the fort. Tough choice.

“We're holding Ria's sewing kit hostage!” he shouted. “If you ever want to see it alive again, surrender every bag of stale corn chips you have!”

The Great Sewing Kit War of '04 lasted about three hours. Ria and her abuelito built a makeshift shelter with the wooden planks, and Ria made a mad dash for the house to get the spare Nyarf guns. They were pretty fairly matched, until Ford fished a few rubber ducks out of the lake and cobbled together a magnet-powered set of legs for each of them. They set them loose, Mr. Ramirez got distracted trying to appease them with offerings of breadcrumbs, and Stan nailed both him and Ria with a single Nyarf bullet ricocheted at precisely the right angle.


As victors of the war and entitled to the spoils, Mr. Ramirez let them spray paint ‘Pines Kings’ onto the side of the fort. It was late afternoon by the time they finally got around to loading the lumber into Stan's car.

Ford grimaced. “I hope you won't get into trouble with our Grauntie for skipping work for us,” he said, tying another orange flag onto the ends of the longest planks.

“Do not worry about it, chiquito,” she said, loading another plank into the bed of the truck. “Today was actually my day off. I just like to go over there sometimes anyway.”

Stanley heaved the last board into the truck, then dangled like a monkey, letting his feet drag on the ground. He yawned.
“Man, victory is exhausting.”

Mr. Ramirez came out of the house with a can of Pitt Cola in each hand. “Here, dudes,” he told the twins, handing them each a soda.

Ford took his with a smile. “Thanks, Mr. Ramirez.”

“Aw, just call me Soos,” he said. “So what're you using this stuff for, again? You two going to build an enemy fort or something?”

Stan chugged his soda and belched. “We're gonna build a boooat,” he said, burping the last word.

“Dan gave us his since it was half-eaten,” Ford explained. Soos nodded like this made total sense.

“You ever want me to help you with that, you let me know,” Soos said.

Ria nodded. “It would do him good to get out of the house and work muscles other than his thumbs.”

“Hey!” Soos nudged her with an elbow, chuckling.

“Sounds good,” Stan said. “Hey, could you show us how to do, like, a break room or something below deck? Like the stuff you had in the fort?”

“Sure!”

Stan grinned. He started to bounce on his toes. “And maybe we could do the up-and-down wall –”

“Battlements,” Ford supplied.

“– instead of a regular rail, and some laser cannons and maybe a tank missile with –”

“We're building a boat, not a floating fortress,” Ford laughed.

“Why not? We're gonna need some way to protect all the treasure we'll find!”

Ria stood back and looked at the truck. “Is everything ready to go?”

Ford gave her a thumbs-up. “We're good. Let's get this stuff to the boat!”

“Come back any time,” Soos said with a wave. “Homemade forts are just like hearts. They're always better –”

“– with more people in them,” Ria finished. She kissed him and she and the twins hopped into the truck. Stan sat squeezed between Ford and Ria. He twisted back to watch Soos waving goodbye.

“You know, your abuelito's pretty cool,” he said.

She nodded, smiling with pride. “The coolest.”

Chapter End Notes

I love doing these shorts! Expect them to link up to other episodes and shorts in the future. I want to make this Relativity Falls summer experience as in-depth as possible. Comments? Questions? Quiches? Leave them below or stick them in the oven.
Seriously, those questions aren't going to bake themselves!
Early update because it's Thanksgiving! I am thankful for my family, my health, rainbows, photosynthesis, and definitely the writers and artists who crafted the Gravity Falls Series. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I'm afraid your services won't be required, here, sir.”

Stan and Ford sat in front of Mabel's yellow armchair, watching a rerun of Duck-tective. Stan was folding invoices from the Gift Shop into a fleet of paper boats. Ford had gotten out a bowl of popcorn to snack on. Both boys had their eyes glued to the screen, but when Stan tried to sneak some popcorn, Ford smacked his hand.

On the TV, the constable was standing with Ducktective at the scene of the crime: an obviously-fake body had gotten smashed by a falling telephone booth. The constable gestured at it haughtily. “My men have examined the evidence, and this is obviously an accident.”

The duck quacked, and subtitles showed up: “Accident, constable? Or is it...murder?”

“What?!” the constable yelped.

The show cut to a commercial.

“That duck is a genius!” Stan said. He loved any show where the police got shown up, especially by talking poultry.

Ford shrugged, leaning back against the chair. “Eh. It's easier to find clues when you're that close to the ground.”

“Are you saying you could outwit Ducktective?” Stan challenged.

“Stanley, I have very keen powers of observation. For example, just by smelling your breath, I can tell you have been eating...” He sniffed and then frowned. “An entire bag of dog bones?”

“Waddles made them look so good!”

“Hey dudes!” Ria came skidding down the hall, broom in hand, eyes lit up with excitement. “You'll never guess what I found!”

“Buried treasure!” Ford shouted.

“Buried – hey!” Stan laughed, punching Ford on the arm. “I was gonna say that!”

Ria led them down one of the hallways on the ground floor of the Shack. They'd explored it only once before, and it was just as creepy as Stan remembered. It was really dark – Mabel liked unscrewing light bulbs in seldom-used rooms, to “save the trees” – and the walls were covered with cobwebs and dusty portraits. A grandfather clock stood against one wall, its pale face gleaming in the
half-light like a giant eye. Stan kept a good hold on one corner of Ford's jacket, just in case.

Just past the clock, there a door recessed into the wall. Something about it looked weird. Then Stan noticed that it looked exactly like the wall – same wall paper, same moulding at the bottom. It was like the door was camouflaged.

Ria held the broom close to her chest, as if trying to shield herself from an impending monster attack. “So I was cleaning up,” she explained, “when I found this secret door, hidden behind the wallpaper. It's crazy-bonkers creepy!”

She pushed the door open.

Creeeeek.

“What is this, a monster movie?” Stan muttered nervously.

The room was dark. There was just one window in the corner, and the air was thick with the smell of moths and dust. Weird figures loomed everywhere, giving an impression of a roomful of monsters with distorted limbs and squiggly tentacles, backlit in the window's pale, ghostly glow.

*Sure, not creepy at all.*

Ford went first, clicking on his flashlight. The creepy shapes were actually men and women who had been frozen in time, ready to come to life at the first sign of the zombie apocalypse –

“Whoa,” Ford breathed, “it's like some kind of wax museum.”

Stan was slightly disappointed. “Yeah...wax.”

Still, his “frozen in time” theory wasn't far off. A lot of the figures were people he recognized from history: Queen Elizabeth, who'd been ruling since the Dark Ages...Genghis Khan, who was missing his hawk from the Gisney movie but still looked pretty tough...Robin Hood, who loved taking gold from rich people (Stan's kind of guy). There was even a wax Sherlock Holmes, which Ford was already mooning over.

Stan took a closer look. They really did look like they were real people frozen in time. Elizabeth's scepter shone like real gold (it wasn't, he checked), and he could see the texture of hair in Shakespeare's pointy beard. One wax lady even came with an ax. He tested the blade: it was surprisingly sharp.

“They're so lifelike,” he said.

“Cept for that one,” Ford said, shining his light on a wax lady's frumpy purple dress.

“HELLO!”

“GAH!”

Stan and Ford leapt back from the figure, bumping into Ria, who promptly dropped the broom.

Ford the shone the light on the figure's face. It laughed, its eyes sunken, its nose hairs glistening.

“It's just me, your Grauntie Mabel!”

Stan, Ford, and Ria made a mad rush for the door, screaming all the while.
Eventually their Grauntie calmed everyone down, mostly by bribing them with money. (It took $20 dollars to calm Stan down. He would've gone for $30, but Mabel threatened to feed his cash to Waddles.) By then, Ria had found the light switch and screwed a fresh lightbulb into the lamp on the ceiling. The light flickered on, so they could see how creepy the wax figures were up close and personal.

“Behold!” Grauntie Mabel announced, spreading her arms. “The Gravity Falls Wax Museum! It was one of our most popular attractions...before I forgot all about it. I got 'em all!” She walked through the figures, gesturing as she went. “Genghis Khan, Sherlock Holmes...” She reached a particularly gruesome one with a giant head and suspenders. “Some kinda...I dunno, Goblin Man...”

Ford was edging away from a wax statue of Thomas Edison. “Ugh...is anyone else getting the creeps, here?”

“And now, for my personal favorite, wax Abraham Lincoln, right over – oh, OH NO!”

She stared down at a pile of melted wax, which had been directly in front of the window. Lincoln had melted right down to his boots and top hat, which lay in a purplish wax puddle next to the figurine's stand.

Mabel clutched at her fez in frustration. “Oh, come on! Who left the blinds open?! Wax John Wilkes Booth, I'm lookin' in your direction!” Stan went over to her as she crouched down and poked sadly at the puddle. “How do you fix a wax figure?” she groaned.

“Aw, cheer up, Grauntie Mabel!” Stan said. “Here, wanna pull my finger? Pull it pull it pull it!” He jabbed her with his finger. She grunted and stood up.

_Hmm, so the finger ain't workin' its magic...time for Plan B!

“Don't worry, Grauntie Mabel,” he said, “guess who can make you a brand new wax figure? THIS GUY!” He grabbed Ford's sleeve and yanked him over.

“Hey! Stanley!”

“You really think you can make one of these puppies?” Mabel asked Ford.

“What? No, Stan, c'mon!” He tried to wriggle out of Stan's grip.

“No way out of it!” he said gleefully, putting his brother in a chokehold. “Besides, aren't you the one always doodling stuff in your notebook? You're the best artist in class!” He finally let his brother go.

“That's drawing,” he said, rubbing at his throat. “Not sculpting. They're completely different! You have to think three-dimensionally and shape the negative space as much as the positive space!”

Stan knew Ford had already changed his mind when he started using fancy vocabulary. He grinned. “Well, I'm positive you can do it, Sixer! I'll even help you! Waddaya say?”

Ford looked at the pile of wax. He put his finger to his chin and squinted his eyes, considering. “Hmmmm...”

Ford was still standing in the exact same pose in the parlor, where they'd moved the wax so Ford had more space to sculpt it. (He had, however, put on his safety goggles and lab coat, in case things got messy. He was definitely glad he'd remembered to pack them, no matter how much Stanley teased
him for it.) Ria had helped him reshape the wax into a huge rectangular prism, and they'd cooled it by cranking the air conditioner. It was ready to go, but Ford still couldn't decide what to sculpt with it.

“FORD!”

“AH!” Ford jumped a foot in the air. Stanley snorted with laughter. “Geez, Stan, what is it??”

His brother grinned. “I came up with some great ideas for your wax figure! Look!” Stan thrust a notebook into Ford's hands.

Ford looked down. Stan had scribbled a rather disturbing sketch of a pirate crossed with a kraken: ten green octopus arms, three of them ending in peg legs, writhed and curled under an enormous squid head with an eye patch and a three-corner hat. Gold necklaces and, inexplicably, handlebar mustaches decorated its tentacles.

“Um, I was thinking of carving something from real life,” Ford said. He was actually thinking of carving Nikolai Tesla, one of the unsung geniuses of the Electric Age. He'd noticed a wax replica of that idea-stealing sneak Edison, and he wanted to make sure Tesla wasn't left out of his rightful place in the winner's circle.

Stan was already sketching his next idea. “Or you could do, like, a hotdog, with big arms!” He rapidly sketched the idea in the notebook. Ford grinned. It was kind of cool to see Stan using a notebook just like he did.

“Sure, but maybe something...else? Like – like someone in our family,” he suggested.

“Kids!” Grauntie Mabel called, walking into the room. She had both arms raised above her head, and the armpits of her blazer were decidedly wet and smelly. “Have you seen my deodorant?” She stepped directly into a beam of golden sunlight. It was like a spotlight shining down, an instant realization of inspiration. A message that told him exactly what to carve into that giant block of wax.

Ford glanced at Stan, who gave him a Look that said they were thinking exactly the same thing.

“Oh, Muse,” Ford said aloud, “you work in mysterious ways.”

It took hours to carve. Ford started by borrowing Ria's vacuum to heat up some of the wax and make it drip off. Stan collected the wax in buckets and went off to dye them – the finished figurine would have lots of different colors, but Ford didn't want to waste time guessing how much wax they'd need of each color. He was going to carve it all, then use the dyed wax on top, to create the clothes, hair, and accessories.

Ford shaped the general outline of the figure while the wax was still soft from the vacuum. Then he waited until it had cooled to carve out the finer details with a hammer and chisel. He'd started from the top and gotten halfway to the bottom when Stan tapped him on the shoulder.

“Yo, bro, take a break,” he said. He held out a glass of juice, another one already in his hand.

“That's not Mabel juice, is it?” Ford asked cautiously.

“Nah. Regular OJ. Looks good so far,” Stan said, nodding at the statue.
Ford swallowed the juice in two huge gulps. “Thanks. Having extra fingers really comes in handy when you're sculpting. Where's Ria, anyway?”

“I sent her to keep Grauntie Mabel busy between tour bus groups.” He briefly explained an idea he'd had for an exhibit in the Museum – a “Corn-Icorn,” which was basically a unicorn made out of corn. Ria had pitched the idea to Grauntie Mabel, who instantly loved it and had started building it right away. Stan figured it would keep them busy forever, since Waddles would keep eating it as fast as they built it.

Ford snorted with laughter. “That was pretty clever, Stanley.”

“Yeah, well,” Stanley said, puffing out his chest. “What can I say? I'm full of great ideas!”

“Like a hotdog with big arms?”

Stanley shoved him and they laughed. “Alright, Sixer, enough talk! Grauntie Mabel's gonna take a break and come in here eventually!”

With Stanley egging him on, it seemed to take no time at all to finish the sculpture. Stanley luged in bucket after bucket of dyed wax and warmed them up, while Ford slapped it on the statue in all the right places and began shaping the details of the statue. The skirt, the hair, the fez...

Finally Ford stepped back, exhausted but extremely proud. Ria had come to watch towards the end, since their Grauntie was still busy with the last batch of tourists.

“Wow,” Ria said, a little awed.

“That's my bro-bro,” Stan said proudly. “This thing looks amazing, Sixer.”

Ford finished using the chisel to shape the lines in the hair. He stepped down the ladder and stood back with the others, looking over his work. “I think... it's done,” he decided.

“Could use some glitter,” Stan pointed out.

Ria nodded. “Agreed.”

Ford grabbed the bucket at the same time as Stan, and together they threw a whole bucket of pink-purple glitter at the statue.

As if on cue, the door opened and Grauntie Mabel walked in, checking her watch.

“Alright kids, last bus came through so I'm gonnaAAAAH!”

She promptly fell over and tried to scramble away before her own feet tripped her up. She sat up again and Ford watched eagerly as she took in his creation.

It was an exact likeness of their Grauntie Mabel, perfectly life-size, wearing her usual fez, blazer, skirt, and corny smile. Its left hand was planted firmly on its hip, in an I-will-take-charge-now kind of pose, and her right arm was held up in a bicep curl, like she was flexing her old-lady muscles. The whole thing was almost indistinguishable from Grauntie Mabel herself, which made Ford really glad they'd added a coating of glitter (although he wouldn't put it past his Grauntie to cover herself in glitter, too).

“Sooh?” Ford prompted, leaning over her. “Waddaya think?”

“I think...” She threw up her arms, smiling hugely. “The Wax Museum's back in business!”
Stan actually didn't mind doing chores the next day. He painted the huge banner they used to advertise the Wax Museum's Grand Re-Opening, and yelled at Boyish Dan to keep it straight when Dan hung it across two huge poles. They set up a display of their favorite wax figures on the porch of the Shack, which they were using for a stage. Queen Elizabeth, Genghis Khan, and a few others stood behind Grauntie Mabel's life-size replica, which glittered even in the shade of the Shack. They’d set up the rest of the figures in the Museum. Ford kept trying to sneak back there to melt Edison (“But we should have a statue of Tesla instead!” he kept saying), so Mabel stuck him on ticket booth duty with Dan.

Stan's job was to stand on the seat of her Diablo bike and wave people into the parking lot with corn dogs. The corn dogs were partly to make him look like a real traffic director, and partly because he was hungry. Waving his arms nonstop was actually hard work, even if he looked awesome doing it, and there were a lot of people coming in. He even saw a huge truck with a couple of guys inside who had to be Dan's uncles or something – they had barrel-shaped chests, bright red hair, and flannel shirts.

He had just waved in a blue van with Gravity Falls Gossiper written on the side, when he heard the “Announcement” music coming from the stage.

“It's starting!” he shouted. He crammed the last bites of hot dog into his mouth and ran to get Ford.

“It's starting, it's starting!” he shouted, but it came out as “Pfft pfft, pfft pfft!”

Ford cracked a grin. “Um, what?”

Stanley grabbed him and hauled him to the stage as their grauntie took the podium. Ria, who was handling the music, switched off the radio and set it down behind her electronic keyboard.

Grauntie Mabel tapped the microphone, which gave an ear-piercing whine, and threw a handful of confetti and donuts into the air. “WELCOME GRAVITY FALLS!” she shouted, as crows immediately began dive-bombing the donuts.

Stan took a rubber band from his back pocket, pulled it back with one finger and beaned a crow on the head, scaring the rest away.

Mabel continued like nothing had happened. “You all know me, folks – town darlin' Miss Mystery! Please, boys...” She batted her eyes. (Stan and Ford gagged.) “Control yourselves!”

The audience stared blankly.

“As you know, I always bring this town novelties and befuddlement, the likes of which the world has never known! But enough about me,” Mabel said, and grinned. She grabbed the sheet they’d thrown over her replica. “Behold – me!”

She pulled off the sheet. The audience stared blankly at the statue, which glittered and grinned like a Senior-Citizen Barbie.

“Yeah!” said Ria's keyboard. “Y-y-y-y-yeah!”

The audience looked about as unimpressed as possible. One person clapped, and another coughed.

Mabel grabbed the mike from the podium and detached it. “And now a word from our own – Fordinardo!”
It's just 'Ford','’ Stan whispered, as she passed the microphone to his brother.

“Uh,” Ford glanced at his brother. They both knew what happened the last time he'd gotten up in front of an audience.

“I got this, bro,” Stan said. He grabbed the mike and strode forward, throwing up his arm like he'd seen Mabel do. “Stan Pines here, folks! And isn't this the most amazing hand-made wax replica you've ever seen? It took hours to carve – days, even – and it's covered with our blood, sweat, tears, and other fluids!”

Several people in the audience groaned, looking nauseated. Stan grinned wickedly. “Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about! Alright, who's got questions! You there!”

“Crazy Chu, local kook,” she said, standing up. Several bits of hay stuck out of her hat and hair. “Are the wax figures alive and, follow-up question, can I survive the wax man uprising?”

“Sure! Next question!”

A fat-looking chump with mouse-brown hair and a tacky green shirt raised his hand. “Um, Thompson Gables, Gravity Falls Gossiper,” he said, sweating visibly. “Do you really think this constitutes a wonder of the world?”

“You're microphone's a turkey-baster, Thomspson,” Grauntie Mabel said.

“Well, yeah, but –”

“Next question!”

A guy in a pinstriped tuxedo stood up, with Crest-white teeth and shampoo-commercial-perfect hair. A camera man stood up next to them, like they were connected at the hip.

“Alexander Anker, a real reporter,” he said, with a condescending glance at Thompson. Stanley instantly disliked him. “Your flyer said there would be free pizza upon admission to this event. Is this true?” He held up one of Mabel's flyers. There was a pizza shaped like a pac man on it, with a speech bubble announcing “Free Pizza” at the top in orange letters.

“Yeah!” someone else called out. “Where's the pizza?”

“Piz-za! Piz-za!”

“I want my pizza.”

Mabel froze. “Uh, that was a typo. GOOD NIGHT EVERYONE!” she shouted, and threw a smoke bomb on the stage. Every started coughing, but Stan climbed the podium to get above the smoke. He caught sight of his Grauntie grabbing the box of cash from the ticket booth and running into the shack, slamming the door behind her.

“What a ripoff!” someone shouted, coughing. Someone balled up their flyer and threw it at the stage, and soon the place was snowballed with them.

“Hey!” Stan grabbed a few and started throwing them back.

The audience stormed off, knocking over chairs as they went. One lady decided knocking them over wasn't enough and actually broke it over her knee.

“FOR GRAUNTIE MABEL!” Stan shouted, and took a flying leap off the stage, flattening the
angry chair-breaker. He bit and flailed his fists at her and anyone else who came near, crushing even more chairs to bits in the process. Pretty soon the audience cleared out, although the Boyish Dan look-alikes paused at the exit to punch the poles holding the banner, screaming “In your face!” and growling like grizzlies.

Stan surveyed the damage. The front lawn was covered in chair parts, the banner was fluttering like a torn flag in the wind, and someone had scribbled stuff in red ink on the bottom of one of the poles – Stan was too far away to read it without his glasses. He turned around. Up on stage, the podium, Wax Mabel, and the other statues were still intact. Dan was absently scratching his beard like this was just another typical day at the Shack, and Ford was peeking out from behind the podium, wary but unharmed. Stanley grinned. He'd never gotten to punch so many people in one day before.

“I think that went well,” he said, as one of the poles came crashing down behind him.

They spent the afternoon hanging out inside. Grauntie Mabel had closed the Shack for the rest of the day, concerned about getting more angry customers from town.

That was fine with Ford.

At the moment, he was lying on his stomach in the living room, absently reading *Wacky Magazine* while Stan polished Wax Mabel. He'd propped it up against Mabel's ugly yellow armchair, exactly where the real Mabel liked to hang out, and was spitting into a dirty sock to clean some dirt off its shoulder.

Ford glanced over at his brother, glad for the second time today that Stan had taken the stage instead of him. He didn't know what he would've done if the crowd went nuts like that at him. How did Stan act so brave all the time?

Grauntie Mabel walked into the room, running her thumb along the bundle of cash they'd made today. “Hot pumpkin pie, look at all this cash!” she laughed. “I owe it all to one person...”

Both twins looked up.

“This guy!” She gestured to her wax replica.

“Hey!” Stan yelped.

“Allright, you too, you little gremlins,” she said, reaching down to mess up both their hair at once. “Now run along and get to bed! We got a long day of fleecin' rubes tomorrow to make up for closing early. Get in your pajamas and get your pajamas on – and no, Stan, battle armor does not count as sleepwear!” she added, as soon as Stanley opened his mouth. She picked up Ford by the back of his jacket and gave them both a shove towards the hall. “Go, go!”

Ford glanced back. She was leaning her arm against Wax Mabel like they were best friends, sighing “Kids” in a very dramatic voice. Ford rolled his eyes. Exactly how weird was their Grauntie, anyway?

It took Ford and Stan several minutes to get into their pajamas, mostly because neither of them wanted to. Finally they did it and headed to the bathroom to brush their teeth.

Ford got out their toothbrushes and passed one to his brother. Stan took out the tube of toothpaste
“Ew, Stan, stop it, that's too much!” Ford protested. He looked at the droopy mound of bluish paste dripping over his brush. “It looks like a unicorn took a dump on it!”

“More for you, less for me!” Stan chirped, tossing the toothpaste back in the drawer. “Get clean for both of us, Sixer, I'm goin' to bed.”

“Oh no you don't!” Ford said. He leaped and tackled Stan, sending them both to the floor with a thud. Ford tried to stick his toothbrush into Stan's mouth. “Hold still and clean those pearly whites!”

“Ew! Ugh, Ford, c'mon!” Stan laughed, trying (but not that hard) to shove him off. Ford squealed as Stan started tickling him, and they rolled on the floor, both of them laughing and trying to brush each other's teeth with the toothbrush – which by now was dripping toothpaste everywhere.

Suddenly Stan stopped squirming and Ford nearly hit him in the eye with the brush.

“Stan! Be careful!”

Stan wasn't paying attention. He craned his head. “Hey, do you hear that?”

Ford listened.

“No!” Grauntie Mabel was yelling. “No, no, nooo!”

They dumped the brush and ran downstairs.

Mabel was standing in the living room, in the dark, shaking and holding herself. Lying prone on the carpet in front of her, lit by the eerie glow of TV static, was the wax replica of their Grauntie. But the replica was missing its head.

“W-wax Mabel,” she stammered. “She's been – m-m-murdered!”

As if on cue, the grandfather clock at the top of the stairs chimed, its deep bell ringing ten times in the dark, silent house. Ford shivered.

Grauntie Mabel insisted on calling the cops, who arrived an hour later, each with a Starducks coffee in their hand. They were the same guys who had been policing the lake a few days ago. This time, Ford got a close-up look at them.

One of them was tall and skinny as a beanpole, his long blond hair tied back in a pony tail. The other was a bit shorter, with dark brown hair, ear studs, and tattoos up his arms and neck. They both had long noses and vaguely bored expressions, like being cops was something they did just to pass the time.

Ford and Stan had stayed in the living room, and Mabel was so upset she forgot to nag them about going to bed or brushing their teeth. (Not that they were going to remind her.) Stan was kneeling by the statue's chopped-off neck, staring at it like the head would show up and reattach itself any second.

“I got up to use the john, right?” she was telling the officers, nervously tapping her fingers together. “And when I come back – WHAM-O! She's headless!”

Stan touched the statue. “It just got chopped off,” he said wonderingly. “Like a TV show right
before the commercial...

Ford rubbed Stan's back. “Who would do something like this?” he wondered aloud. And more importantly, had they been aiming for the wax replica, or for their Grauntie Mabel...

The beanpole-cop was taking notes in a little notebook while the other officer held their drinks. “What's your opinion, Sheriff Velazquez?”

The Sheriff passed his cup back and turned to Mabel. “Look, we'd love to help you, but let's face the facts,” he said. “This case is unsolvable.”


“You take that back, Sheriff!” Mabel demanded.

“Yeah, you're kidding, right?” Ford stepped forward. “There must be evidence, clues... Y'know, I could help if you wanted!”

“He's really good,” Stan added. “He figured out who was eating our tin cans!”

Ford nodded seriously. “Waddles the Pig will eat anything.”

“Yeah, yeah – let the boy help!” Grauntie Mabel said. “He's got a little brain up in his head!”

The Sheriff snorted with laughter. “Aw, kid, I know you're from the city and all, but not every crime is like the ones you see on TV. What, d'you think all you have to do is look up some fancy forensic terms on your cell phone?”

The other cop laughed, leaning all chummy against Velazquez. “Betcha he'd try to look up the T.O.D. for a wax figure!”

Velazquez grinned. “Probably! Kid, you are adorable!”

Ford stared at him. “Adorable?” he repeated. The officers laughed, and Ford felt a weird pressure building up in his head. He gritted his teeth, scowling darkly.

“Look, P.J., leave the mystery-solving to the professionals, okay?” the Sheriff said. The two officers high-fived.

The walkie-talkie strapped to Sheriff’s shirt buzzed. “Attention all units, Thompson is about to fit an entire cantaloupe into his mouth. Repeat: An entire cantaloupe.”

“It's a 23-16!” said the blond cop.

“Let's move.”

The two officers sprinted for the door, sloshing coffee and whooping with laughter.

Ford stared after them. Was that it? There was a potential homicidal maniac on the loose and they were going to go watch someone stuff a melon down his throat?! That wasn't even physically possible! And Ford was too smart enough to solve a case!

“That's it!” he shouted. “Stanley, you and I are going to solve this mystery! Then we'll see who's 'adorable',” he growled. Talking that low made his throat itch and he sneezed.

Stan smiled. “Awww, you sneeze like a kitten!”
Ford glared at him.

Unfortunately, Mabel finally remembered that people need sleep at night. She practically forced them to go back to bed. Ford made her promise to stay out of the living room until they woke up, so she wouldn't accidentally contaminate the crime scene.

“Contaminate the crime scene?” she'd repeated. “Exactly how many crime shows do you watch, kid?”

Nonetheless, she'd agreed, and the next morning Ford got up bright and early to start work on the case. Stan had made caution tape by writing “Do Not Cross” on toilet paper in bright red marker, and then flinging the roll around to mark the perimeter of the room. In the meantime, Ford had set up a bulletin board with “Suspects” tacked to the top. Underneath it was a collage of photographs showing yesterday's audience members, including one guy Ford was almost sure was a ghost because he was so pale and bald. Ford stood back and looked it over, tapping his chin with his pen.

“Wax Mabel has lost her head, and it's up to us to find it,” Ford said.

Stan took out the camera from their hiking trip and started snapping pictures of Wax Mabel's body.

“This is so cool. We're like a real-life detective team!”

“There were a lot of unhappy customers at the unveiling,” Ford continued, turning back to the board.

“The murderer could have been anyone.”

“Yeah! Even us!”

“In this town, anything's possible,” he agreed. He took the journal out of his jacket and started flipping the pages. “Ghosts, zombies...it could be months before we find our first clue.”

“Hey look! A clue!”

Ford looked. Stan was pointing at the ground in front of Wax Mabel's chopped-off head. There were –

“Footprints in the shag carpet!”

Ford examined them closely while Stan snapped more pictures. They were big-ish, definitely bigger than a kid's, and it looked like the perpetrator had walked around the body. In one place, though, he had stood still: Ford could clearly see two prints, a left foot and a right foot, side by side near the body's shoulder. The right footprint had a bit of carpet fluffed up in the middle.

“That's weird,” Stan said, kneeling next to Ford. He'd noticed the prints, too. “They've got a hole in them.”

It was the only possible explanation – shoes with a hole would leave a bit of carpet untouched with every step. Ford started to follow the other prints. “It looks like they're leading to...”

Stan followed him to the back of the yellow armchair.

An ax lay on the ground, its dull edge gleaming. They gasped and shared a serious Look.

Someone trying to kill Wax Mabel wouldn't have bothered standing behind the chair. But if someone was trying to kill the real Mabel, then they'd have to sneak up from behind.
Someone had actually tried to murder their Grauntie!

There was no time to lose. They decided to go straight to the only lumberjack they knew – Boyish Dan.

Unfortunately, Boyish Dan was out today, and they found Ria at the cash register instead.

“What's up, little dudes?” she asked.

“Someone killed Wax Mabel last night,” Ford told her.

“Oh yeah. Heard about that.” She nodded with a worried look towards the newspaper stack they kept by the door. “Gravity Falls Gossip's got a front-page story on it.”

“We think we've found the murder weapon,” Ford began, but Stan yanked the ax out of his hands.

“Check it out! And it's not the same one we have for making Ford chop firewood. We were gonna show it to Boyish Dan.” He passed it to Ria.

“Hmm…”

Ford looked at Stan. Why'd you show it to Ria? He asked silently. It's not like she's an ax expert. Stan shrugged.

“So what do you think?” Ford asked.

“In my opinion...this is an ax,” Ria said.


Ford blinked. “The what?”

“Those two guys who looked like they were Boyish Dan's uncles,” Stan explained. “They broke the poles we used to hold up the banner!”

Ford snapped his fingers. He remembered hearing the crack of the breaking wood from behind the podium, and peeking out to see what was happening. “Of course!” he said, unison with Stan.

“They were furious when they didn't get their free pizza!”

“Furious enough...” Stanley posed, shaking his fists. “…for murder!”

“Oh, you mean Kevin and Marcus!” Ria said. “Yeah, they hang out at this crazy-intense biker joint downtown.”

Stan nodded grimly. “Then that's where we're going.”

“Dude, this is awesome!” Ria waved the ax excitedly. “You two are like, the mystery twins!”

“Don't call us that,” Ford said flatly.

The two of them were heading out the door a few minutes later. Ford had packed the ax in his backpack with the handle sticking out. Stan said he had already rigged up a couple of fake ID cards, just in case. Waddles oinked at them as they passed, drawing Mabel's attention. She'd pulled up onto the lawn Ria's pick-up truck.

“Hey, kids!” she called. “Give me a hand with this coffin, wouldja?”
“Coffin?” Stan asked, as they walked over. She was muscling a large oak coffin from the bed of the truck. It slipped out of her grasp and landed head-first on the ground, narrowly missing Ford's feet. He stepped back quickly.

Mabel leaned on the truck, breathing a little heavily. “I'm doin' a memorial service for Wax Mabel,” she explained. “Something small, but classy.”

“Sorry, Grauntie Mabel, but we've got a big break in the case,” Ford said.

“Break in the case!” Stan echoed.

“We're heading into town to interrogate the murderer.”

Stan grabbed the ax from his backpack. “We have an ax!” he said, pretending to chop the air. “Ree! Ree! Ree!”

Mabel squinted thoughtfully. “Hmm...sounds like the kind of thing a responsible adult wouldn't want you doing...good thing I'm an aunt! AVENGE ME, KIDS!” she shouted. “AVENGE MEEEE!”

Stanley covered his mouth to keep from giggling. (That would be such an un-cool thing to do.) He and Ford had been walking around town when they'd finally found a likely-looking biker's bar. It was called Skull Fracture and there was a big muscly guy in front, just like in the movies. They'd hid behind a dumpster to scope it out. Well – Ford had hidden behind the dumpster. Stan had climbed straight into it. Old guys had B.O., right? So he figured a little dumpster dive would help him smell like an 18+ punk with attitude.

Ford sidled along the dumpster and peered around the corner. He checked a card in his pocket where he'd written the address. “This is the place,” he said.

They both peeked out again just as the muscly guy looked their way. They jerked back with a gasp.  

_This is so cool!_

“Got the fake IDs?”

Stan grinned and passed them to Ford. His brother looked up at him. “Seriously, Stan?”

“What? They're fake! Kind of!”

His brother sighed. “Here goes nothing.”

The bouncer was scowling at nothing in particular when he was approached. He took one look at the ID he'd been handed and raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, we don't serve miners,” he said.

The miner waved his arms – and his pickaxe – in frustration. “Daaaaang-nabbit!” he grumbled. He spat on the ground and shuffled away.

Ford and Stan walked up next. The guy looked even bigger up close. He had a nose piercing just like a bull between his nostrils, and tattoos stretched across his biceps, triceps, and forearm-ceps.

Stanley puffed out his chest to look bigger. “We're here to interrogate Kevin and Marcus, the lumberjacks, for the murder of Wax Mabel,” he said confidently. He and Stan held out their cards.
They were sort-of fake, which meant that they were actual IDs he'd pick-pocketed from the people he had fought in the audience. He'd scribbled pictures of him and Ford in crayon and taped them to the picture part of the ID.

The guy shrugged. “Works for me.”

He pushed open the door with one hand. Stan grinned and practically ran inside, Ford following behind him.

The interior was just as dark, smelly, and crusty as Stan had pictured it would be. Most of the lighting came from cheesy neon signs on the walls, saying stuff like “Exit”, “Neon,” and “Bikers Only.” The place was a mostly-guy zone, with everybody wearing bandanas around their foreheads and sleeves with their shirts rolled up. There was a huge fight going on between four guys in the middle of the room, which everyone was totally ignoring, even though fists and a couple of teeth were flying through the air.

“Now this is my kind of place,” Stan said as they walked in, stepping over some guy who lay flat on the floor.

“Alright, let's just...try to blend in,” Ford said.

“Says the guy who smells like baby wipes,” Stan said.

“To the guy who smells like rotting grapefruit.” He hiked his backpack higher on his shoulders. “Just stay put. I'll be back in a minute, okay?”

“You got it!” Stan hopped up on a barstool, next to a teenage biker dude with spikes in his black leather vest. He whipped out a deck of cards from his back pocket and tapped the guy's thick arm. “I'm thinkin' your a poker guy. Am I right?”

The guy snarled.

“Texas Hold 'Em. Got it.” Stan grinned and fanned the cards. “Wanna make the game more interesting?”

In no time at all, Stan had attracted two more customers eager to part with their money: a guy with an enormous handlebar mustache named Sal, and another dude with a skull-and-crossbones tattooed on his forehead named, for no apparent reason, “Lawnmower.”

The guys stubbornly refused to bet money, but even so, it took only three games for Stan to win an assortment of random prizes: three Choco Bars, a book of matches, a few rubber bands, an 8-ball from the pool table, and a cigarette lighter with a cool triangle design on the side.

“But you don't even smoke!” Lawnmower protested.

“And now, neither will you.” Stan grabbed the lighter and waved it, grinning. “You're welcome!”

Ford tapped his shoulder. “Stanley! Big break in the case!”

Stan scooped up his prizes and hopped off the stool. “Later, guys!”

“Don't forget, Thursday night at Sal's!”

“You got it!”

Once they were out of Skull Fracture, Stan dumped his stuff in Ford's backpack. Ford filled him in
on what he'd learned as they headed down the street.

He'd found Dan and his two uncles sitting in the corner. Boyish Dan and Marcus, the younger uncle, were locked in mortal combat (aka arm wrestling). Kevin, the older uncle, had been practicing his on a Biceptikus. Kevin told Ford that he and Marcus had been punching the clock, literally, at the same time the murder had occurred.

“And this is a left-handed ax,” Ford finished, hefting the weapon.

Stan stared at it doubtfully. “Left-handed? How can you even tell?”

“He's a lumberjack, Stanley, of course he could tell.”

Stan held in a snicker. That was the tone Ford used when he had absolutely no idea.

His twin flipped open his nerd-notebook, where he'd written down a list of people from yesterday with columns for being left- and right-handed on the side.

“These are all our suspects,” Ford said. “Kevin and Marcus are both right-handed. That means all we gotta do is find a left-handed suspect, and we've got our killer.”

“Oh, man! We are on fire today!” Stan shouted, shaping his hands into guns and firing at the sky.

“Pzow! Pzow! Pzow!”

“Let's find that murderer!”

They high-sixed.

It was a lot harder than they thought.

For one thing, Ford's list was over two pages long. And the writing was tiny. Stan thought they should just go door to door throwing things at people to see which hand they catch with (which they did end up doing for the angry lady, since they didn't want to get near her. Turned out to be a good call – they threw a baseball and she crushed it with one hand.)

But stick-in-the-mud Ford thought that someone would eventually call the cops on them, plus doing the same thing over and over might call the murderer's attention to what they were doing. So they had to come up with a lot of different ideas for how to tell if someone was right- or left-handed.

Crazy Chu was easy – they found her in the dump, fighting with a baby alligator. She waved at them with her right hand, which the alligator was already attempting to swallow whole.

Next up was a guy who wore a shirt that read “Make Pizza Not War”. (Did he have any other shirts?) Ford pretended to be a delivery guy and knocked on his door, asking him to sign for an empty box. Make Pizza Guy signed with his right hand and Ford walked away – with the box, which made Stan laugh at the expression on the guy's face.

After that came a guy with a cast on both arms...a girl with a cat tucked under her right arm...another guy who was spray-painting a park bench with his right hand to make it look like it was covered in bird poop... Stan lost track of how many people they'd checked, but felt like hundreds.

Stan was lying flat on the sidewalk, hoping if he played dead he wouldn't have to move another step, while Ford checked on a guy called “Lefty” at the bowling alley.
He heard the sound of Ford's footsteps coming back. “Please tell me that was our guy,” he said.

“You really are tired,” Ford commented. “No, apparently 'Lefty' is just his nickname because you only see him from his left side. There's something definitely suspicious about that…”

“So we're done?”

“Almost.” Ford held the notebook in front of Stan's face. “There's only one person left. Ring any bells?”

Stan grabbed the notebook, his eyes widening as he remembered yesterday's events. “Of course...it all makes sense!”

Sheriff Velazquez and Officer Johnson picked them up from the Shack after dinner. The cops drove them to the murderer's current location: the office of the Gravity Falls Gossiper.

Ford and Stan hopped out and raced to the door. Stan had to literally hold his breath to keep from screaming, he was so excited. An actual crimes bust! And it wasn't on him!

“You kids better be right about this, or you'll never hear the end of it,” Johnson warned.

“The evidence is irrefutable,” Ford said.

“It's soooo irrefutable!” Stan echoed.

Velazquez grinned and raised his knight stick. “Ready?”

Johnson got his out and fought off Velazquez' stick like they were playing swords. “Yeah, man, yeah!”

“Let's do this! One...two...three!”

He and Johnson kicked the doorknob, smashing the lock clear through the wooden frame. They dashed inside, Stan and Ford on their heels.

The office of the Gossiper was slightly smaller than the Shack's poster, and the walls were covered with bulletin boards, papers stapled to the wall, and a couple of poodle-themed calendars from 1982. Thomson Gables was sitting at a chipped metal desk in front of a massive typewriter, circa Jurassic Age. He was wearing the exact same clothes as he had yesterday days ago and reading a copy of the morning's Gossiper.

“NOBODY MOVE!” Valezquez shouted. “This is a raid!”

Thomson promptly fell out of his chair. “What is this? Some kind of raid?” he asked.

Johnson smashed a tacky table lamp with his night stick.

Ford marched over to Thomson. “Thomson Gables, you are under arrest for the murder of the wax body of Grauntie Mabel!”

“You have the right to remain impressed...with our awesome detective work!” Stan added, and they high-sixed again.

Thomson got to his feet, sweating nervously. “Uh, did I miss something again? Wh-what's going on
“Allow me to explain,” Ford said. “You were hoping that Grauntie Mabel's new attraction would be the story that saved your failing newspaper. But when the story was a flop, you decided to go out and make your own headline.”

Stan held up the newspaper Thomson had dropped. There was a picture of Mabel's wax head on the cover, exactly the way it looked when it got chopped off.

“But you were sloppy,” Ford continued, “and all the clues pointed to a shabby-shoed reporter who was caught left-handed.”

Stan grinned, remembering the hole in Thomson's shoe and how he'd held up the turkey baster with his left hand. “Thomson Gables,” he said smugly, crumpling up the paper, “you're yesterday's news.”

Thomson, however, had stopped sweating almost entirely. “Uh, yeah, no, that wasn't me,” he said, pointing at the crumpled paper. “I didn't have anything to do with that. And that's 95 cents, by the way.”

“I knew it!” Ford shouted, before his words sank in. He did a double-take. “Wait, wha...?”

“What was that again?” Stan asked, sticking a finger in his ear to clean it.

“95 cents.”

“No, we meant –”

“If you didn't have anything to do with it, then where were you the night of the break-in?” Johnson demanded.

“Are you kidding?? You watched me stuff three cantaloupes in my face!”

“That was after the murder,” Ford remembered. The call on Sheriff Velazquez' radio had come at least two hours after actual head-chopping. “What were you doing at exactly ten o' clock sharp?”

Thomson started to sweat again.

They watched him pop a security tape into his TV – it was so old he still used VHS. The image appeared, green-tinted and grainy, but clear. They watched as the tape showed Thomson glancing furtively around the room, tip-toe to his supply closet, and opened it.

The closet was a tiny shrine centered on a life-size cardboard cut-out of an anime character with bright blue hair tied up in pigtails. There were candles, dvd's, smaller posters, manga, and even fake cherry blossom flowers gathered around her.

“Alone at last,” Thomson sighed. He carefully removed the cut-out from the shrine and cuddled it in his arms. “Come here, my darling waifu.” He started smooching the cardboard.

“I...I don't even know how to respond to this,” Stan said finally.

Velazquez leaned closer. “Time stamp confirms it. Thomson, you're off the hook, you freak of nature.”

“Hooray!”
“But...but it has to be him!” Ford sputtered. “Check the ax for fingerprints!”

Velazquez held up the ax and dusted it while Johnson shone a tinted light on the handle. “No prints at all,” Velazquez reported.

“No prints?”

“Hey I got a headline for ya!” Johnson said to Thomson. “City Kids Waste Everyone's Time!”

“The cantaloupe headline would be a better sell,” Stan said, but Ford was looking down and biting his lip the way he always did when he got bullied. Stan looked down too. He wasn't feeling too hot, himself.

“Boy, I'd be pretty embarrassed if I was you two!” Thomson said. Behind him, the security tape showed him hugging the cut-out, whispering, “Waaaaa, Anni Mae Sempai, daisuki desu...!”

Ford watched Grauntie Mabel approach the podium. They'd moved it to the parlor for Wax Mabel's funeral service. The remaining lawn chairs had been set up inside, even though the audience consisted solely of the remaining wax figures, Ria, and the twins. Mabel had set up a small table of hot coffee and fake candles on one side of the room, and even lit a fire in the fireplace. At the front of the room, next to the podium, Wax Mabel lay in her coffin. She was positioned at a slight angle because she wouldn't quite fit with both arms sticking out to the side. The wall behind it had been decorated with drapes and a framed photo of Mabel and her wax replica. It was quiet – especially with a bunch of wax replicas for an audience – but Ford could practically hear depressing organ music. Even Stan wasn't cracking any jokes at how ridiculous this was.

Grauntie Mabel cleared her throat. “Kids...Ria...lifeless wax figures,” she began. “Thank you all for coming.” She paused to take a deep breath. “Some people might say that it's wrong for a woman to love a wax replica of herself.”

“They're wrong!” Ria shouted, springing to her feet.

“Easy, Ria.” Mabel turned to the coffin. “Wax Mabel, I hope your knitting sweaters in Wax Heaven...” She started choking up. “I'm sorry, I got glitter in my eye!”

Mabel ran for the door, sobbing loudly. Ria ran after her, leaving the twins sitting quietly in their seats. Stan stared down at the ax, lying crosswise on his lap. Ford leaned back with a sigh.

 Those cops were right about me,” he said glumly.

“Sixer, we've come so far,” Stan said. “We can't give up now!”

“But I considered everything!” Ford said, getting to his feet. “The weapon, the motive, the clues...” He walked to the coffin and peered into it. It wasn't as creepy as an actual dead body – or maybe it was, since Ford had never seen one – but the vacant spot where the head should be made his stomach feel all hollow. He was supposed to be the smart twin, but when a real mystery finally landed head-first (nor not) in his lap, he couldn't do a thing to solve it.

Stan came up next to him as Ford looked over the wax replica's body. His gaze landed on its feet. “Wax Mabel's shoe has a hole in it,” he said, not really thinking about it.

“Yeah, all the wax guys had that,” Stan said. “It's wear the pole thingie attaches to their stand dealies.”
“Wait a minute...” Ford could practically feel the answers coming together. Adrenaline zinged up his spine. “What has holes in its shoes and no fingerprints? Stanley –” he grabbed his twin, whispering urgently, “the murderers are –”

“Standing right behind you?”

They whipped around.

The wax figures were literally coming to life! They pulled themselves to their feet, groaning and stretching. Several of them were muttering threateningly, punching one hand with the other, a dangerous gleam in their creepy wax eyes.

“Wax Sherlock Holmes!” Ford exclaimed, staring in horror. “Wax Shakespeare! ...Wax Coolio?!”

“Sup homie,” Coolio said coolly.

Wax Lizzie Borden grabbed the ax from Stan, who backed up next to Ford. They leaned together, surrounded on all sides by a Wax Man uprising.

“Congratulations, my two amateur sleuths,” Sherlock said, stepping forward and looking down at them over his beaky nose. “You've unburied the truth! And now we're going to bury you.”

“What!” Ford squeaked.

“Bravo, Stanford Pines,” the detective continued, pulling Mabel's missing wax head from his trench coat. “You've discovered our little secret! Applaud, everyone! Applaud sarcastically.” The other wax figures immediately began clapping. “Ah, no, that sounds too sincere,” Sherlock said. “Slow clap, slow clap...there we go, nice improvising.”

“But – how is this possible?” Ford demanded. “You're made of wax!”

“Yeah,” Stan said. “Are you...magic?”

“Magic!” Sherlock chortled, glancing at the other figures. “He wants to know if we're magic!”

Sherlock slammed his fist onto the rim of Wax Mabel's coffin, inches from Ford's shoulder. He jumped. Sherlock loomed over him. “We're CURSED!” he shouted.

“Cuuuursed,” the other figures echoed. Wax Nixon even shook his head so his cheeks flapped like a beagle's.

Sherlock glared darkly at the twins. “Cursed to come to life whenever the moon is waxing. Your precious auntie bought us many years at a garage sale...”

“A haunted garage sale, son!” Coolio added.

_It was a gorgeous Victorian mansion set on the top of a stony hill in the middle of nowhere. Grauntie Mabel stood with her hands on her hips, looking over the wax figures crammed together in the garage._

_The mansion's owner, a short, pudgy man in a tuxedo, was rubbing his forehead with a handkerchief, obviously anxious. “I must warn you, these statues come at a terrible price.”_

_Mabel checked the tag. “Twenty dollars?! Eh I'll just take 'em when you're not lookin’.”_

“What?”
“I said I was gonna rob ya!”

“And so the Mystery Shack Wax Collection was born. By day, we would be the playthings of Man...”

Wax Coolio cut in again. “But when your auntie was asleep, we would rule the night!”

Ford tried to picture the wax guys hanging out, chatting about which tourists were the worst and taking stupid selfies of themselves with a sleeping, oblivious Grauntie Mabel. He grimaced.

Sherlock turned away, nodding, as if pleased with the idea of picking Mabel’s boogers while she slept. “It was a charmed life for us cursed beings...that is, until your auntie closed up shop.”

Ford glanced at his brother, remembering how the door they’d found had been practically covered over with wall paper and crown molding. Exactly how long had the wax guys been stuck in there, plotting their revenge?

As if he’d read his thoughts, Sherlock said, “We’ve been waiting ten years to get our revenge on Mabel for locking us away...but we got the wrong one.” He glanced at the ax in Lizzie's hand, his wax eyes glittering malevolently.

Ford swallowed. “So you're trying to murder Grauntie Mabel for real!?“

“You were right all along, Ford,” Stan said. “Wax people are creepy!”

“Enough!” Sherlock stepped towards them menacingly. “Now that you know our secret, you must...die.” His and every other wax figure's eyes rolled up at once, showing nothing but a blank, maggot-colored white. Ford and Stan quickly backed up, cornered against the refreshment table, as the wax figures advanced on them.

“What do we do, what do we do?!“ Stan yelped.

“I don't know!” Ford looked around quickly and grabbed something from the table. He started chucking anything he could get his hands on – plates, cups, spoons. They bounced right off the wax people without even slowing them down.

Trying not to panic, Ford grabbed one of the last things on the table: the hot pot of coffee. He threw it at Gengis Khan's face.

The hot sludge heated the whole front of the statue. Khan's face melted like a snow cone in the summer, and the wax on his chest bubbled and ran in long drips to his waste. He yowled in agony and stumbled backward.

“That's it!” Stan shouted, staring at the pot. “We can melt them with hot-y melty things!”

They turned and each grabbed a fake candle off the table, pointing the glowing electrical bulbs like spearheads. Sherlock and the others backed up at once, arms raised in self-defense.

“Anybody move and we'll melt you into candles!” Ford threatened.

“Decorative candles!”

“You really think you can defeat us?” Sherlock hissed, lowering his arm.
Ford and Stan looked at each other, shrugging. “Eh, well, I'm not really sure,” Ford said, as Stan muttered something about being worth a shot.

“So be it! ATTACK!”

Lizzie and Robin immediately ran for Stan, while Groucho headed straight for Ford. Ford saw Lizzie miss Stan and chop off Robin's head instead. Then he ducked as Groucho grabbed for Ford's hair. Ford dodged him and went straight for the bald guy crouching by the wall.

“Interview this, Larry King!” he shouted, slicing Wax Larry's head clean off his shoulders.

“My neck!” he wailed. “My beautiful neck!”

Groucho swung around for round two and tried to grab the candle from Ford's hands. Ford jerked away and Groucho grabbed the electric flame instead, pulling back with a surprised growl when it melted his fingers. Ford used the candle to slice him in half at the waist.

“Joke's on you, Groucho!” he said.

Groucho's top half slid for the floor. “I've heard about a cutting remark, but this is ridiculous!” he quipped. “Hey, why is there nothing in my hand?”

He splattered and Ford heard a sudden roar. He turned in time to see Khan running straight for him, hands outstretched, his face a half-melted monstrosity. Ford threw himself to the floor just as Khan jumped straight at him – and landed instead in the fireplace, his wax melting with a wet *splat.*

“Hah, Genghis Khan!” Ford said. “You fell harder than the...uh...”

“Gin Dynasty!” Stan called. Ford looked over. Somehow Stan had chopped of Shakespeare's arms. The arms were still moving and on had wrapped itself around Stan's neck. He choked and slammed the hand repeatedly in a doorjam.

Thomas Edison was sneaking up from behind him, but before Ford could make a move to help, a shadow fell over his head. He spun, slashing with the candle. Wax Nixon fell back, trying to avoid it, and nearly twisted a wax ankle. Ford sliced off Wax Coolio's head and threw it at Edison just as he grabbed for Stanley. Stan turned, caught the head on the rebound and swung it by a dreadlock, smacking three wax figures down at once.

“'Sup with that?” Coolio demanded.

“Ford, watch out!” he called, and Ford ducked and felt a wind pass over his head. He scrambled away as Wax Sherlock Holmes advanced on him.

“Alright, let's get this taken care of,” Sherlock said. He impaled the Mabel head on a stuffed rhino horn and grabbed a sword, and actual sword from a metal bucket by the fire. (Why did Mabel have a sword?!) Ford held up his candle, but Sherlock chopped it in half with one swing. As he pulled back for another swing, he heard Stan shout, “Catch!”

Ford looked up just as Stan threw a red-hot poker his way. He caught by the cool end, just in time to block the blow of Sherlock's sword. The metal clanged and Ford nearly lost his grip. He backed up quickly as Sherlock chopped and hacked at him, forcing Ford back through the house, up the stairs to the attic. Ford feinted and then lunged, slicing at Sherlock's knees, but the detective sidestepped and advanced on him. Ford stepped back again and hit the attic wall.
Sherlock practically glowed with rage. “Once your family is out of the way, we'll rule the night once again!”

He raised his sword.

The window caught Ford’s eye, its triangle-patterned glass glowing hot pink with the coming dawn.

“Don't count on it!” Ford shouted. He rolled between Sherlock's legs and sprinted for the window. He shoved it open and crawled out quickly, poker still clutched in one hand, his fingers and sneakers scrabbling for purchase on the slippery roof. He could hear Sherlock right behind him.

Ford ran straight up the steepest part of the roof, climbing as fast as he could to the top of the “SHACK” sign. He stood on top of it – it was barely five inches wide, but it was his best path of escape. He edged along the sign as quickly as he dared.

Sherlock had caught up to him and was standing at the other end of the sign. He was five feet away, but his long arms and sword gave him good reach. He chopped at Ford, his sword gleaming, and Ford parried with his iron poker. He grunted, breathing hard, his muscles going numb from absorbing the impact of so many blows. He lost his balance and dropped the poker, his arms wheeling. Sherlock's sword came down where he had been a split-second before, hitting the “S” on the sign so hard that it came loose and fell heavily to the roof. Ford tried to step back but his heel hit nothing but air. It was the end of the sign.

“You really think you can outwit me, boy!?” Sherlock demanded. “I'm Sherlock-bleeding-Holmes! Have you seen my magnifying glass? It's enormous!”

He held it up as proof, but Ford wasn't paying attention – he dropped the poker and scrambled over the “MYSTERY” sign, pulling himself over the peak of the roof and onto the other side.

Ford slipped and gave a small cry of fear as he slid down the tiles, barely catching himself on the flat part of the roof on top of the attic's bedroom window. The chimney from the parlor rose up next to him. He hid behind it, panting.

Silence.

Ford clutched the chimney tightly and peered around it, checking the roof. The glowing red sky cast an eerie light on the roof and distant trees, and the small triangular flags flapped in the breeze...but he didn't see Wax Sherlock anywhere. He turned away with a sigh of relief –

Only to see the detective standing right next to him!

Sherlock kicked Ford squarely in the stomach, send him flying to the edge of the ledge. Ford half-curls in on himself as Sherlock stood over him, his blank eyes gleaming hungrily.

“Any last words?” he asked, raising his sword for the final strike.

“Um...” Ford glanced to the side. “...you got any sunscreen?”

“'Got any'...what?”

Sherlock looked up in horror. His arms, still raised, were now in the direct path of the rising sun. Even in the cool morning air, the sunshine was hot enough to melt the sword from his hands. As the sun rose higher every second, Sherlock's hat, face, and shoulders began melting, dripping flesh-colored wax down his trench coat.
Sherlock stared. “No.”

Ford sat up, wrapped around his knees. “Y’know, letting me lead you outside?” he said. “Probably not your sharpest decision.”

“Outsmarted by a child in velcro shoes! Noooooo!” Sherlock howled. Ford watched as Sherlock, now fully in the sun, melted like ice cream soup. “Fiddlesticks! Humbug! It’s a total kerfuffle, what a hullabaloo…” By now he was a mud-colored puddle oozing off the roof.

Ford stood up, readjusting his jacket. “Case closed,” he said, dusting off his hands. He sneezed.

“Hah! You sneeze like a kitten,” Sherlock said. “Those policemen were right, you’re adorable. Adoooraaaablllle!”

His melting face fell off the roof and landed on the ground with a moist smack.

Ford’s lip curled. “Um, ew.”

The parlor was thoroughly destroyed, and frankly Stan couldn’t even figure out where all the chairs had gone. But the wax monstrosities were now only yellow and purple puddles on the floor, plus or minus a few wriggling arms and limbs, which he currently throwing into the parlor’s fireplace.

Shakespeare's head, the only part of him left intact, had been reciting poetry at him as a last line of self defense.

“Though our group be left in twain, man of wax shall rise again!” he chanted.

Stan picked up the head. “You know any limericks?” he asked.

“Uh…” Shakespeare squinted nervously. “There once was a dude from Kentucky…”

“Nope!”

Stan tossed him into the flames, which blazed with the new source of fuel. He heard a noise at the door and turned. “Ford! You’re okay! You solved the mystery after all!”

Ford smiled at him, climbing up on a chair to reach Wax Mabel's head from the rhino horn. “Yeah, well, I couldn't have done it without my sidekick.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “No offense, Sixer, but you’re the sidekick.”

“What? Says who? Are-are people saying that? Have you heard that?”

Grauntie Mabel picked that moment to walk back in. She took one look and shrieked. There were wax puddles were everywhere, the drapes had been torn down, and plastic spoons and plates had been scattered everywhere, some of them even sticking out from the walls. “Holy hot sauce! What happened to my parlor?!”

“Your wax figures turned out to be evil, so we fought them to the death!” Stan said cheerfully – and truthfully, for once.

“I decapitated Larry King,” Ford added.

Mabel laughed. “You kids and your imaginations.”
Ford smiled. “On the bright side, though...look what we found!” He held out Wax Mabel's head, which was still grinning obliviously.

“My head!” Grauntie Mabel took it and held it up, grinning hugely. “I missed this girl! Ya done good, kid! Alright, line up for some affectionate noogie-ing!”

Stan tried to back up along with Ford, quickly making excuses to avoid the noogie – he had head lice, he had a concussion, he was allergic to all words starting with “n”. Mabel ignored him and grabbed Ford, then Stan, practically scrubbing their skulls with her knuckles. Stan winced, sputtering with laughter and trying (but not really) to shove her away.

A honk made the three of them stop and look to the window. Sheriff Velazquez and his partner had pulled up in their patrol car.

“Solve the mystery yet, boys?” Velazquez called. “I'm so confident that you're gonna say 'no', that I'm going to take a nice long sip from my cup of coffee.”

Stan glanced at Ford and grinned. His brother was intentionally waiting several seconds, until Velazquez had loaded up his cheeks with the scalding liquid.

“Actually,” Ford said, “the answer is yes!”

He held out the head and Velazquez choked, spewing coffee all over the steering wheel. Johnson jerked back with a shout, then burst out laughing as the Sheriff pounded his own chest.

“Dude, you got scalded!” Johnson guffawed. He glanced over the Sheriff's head and waved at Ford “Kid, I take it back! You are destined for greatness!”

“It burns, it burns!” Velazquez shouted, hitting the gas.

“GREATNESSS!” Johnson bellowed, as the car sped away. Stan chuckled.

“So oo,” Ford said to Stan, “did you get rid of all the wax figures!”

“I am 99% sure that I did!” Stan said.

“Good enough for me!”

Mabel immediately offered to take them out for ice cream, in celebration of finding her wax copy’s head. Stan was so excited he decided not to tell them about the weird thumping he heard in the vent. It wasn't like Ford was going to get curious about it and go vent-crawling, anyway, right?

“I call shotgun!” he said, racing for the door.

“Stan, it's a motorcycle, not a car!” Ford said, running after him.

“Call it what you want, Kitten-Kid, I get first dibs!” And he laughed when Ford tried to tackle him.

Chapter End Notes

"Oh, Muse, you work in mysterious ways."

GUYS THE LINE FORD SAID THE LINE IT WAS SO PERFECT I DIED
Headhunters Short

Chapter Notes

Canon Stan:
a) bought wax sculptures,
b) knew what most of them were, and
c) likes at least one black-and-white period movie.

This proves that he likes history and nothing can convince me otherwise - even if history came to life in the last episode and tried to kill him.

Minor gore alert, but totally worth it for the fluff at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If there'd been something even halfway decent on TV, he wouldn't have let Ford drag him to the bookstore.

“Bet they have that new Tesla book I ordered,” Ford had said.

“Ohooh, Tesla.”

“Oh come on, Stan, it'll be fun! Plus, if you don't come, Grauntie Mabel will probably stick you with all the chores.”

Hard to argue with that.

They took the bus to the Farms and Nobly store in the mall. Stan left his brother drooling in the Sci Fi section and started wandering the aisles. He was pretty sure he could guilt Ford into buying him a meat-kebab after this.

That's when he saw the lady with her face cut off.

He did a double-take. There was a lady in a frilly white dress on the cover of a book, but it looked like the skin on the lower half of her face had been ripped off. In its place were bared teeth and gray, diseased tissue. Part of her throat had been ripped out, too, and her eyes were red as blood.

Cool.

He picked it up and started reading. A bunch of fancy people were fighting zombies from the very first page, sharpening knives and polishing muskets and killing “unmentionables” as calmly as swatting mosquitoes. He was still standing there reading it when Ford came to find him half an hour later.

“You find a good book?” he asked.

“Huh?” Stan looked up. “Oh, hey! Can you buy this book for me?”

Ford looked a bit surprised. “Sure. What is it, a book on how to build a sailboat?”
“Nah, borrowed one of those last week.”

“Stanley, when you say 'borrowed' –”

“Anyway,” Stan said loudly, shoving the book at his brother. “Go buy this so I don't have to borrow it, too!”

They went to work on the Stan O' War in the afternoon, same as usual. Except that Stanley had a hard time concentrating.

He kept thinking about the book. It was basically like one of Grauntie Mabel's old-lady black-and-white boring movies, just with zombies. Lots of zombies. Some of the words were weird but he mostly got the gist of it. And the Bingley guy sounded neat, he had a ton of cash and all the girls were drooling over him, imagine if Stanley was like that somed–

BANG.

“OW!”

Ford popped his head over the boat to look at Stanley where he was sitting on the deck. “You okay?”

Stan's eyes watered with pain and he squeezed his throbbing finger. He'd smashed it with a hammer.

“I think I just killed my finger.”

Ford rolled his eyes. “I kept telling you to pay attention.”

“If I'm not paying attention I'm not going to pay attention to you telling me to pay attention!”

“Okay, okay, let's go dunk it in the lake for a minute and call it a day.”

“Oh hey, Stanley,” Mabel said, walking through the living room, carrying an armful of yarn. Then she did a double-take. “Stanley?”

Well, at least she hadn't mistaken him for Ford like Ria had. He didn't look up from the book, but he did wave at her. “Sup.”

“Are you actually reading a book –”

Yes Grauntie Mabel I am actually capable of reading –

“– set in the early 1800s?!”

She swooped down and grabbed it.

“Hey!”

“You are!” She was practically dancing on the spot. “Omigosh omigosh, I didn't know you liked history!”

“Did you miss the thing with the zombies?” Stan demanded, grabbing the book back. History and
romance? He had a reputation to uphold here!

“Zombies shmombies, it makes learning about history super-fun! Look –” She dug behind the yellow armchair, pulled out a stack of books, and spread them on the carpet. She pointed. “I got _Jane Eyre_, which is basically an old-fashioned Cinderella story with a shaggy Rochester guy who's kind of a jerk but he's a _hot_ jerk, and _Gone with the Wind_ which is set in the Civil War which also has a hot guy in it, and the epically awesome _Princess Bride_ which if you skip over the part about the hats is seriously cool –”

“Isn't there a hot guy in it?” Stan asked, amused.

“A very hot guy,” she assured him. “But if you like your history with a little zombie in it, we should totally watch _Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies_!”

Stan perked up. “‘Watch’? As in movie? As in movie with zombies?”

“Abraham Lincoln _fighting_ zombies! It's a B-movie with blood and guts and Abraham Lincoln and also it's probably not appropriate for children!” She leaped to her feet. “I'm gonna get it right now!”

“I wanna come, I wanna come!”

“Let's ride!”

She scooped him up, slung him over her shoulder, and ran out the door, laughing.

That night Grauntie Mabel, Stanford, and Stanley crowded around the kitchen. Ria normally hung out with them in the evenings, but tonight was Bingo Night, so she'd made about five gallons of popcorn for them and left with a cheery wave.

“Don't forget, drink warm milk before bed so you will not have nightmares!” she called.

“We'll forget!” they promised her, and she chuckled as she walked out the door.

They had the whole living room set up: it was dark, the windows were covered, there were four or five candles set up around the TV like an alter to a technicolor deity. Grauntie Mabel had bought sixteen chocolate bars – the good kind – and a gallon of ice cream each, Rocky Road for Stanley, Vanilla for Stanford, Cake Batter for herself. They covered the popcorn in butter and caramel and laid out the snacks like a buffet on the carpet. They were each armed with a bowl, a spoon, and a blanket they could hide under if they wanted to feel scared.

“This,” Stanley said solemnly, “is the coolest night ever.”

Ford bowed to the TV. “Oh great and powerful television, give us the gift of a zombie-killing Lincoln.”

Grauntie Mabel popped in the movie and sat back in her armchair to watch. “Okay kids,” she whispered in her scariest voice, “get ready for the coolest vaguely historical horror movie of all time!”

Chapter End Notes
SEE THE FLUFF LOOK AT IT THEY ARE SO PRECIOUS
Stan sat in the living room with Ford and Boyish Dan, watching the ever-awesome *Tiger Fist!* Stan and Boyish Dan each sat on an arm of Mabel's yellow chair. Ford sat on the floor in front of them.

On the screen, Tiger Fist stood in a pale blue hospital room. A nurse removed its IV and slowly backed away.

“`The tiger was badly injured in the explosion,” said the narrator, “but we repaired him...with a FIST!”`

A seriously ripped arm popped out from behind the tiger's head, flexing its bicep.


As if sensing their enthusiasm, the show immediately cut to commercials.

“`Boooo,” Stan called. “No commercials!”`

A man appeared on the screen, sobbing his guts out.

“`Are you completely miserable?” asked a voice.`

The guy sobbed some more. “YES!”

“`Then you need to meet...BUD GLEEFUL.” A silhouette appeared on the screen.`

“`Bud Gleeful?'” Ford repeated. “Is that even a real name?’”

Stan snorted. “What makes him so special?’”

“`He's a psychic!’”

Stan and Ford burst out laughing laughing. Dan growled at them.

“`What's so funny?’ Boyish Dan demanded.

“`Dude, our mom's phone psychic,” Stan said. “We've seen every trick she ever used. It's just a fancy con.’”

Dan scowled. “Bud Gleeful's the real deal!’”

“`Bud Gleeful?'” Grauntie Mabel walked into the room, tired from a long day of scamming tourists. “Why is *that* name being mentioned in *my* house?’”

“Dan brought it up,” Stan said instantly.
“Is he really a psychic?” Ford asked her.

“He’s trouble, that’s what he is!” Mabel snapped. “Ever since the Gleefuls rolled into town, I’ve had nothing but trouble. Didn’t you hear that commercial?”

Stan opened his mouth to protest – they actually hadn’t seen most of it – but Ford beat him to the punch.

“You still didn’t answer my question. Is he a real psychic or not?”

Dan crossed his arms. “Go to the Tent and find out yourself!”

“Never!” Mabel jabbed a finger at the twins. “You’re forbidden from patronizing the competition! No one who lives under my roof is allowed under that Gleeful’s roof.” She stormed from the room, muttering under her breath. Stan caught Ford’s eye and grinned.

“She still didn’t answer my question,” Ford pointed out.

“And tents don’t have roofs,” Stan added. “Looks like we’ve found our loophole! C’mon, guys! We’ve got a psychic to see!”

He jumped to his feet and ran out the door.

The tent was massive – taller than the Mystery Shack, like an upside-down funnel set on a huge fabric cake. The whole thing was done in shades of baby-blue. There was a huge wooden symbol on top: a five-pointed star, its arms all different colors, with a white eye staring from the middle. White wooden posts framed the doorway.

The guy at the door looked like an albino Elvis. He had a white pompadour almost bigger than his head, and a glittery baby-blue tuxedo that matched the tent. “Welcome, welcome!” he called, holding out a sack with a star on it. “Put your money in Bud Gleeful’s Psychic Sack!”

Boyish Dan shoved in two fistfuls of cash.

“A psychic sack?” Ford asked dubiously. “And people buy that?”

“The art of the con,” Stan said absently. He looked back over his shoulder as they walked. For some reason, the guy reminded him of a barracuda.

Inside the tent, there were two sets of pews with a central aisle between them, all facing a wide wooden stage with pale blue curtains. The central pole of the tent was strung up with loudspeakers. An electric piano and speaker were set off to one side of the stage.

They sat down in a pew towards the back. Stan couldn’t believe how many people showed up. “Practically half the town is out here,” he said, looking around in amazement. “Our mom never gets this many customers at once. Or Grauntie Mabel. I thought this was gonna be like that palm-reader down on the Boardwalk in Jersey...”

“It’s more like a bizarre-o version of the Mystery Shack,” Ford said. “Look, they even have their own ’Ria!” He pointed to a pear-shaped woman carrying a broom and a vacuum, with a name tag that read “Sophia.”

The lights dimmed. People started clapping and cheering in anticipation. A crescendo of music rang
out from the speaker, and two spotlights flashed over the crowd, coming to rest on the center of the
stage.

“It's starting, it's starting!” Stan said, getting excited.

Ford frowned. “Let's see what this 'monster' looks like,” he said.

A huge shadow – exactly the same silhouette they'd seen on the commercial – appeared on the
curtains. It thundered closer. Heavy footsteps shook the ground. Stan gripped the pew and leaned
forward.

The curtains squeaked open. A pudgy little kid stood in the middle of the stage, wearing a baby-pink
suit over a silk yellow shirt and a matching cape. He had buck teeth and a pompadour.

“Well howdy, America!” the boy said cheerfully. “Mah name is Bud Gleeful!”

He clapped his hands and a small flock of doves flew out of his poofy hair, circling the crowd. The
audience oooh'd and clapped their hands, little kids reaching up to try and touch the birds.

Ford raised an eyebrow. “That's Grauntie Mabel's mortal enemy?”

Stanley stared. “But he's so cutesy.”

Boyish Dan growled at them to be quiet.

Bud beamed at the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is such a gift to have you hear tonight! Such
a gift.” He dropped his voice to a near-whisper. “I have a vision. I predict that soon you will all
say...'aw'.”

Bud turned away, then turned back with the most perfect little-lost-puppy-dog look Stan had ever
seen.

The audience aw'd, right on cue.

“Impressive,” Stan said thoughtfully.

Ford sat back. “I'm not impressed.”

“Alright, Dad,” Stan teased, punching him lightly on the arm.

Bud turned. “Hit it, Dad!”

Stan jumped – he and Bud had said it at exactly the same time. Even weirder, the guy at the door
was sitting at the electric piano. How the heck did he get over there so fast?

Big Pompadour grinned and started tapping out a tune. Little Pompadour opened his mouth and
started to sing.

“Oh I can see / what others can't see. It ain't some sideshow trick / it's innate ability! Where others are
blind / I am future-ly inclined.” Bud did a little tap dance without breaking the rhythm. “And you too
could see / if you was widdle ol' me!”

Bud chuckled and stepped forward, raising both arms in the air. Big Pompadour paused, leaning
forward to flip the music book. “C'mon everybody, rise up!” Bud called. “I want you to keep it
goin'!”
Everyone in the audience stood up. Stan jumped on the pew so he could see over people's heads.

Ford tugged Stan's pants. "Stanley, get down – Hey!" he said, standing up. "What – I didn't mean to –"

"Keep it goin'!" Bud danced over to an old woman covered with cats. "You wish your son would call you more," he sang.

"I'm leaving everything to my cats!"

Bud turned. "I sense that you've been here before."

Officer Velazquez grinned, decked out in Bud Gleeful merchandise. "Aw, what gave it away?"

"Come on," Ford muttered.

Bud came down the aisle. "I'll read your mind to show I can," he sang, and stopped in front them. "Something tells me your name's Stan."

Stan blinked, surprised. "How'd he do that?"

Bud was already back on stage. "So welcome all yeeeee / To the Tent of Telepathy. Thanks for visitin'..." He winked. "Widdle ol' meeeeeel!"

The music wound down, and the crowd exploded with applause. Stan jumped down from the pew.

"Thank you!" Bud called. "You people are the real miracles!"

Stan cheered enthusiastically.

He and Ford left the Tent with everybody else – except Boyish Dan, who stayed behind to get another autograph from Bud Gleeful. (He had eight so far.)

"Man," Ford said, "that kid's an even bigger fraud than Grauntie Mabel. No wonder our aunt is jealous."

"C'mon, that was the best con I've ever seen!" Stan said excitedly. "Way better than mom's! Even you were standing up!"

"Well, it's not like I wanted to," Ford mumbled.

Stan teased Ford about it as they headed back. At the same time, though, he felt a little uneasy as they walked away from the Tent. It was like there were eyes stabbing at his back. He rubbed his neck, thinking of the Big Pompadour guy.

A barracuda.

As fun as it was, Stanley wasn't sure they should come back.

The pink suit, shirt, and cape lay folded neatly on the front pew. Bud was mopping the floor of the stage when his father backed into the Tent.

"G'night, folks!" he called cheerfully. "Thanks for visitin'! Y'all have a good evenin'!" Then he turned around, and his face darkened with rage. "YOU!"
Bud hopped down from the stage. His father stomped towards him, his face like a very red strawberry under a mound of whipped cream.

“Boy, how many times do Ah have to tell you, ya don't say 'howdy' at the beginnin' of the show!”

“It's just a friendly greetin',” Bud protested. “It slipped out!”

“And what in tarnation are you doin' out of uniform!”

Bud looked down. He was wearing kakhi shorts and that big Hawaiian shirt his mother had bought him years ago.

“It was itchy, and Ah was just cleanin'...”

His father bent down, sticking a finger in Bud's face. “Now you listen to me, boy,” he hissed. “Nobody wants to pay to see some tacky little tourist from Honolulu! Your job is to make people like you, so they'll give you their money and do whatever you want them to do. You're doin' a poor enough job as it is. So until Ah say otherwise, you pick up your uniform” – he grabbed it from the pew – “you go to your dressing room, and you get changed in a deep-fried second!” He shoved the clothes at Bud. “And when you get back, you scrub that stage until it shines!”

“Yes, father.”

Gideon patted his cheek. “There we go.”

Bud headed for the exit, holding his clothes in his arms. His dressing room was inside the huge camper they used to get Bud from place to place.

He stepped out of the tent. The night was dark and quiet, stirred only by the sounds of the forest. The crickets, the owls. It was nice, being alone out here. Not that Bud minded crowds – he liked it, loved bein' on the stage watchin' all those people cheering and whistling like he was a chocolate-flavored pizza.

Still, the routine was a little...well, routine. Bud almost wanted to laugh sometimes, the way they stared at him, all dazzled just because he was singin' and wearin' sparkly clothes. If that was all it took to impress a body, this town really needed to work on its average IQ scores.

Except for that one kid. Stan. He'd been watching along with everybody else, but Bud heard him talking, him and his brother. Stan hadn't bought the act. He'd seen right through it.

And he'd been impressed.

Bud paused on the bottom step of the trailer, looking down the road. Thinking.

The next day Stan found his brother at the table in the den. He was reading that dumb journal again, the nerd.

He ran up and flopped his whole body over the journal. “Hey, Sixer!” Stan said loudly. “Check it out – I got tattoos!”

He flexed his biceps. It had taken the entire morning and three Sharpies, but he'd drawn tattoos all up and down his arms. They were now covered in barbed wire, skulls-and-crossbones, teeth, and smiley faces with eye patches, and even a drawing of himself, bulging with muscle.
“Are those, um, permanent?” Ford asked, shoving him off.

“If I re-draw them enough, probably!” Stan said cheerfully.

**Ding dong.**

“Who’s at the door?” Grauntie Mabel called. She sounded grouchy. Stupid bell probably woke her up – when the Shack was closed, Mabel slept until mid-afternoon. It was barely 11.

“I’ll get it,” Stan called. He went for the door and opened it.

Bud Gleeful stood on the porch, looking remarkably like a fat pink salmon in his glittery three-piece suit. “Howdy!”

“Oh, hey! It's *widdle ol' you,*” Stan said, making his voice all cutesy-wootsy.

Bud chuckled. “Yeah, that song's pretty corny. Now Ah know we haven't formally met, but after last night's performance Ah just had to drop by and say hi.”

Stanley leaned against the doorway, propping up one foot on the frame. “Y'know, your act was pretty good. It was like that one time my brother and I went to the circus! I bet you'd get even more people if you could tell fortunes while riding a unicycle. Or get a mascot. Something like *Tiger Fist,* but with more fists!”

Bud laughed. “Ah've had the same ideas! When Ah saw you in the audience, Ah knew you were a kindred spirit – someone who appreciates a good act for what it is.”

“A total con?” Stan said, and they laughed again.

“Who's at the door?” Mabel called.

“No one, Grauntie Mabel!” Stan called back.

“Ah appreciate your discretion, that Mabel's no fan of mine,” Bud said. “Come to think of it, Ah don't know why Mabel isn't asking you for ideas on how to run the Shack.”

Stan smiled. “You and me both!”

“What do ya say, we step away from here, and chat a bit more?” Bud asked. “Ah've got a whole collection of model cars in mah dressin' room.”

Stan's eyes lit up. “*Really?!*”

A short bus ride later, Bud opened the door to his dressing room. It was hardly larger than a walk-in closet, but it was covered wall to wall with shelves of model cars.

Stan gazed around the room, starry-eyed. “Whooooaaa. These are *yours*?”

Bud grinned. “Wait for it.” He picked up a remote from a nearby shelf and pressed a button. A huge race track came to life on the far end of the room, red, yellow, and green cars zooming around a multi-level track complete with automatic landslides, loo-de-loops, and tiny plastic shark pools.

“I've been building this stuff for ages. What do you think?”
Stan was practically drooling. “I have seen the gates of heaven...”

Ford sat in Mabel's armchair, re-reading the first few pages of the journal. There was weird writing on almost every page, and it didn’t even use the same code half the time. He was starting to wonder if the weird symbols were actually another language. Maybe once Ria got back from –

“BOO!”

“GAH!”

Ford jumped so badly he fell on the floor. He picked himself up, fixing his glasses as his brother laughed. “Aw, man, Sixer, that gets better every time!”

“No, that gets worse every time. And what happened to you? You're filthy!”

Stan was covered from head to toe in dirt and grease. He smelled like burned rubber. There was even a dribble of mustard on his shirt.

He grinned. “I was hanging out with my new pal Bud! He’s so loaded he rented out a whole miniature race track this afternoon. I crashed three cars before they kicked us out.”

“Bud Gleeful?” Ford asked, puzzled. “Stanley, doesn't it seem odd that he'd take a total stranger to a private track?”

“Oh, leave him alone,” Stan scowled. “You never wanna play cars with me. Lately you've just got your nose stuck in that dumb journal all the time.”

“What do you mean?”

Ria walked into the room. “Hey Ford, I got that book on the history of ciphers from the library. You ready to spend hours trying to crack the journal's codes, one cipher at a time?”

“AM I!” Ford shouted. He sprinted to the den's table, chanting, “One atta time, one atta time!”

Stan and Bud stood on the roof of the Gleeful Warehouse, the wind blowing in their hair. Stan had his hands on his hips and one leg up on the rim of the roof, like a real adventurer. The old brick building sat on the very edge of a cliff. The whole town was spread out before them – heck, he could see the whole valley from way up here, even those weird granite cliffs in the distance. They probably weren't supposed to be up here. If they knew, the cops would probably arrest them in a New Jersey minute. Which, of course, was part of what made it so cool.

“How d'ya like it?” Bud asked.

“It's amazing!”

Bud laughed. “Yer hair looks like a bird's nest.”

“That's what this reminds me of! A crow's nest!”

“Come again?”

“You know!” Stan gestured with his hands. “Those little bucket-shaped things on the top of a ship's
There's always a guy in them who shouts, 'Land Ahoy'! Stan threw up his fists in mock-excitement. “Except the guy in the nest usually has a –”

“Telescope?”

Bud pulled out two shiny new telescopes from his pink suit jacket.

“DUDE!” Stan grabbed one and held it up to his eye. “This is awesome! You are seriously my new best friend right now!”

Bud grinned. “Works for me!”

They sat down on the roof and peered through the telescopes. Stan swung his legs, banging his heels against the roof. “This is seriously the coolest. We gotta bring Ford up here next time.”

“Ford?”

“My brother. He's a total genius,” Stan explained. He pointed his telescope at an old lady and watched her pick her nose. “Bet he could figure out how to use these babies to like, start a fire or tell directions –”

“Maybe we should give the telescopes a break,” Bud broke in, setting his aside. Stan shrugged and twirled his own telescope around his fingers like a baton.

“Man, the people down there sure are puny,” Stan commented idly. They were even smaller than ants from this far away.

“Yes,” Bud said slowly. “They are.”

Something in his voice made Stan glance up, but the moment passed and Bud was back to his usual self.

“Hey, Stan, would you wanna come with me to Les Homards tomorrow?”

“Lay what?”

“It's this fancy five-star restaurant. Ah have to make appearances like that for my public,” Bud explained. “It's got fresh-caught fish from the Gulf of Mexico, and it's decorated with relics from actual cruise ships. You did say you like boats.”

Stan tapped his chin thoughtfully. “I'm listening...”

“Ah'll pay for anything you want,” Bud went on. “Mah dad gives me tons of allowance for places like that. And Ah'll get ya'll a tuxedo to wear if ya don't already have one.”

“Whoa, whoa, time out.” Stan held up his hands. “A tux? I'm not dead yet, Bud.”

Bud chuckled. “Stan, a tux isn't something they put on dead bodies. It's sort of like...a gentleman's uniform. Ya wear them to fancy places.”

Stan grunted. “Tell you what. Skip the tux and it's a deal!” He held out his hand. Bud squealed with delight and attacked him with a bear hug. Stan grunted and tried to wiggle away. “Okay, this is happening. Feelin' reeeal awkward right now.”
“It is not a date,” Stan said for the fifth time, as Ford snickered. “It's just a dinner. With a guy. And free food.”

Stan and Ford were sitting on the yellow armchair in the living room, playing Zombie Smash 2.0. The goal was to kill the other person's zombies faster than they killed yours. In the real world, Stan could've creamed them way faster than Ford, but Ford was almost better at video games than Stan.

“Aren't you worried Mabel will find out?” Ford asked, maneuvering his hordes of undead around a grocery store.

“Psh. I'll just say I'm doing recon on the competition.”

“I don't know, Stan. She got pretty worked up about it. I haven't even seen her since the other day.”

“Getting worked up is her thing. Like making Mabel Juice.” He blew up two dozen zombies. “KA-BOOM! Yes!”

“Aw, c'mon!” Ford groaned.

The doorbell rang.

“That's my ride! See ya later, Sixer!” Stan hopped off the chair.

“Don't forget we're fixing the boat tomorrow!” Ford called.

“You got it!” Stan gave him a thumbs up and ran out the door.

The diner was even fancier than he'd expected. The cream-colored walls were decorated with gilded ship's wheels, each wheel was surrounded with something that looked like the open jaws of a shark. There was a white-marble fountain that spouted sparkling water – actual sparkling water, like soda, with the little bubbles in it and everything. Tables with clean white table clothes were spread neatly throughout the room, and there big booths with plushy bright-blue seats.

They sat at a table big enough for ten people, with a spiky blue centerpiece shaped like a sea urchin. Each place mat had at least a million forks arranged around the plate.

“Wow, this place sure is ritzy,” Stan said. “I've never even seen so many forks.”

“Yeah, took me a while to learn them all,” Bud said offhandedly. He snapped his fingers and a waiter appeared.

“Ah, Monsieur Gleeful! 'ow eez your evening tonight?”

“Oh, fine, fine, Jean-Luc, merci beaucoup,” Bud said pleasantly. “I'll have the usual, s'il vous plait. Stan, is there anything you'd like to order?”

“Yeah.” He grinned. “One of every desert you've got!”

The next day, Ford, Boyish Dan, and Ria were hanging out in the Gift Shop. Ford had spent hours working on the journal with no luck cracking its encrypted notes. At the moment, he was just sitting on a barrel and leaning back against the counter, resting his tired eyes. Boyish Dan was practicing his woodwork, carving something that looked like a long, spindly boogie monster, and Ria had her nose
buried in the latest gossip magazine.

“Hey, hey!” Mabel barked. She hurried into the room, holding up a newspaper. “What the jeckle is Stanley doing in the paper next to that greasy pickpocket Bud Gleeful?”

“Oh yeah, it's like a big deal,” Ria said, looking up. “Everybody's talking about how Bud's taking Stan out for dinner tonight.”

“WHAT!” Mabel screeched. “That little shyster is messing with my great-nephew!?”

“Gleeful's a real psychic!” Dan barked.

Mabel threw the newspaper down, redder than a sunburnt crab and twice as angry. She stormed out of the room.

“I didn't know, I didn't hear about it!” Ford called anxiously. “Plus he said he was just doing recon!”

Mabel strode back in, fully dressed and wielding her 8-ball cane like a sword. “Yeah, well it ends tonight! Nobody messes with my family! I'm going straight over to that little skunk's house – this is gonna stop RIGHT NOW!”

She stalked out and slammed the front door behind her.

“Dude,” Ria said. “Wouldn't that be funny if that was a closet, and she had to come back and walk out the real door?”

Boyish Dan and Ford looked at her.

She went over and opened the door. It led straight out to the front lawn. “Nope,” she said, “real door.”

Mabel thundered down the road on her vintage bike, her pulse pounding in her ears. She knew full well what a slimy creep Gideon Gleeful could be, and his son was hardly any better. Mabel wouldn't put it past either of them to use Stanley to spy on her. Recon, her cat-printed doilies!

The Gleeful home was on a charming little street, with houses painted in pastel colors and tiny gardens behind white picket fences. The Gleeful house had a huge billboard on the front lawn, advertising Bud Gleeful, Child Psychic. She hit the brakes and screeched to a stop, tossed her helmet on the seat, and stormed through the fence straight to the front door. She banged on it as hard as she could.

“Bud Gleeful, you little punk!” she shouted. “Open up!”

A sign on the door read “Pardon our Garden.” She grabbed a Sharpie from her pocket and wrote underneath, Our dog poops in there!

The door opened and Mabel straightened, glaring up. Gideon Gleeful was at least two inches taller than she was, even without that stupid hairdo, but she didn't back down.

“Why, if it isn't Princess Mabel,” Gideon said silkily.

She tried to push him aside. “Out of the way, Giddy, I'm looking for Bud!”

Gideon stepped back so suddenly that she fell forward into the room.
“Hey!”

“I haven't seen the boy around, but since you're here, you simply must come in for coffee.”

“How about no,” Mabel said flatly. She planted her fists on her hips, standing in the middle of the living room and glaring daggers at him. “Now you listen here, Gleeful, I don't know what you're planning, but if you think I'm going to sit back while you mess with my grephew you've got another thing comin’!”

Gideon held up his hands, an expression of perfect innocence on his face. “Mabel, Mabel, Ah haven't the faintest idea what you're talkin' about. But really, where are mah manners...” He walked over to the coffee table and sat down smoothly in his armchair, leaning back in it like a throne. He gestured gracefully to the sofa. “Please, please, make yourself comfortable.”

She stabbed the air with her cane. “Don't change the subject. Just because you have the police in your glittery blue pocket doesn't mean you can fool me.”

“Such accusations.” Gideon's eyes narrowed. “One might think, Mabel dear, that our two boys might be gettin' along on their own. That this is merely presents a fantastic business opportunity for the Mystery Shack and –”

“Forget it,” Mabel gritted. “If they're really gettin' along on their own, then I'm not gonna do a thing about it. But if you even come near my Shack, Gideon, if you make one more move to get my Shack, I'll spring my security system on you so fast it'll curl your poofy white hair.”

She whirled around and stormed from the house.

“...so Ah said, autograph your own head, shop lady!” Bud laughed. Stan chuckled, but not too hard. He’d eaten so much cheesecake his stomach resembled a small beach ball. But even if he had the worst stomach ache since the invention of ulcers, it had totally been worth it.

Bud patted his mouth with a napkin. “Stan, tonight's dinner has been a lot of fun. And tomorrow's Ball will be even better!”

Stan blinked. “Ball?”

“Oh, look!” Bud said dramatically, “a red-crested South American rainbow macaw.”

Suddenly a trap door in the ceiling opened and a huge bird swooped out, with the wingspan of a small airplane. Stan yelped and ducked under the table.

It landed on Bud's arm and started talking.

“Stanley! Will! You! Accompany! Bud! To! The Ballroom! Dance! This! Thurbdy! RrrrrThursday! BGAK?” It coughed up a bright pink envelope, which landed on the table with a splat, then flew out the window.

The bird got everyone's attention: the whole restaurant was staring at them now, whispering and talking like the two of them couldn't hear everything they said.

“Aw, so adorable!”

“Bud's got a best friend!”
“Don't they make the cutest couple?”

“They're expectin' us. Please say you'll go,” Bud said, holding out the card to Stan.

Stan leaned slightly away, grossed out. “You know that's covered in bird spit, right?”

People were getting up and actually coming over to them now. Stan's shoulders tensed. It felt like being in a school yard when bullies were ganging up on him. And they wouldn't stop talking.

“It's a Bud-ding bromance!” said the Sheriff.

“This is gonna be adorable!” said a blond girl, snapping her bubble gum.

An old woman piped up. “If he says no, I'll die of sadness.”

“I can verify that that will indeed happen,” said a doctor.

Stan shrank into his seat a little. “But...Ford and I were gonna fix our boat tomorrow...”

“You can do that anytime,” Bud said. His smile was turning a little forced. “This Ball only comes once every two weeks. There'll be cheese and chocolate fountains, and you can keep the tux for free!” He gestured to the side and the waiter appeared immediately, a Stan-sized tux draped neatly over one arm. The audience leaned in, murmuring excitedly. Stan stared at the tux, starting to sweat.

“Well, uh, Bud, I guess I'm gonna say...”

Ford sat at the table in the den, the journal in his hands and a can of Pitt cola by his elbow. He and Ria had spent hours trying to crack just one line of the journal and gotten nowhere. It had to be something extremely important if it was that hard to crack – like maybe the key to finding Area 51 or how to unlock the mysteries of time travel. But nothing they’d tried had worked. Maybe it wasn't a code, it was really some kind of other language – maybe even an alien language, with verbs and nouns in weird places so ordinary decryptions wouldn't work...

He heard the front door open and shut. A minute later Stan walked past him.

“So, how'd it go?” Ford asked.

“I don't know...I have a tuxedo now.”

Ford glanced up. There was, indeed, a black mound of silky fabric rolled over Stan's arm. “A tux? I thought you hated those.”

“I do! But he asked me to the ball and everyone was standing right there and I couldn't make myself say no!”

That was new. “Well, one tux isn't a – did you say ball?”

“There's some ball for snooty rich people.” Stan flopped on the carpet of the living room, looking miserable. “And it's tomorrow and I know we were gonna work on our boat...”

“Why don't you just call up Bud and tell him you changed your mind?”

“It's not that easy, Ford!” Stan rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself up. “And I do like hanging out with Bud. He's like the rich little brother I never knew I wanted. And he gets me all this
cool stuff! And everybody was ganging up on me!”

Ford got up, went over, and crouched down next to his brother. Stan leaned slightly into his shoulder. “It's okay about the boat,” Ford said. “Just wear the tux. And try not to come back in a hearse.”

Stan chuckled and punched him on the arm.

“Boatin’ at night, boatin’ at night, whe-hee-hee-hee!”

Stan and But were sitting in a boat – one of those things they had in Venice, but in miniature. Crazy Chu had been hired to paddle them around the lake. Stan kept fidgeting. He'd basically ditched his brother when they'd planned to work on their boat together, and now here he was, riding a boat with Bud. It felt...disloyal.

“Y'know,” he said awkwardly, “I thought dancing was gonna be the end of the evening...”

“Oh, but we're havin' so much fun!” Bud said. “Ya looked like you were really enjoyin' yourself.”

“Haha, yeah...”

He had, actually. The Ball had been pretty boring for the most part, but the chocolate fountain was awesome. And when the Northwest kid started giving him dirty looks, he'd gone right up to Mrs. Northwest, gave her the cutest lost-puppy look he had, and asked her to dance. She'd actually gone along with it, and they waltzed around the floor. The look on the kid's face was priceless.

But he was really getting sick of the tux. It itched, and felt hot, and he'd done a stupid little dance instead of hanging out with his brother.

“Ah bet it's much more fun than workin' at the Shack all day,” Bud was saying. “No o-f-fense, but that Mabel Pines doesn't know a class act from a class clown.”

Stan frowned. Most of the time he was the class clown, but the way Bud said it didn't sound very nice. “Did you just make fun of my Grauntie?”

Bud wasn't listening. “I've already made reservations for us at The Club,” he said. “Just wait until you taste their crème brulee!”

“Whoa, hold up. I was gonna go work on the boat with Ford –”

“This boat is better,” Bud cut in, a hard edge to his tone. Then he brightened. “Y'all can have it if you want! Ah'll even throw in Crazy Chu.”

Chu cackled.

Stan pulled at his collar. If it got any tighter he really would go home in a hearse. “Look, Bud, I don't know if –”

“Hold that thought!” Bud glanced at his Rolex. “Perfect timin'. Look!”

Stan looked up. A shrill sound reached his ears and the night sky lit up with fireworks. Dazzling pinks and yellows exploded in the air. Streaks of brilliant white spelled out the words “Stan and Bud: Best Friends Forever.”
Ford had headed down the stairs and started for the kitchen when he heard a noise. He checked the living room. Stan was rolling around on the carpet, talking to himself like he did when he got really upset.

“...so much cool stuff but it's getting so creepy but I don't want to get ganged up on. Ahhh I have no way oooout!”

“What in the heck happened on that date?” Ford asked, walking in.

Stan sat up. “I don't know! We went to the stupid party, and I ate like a bucket of chocolate, and then there was a mini garbanzo boat –”

“Gondola?”

“– with fireworks that had my name and now he wants to take me to some stupid restaurant!” He threw himself back on the floor with a thump. “I mean the free stuff was cool at first, but I hate that tux and Bud gets all weird whenever I mention you and everybody keeps talking about me even when I'm right there! I always thought it'd be so cool to be popular. But I'm only popular because I'm hanging out with Bud. What if I tell him I don't want to be friends anymore and suddenly I'm public enemy number 1?”

Ford held up his hands. “Stanley, relax. It's not like you're going to have to work for Gideon.”

The TV beeped with a sudden news bulletin. The anchor man appeared on the screen, shuffling papers importantly. “Child Psychic Bud Gleeful has just announced the selection of a mascot for the Tent of Telepathy,” he announced. A picture of Bud appeared on the screen, covered in puppies. The caption read File Photo. “Our source informs us that the new mascot will be none other than Stanley Pines, grand-nephew of local shyster Mabel Pines.” A picture of Stan and Bud appeared on the screen, grainy and clearly clipped from the newspaper. “A recent poll has indicated that the name 'Stan the Tent Man' will be his official title, and he is expected to take up the position by the end of the week.”

Stan screamed and ran from the room.

Ford gave him a minute, then followed him upstairs. If he knew his bro-bro, Stan would probably try to hide and ignore the problem, even though Ford knew perfectly well that it wouldn't solve a thing.

“Stanley,” he called out. “Stan...?”

He checked their room, but Stan wasn't on either bed (or under them). He was just about to look elsewhere when he noticed the laundry basket by the door. And the clothes were in the basket.

Ford smiled wryly and knelt in front of it. “Stanley.”

A muffled voice came from under a shirt. “Stanley's not here. He's in Laundryville.”

“Are you gonna come out of Laundryville?”

“Nu-uh.”
Ford sighed. “All right. If you want to stop hanging out with Bud, then I can tell him for you.”

Stan poked his head out. “You will?”

He nodded.

Stan launched himself at Ford. They both landed on the ground, Stan punching Ford on the arm and yelling “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Ford laughed and tried to push him off, grinning when Stanley hugged him.

It was pretty easy for Ford to find the restaurant. When Stan said it was “The Club,” he figured Stan hadn't caught the real name but knew it was some kind of club. As it turned out, there was an actual restaurant with that name in Gravity Falls. The building was shaped, of course, like a club from a deck of cards.

Stan had gone with him, but he got increasingly nervous the closer they came. He ended up jumping into the bushes right outside the restaurant. Ford went in alone.

It was a pretty fancy place – the walls were covered with heavy red drapes, and there were small round tables draped with silk table clothes. The guys all wore suits and the girls all wore dresses, like they were secretly competing for a “Miss America” contest. Bud was sitting by himself at a table, reading a leather-backed menu that was almost as big as he was.

Ford went up to him and cleared his throat.

“Oh – Stanford Pines! How are ya?” Bud said, setting down his menu. “Ya look good, ya look good.”

“Thanks, you uh...” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Look, Bud, we've gotta talk. Stanley isn't coming tonight. He uh, he doesn't wanna hang out with you anymore.” He laughed nervously. “He's uh, he's kinda weirded out by you – no offense,” he added quickly.

“So, what yer sayin' is,” Bud said, smiling through gritted teeth. “you've...come between us.”

Ford frowned a little. “You're not gonna, like, freak out, are you?”

“Of course not!” Bud said cheerfully, waving his hand. “These things happen, bygones, you know!”

“So, okay, cool!” Ford started backing up casually. “Well then, sorry man, but heeey, thumbs up, huh?”

He turned around and headed out. He thought he heard Bud say something, but it was so quiet he must've imagined it.

Well that went easier than I expected! he thought. It felt pretty cool that he, for once, had stood up for Stanley, not the other way around. And apparently he'd done a pretty good job of it, too!

“How'd it go?” Stan asked, climbing out of the bushes. “Was he mad? Did he threatened to sue me?”

“Don't worry, Stanley, he's just a kid!” Ford put a hand on his brother's back and they started walking away. “There's nothing at all to worry about.”
Bud breathed heavily through his nose. He was sitting at the vanity in his bedroom. The vanity's mirror was framed with bare light bulbs, but other than that the room was dark. Spots of red burned in his cheeks.

How dare Stanford Pines come between Bud and his best friend. How dare he.

“Stanford Pines,” he said, his breath snorting in his nostrils, “you don’t know what you’ve done.” He grabbed a hair brush and threw it against a wall. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. He gripped the edge of the vanity and strained. “You just made the biggest mistake of your life!”

The vanity went hurling against the wall.

CRASH!


Bud turned, about to scream at him and to heck with the consequences – but something caught his eye. He forced himself to relax, making his face to return to its usual baby-lotion pallor.

“I’m sorry, Father, I tripped and hurt my head.” He looked up at his father. “Kiss it for widdle ol' me?”

His father bought it, hook line and sinker, just like Bud knew he would. He was always a sucker for things that were cute and/or glittery. He bent down to kiss Bud's poofy hair, then straightened up.

“Now you watch out for your face, ya hear?” he said. “That's your ticket to fame and fortune, son.”

“Yes, Father,” Bud said sweetly, his hands behind his back.

His father left, and Bud stared at the collage on the back of his door. It was covered with pictures of Stan, sometimes alone, sometimes with Stan and Bud together. Only one photo showed Stanley with that little mouth-breathin' fool, Stanford Pines.

Bud took his fists from behind his back. In his hands was the bright green amulet his father always used to control the crowd. He'd never held it before, but he knew how it worked – his father had bragged to him about it often enough. He gripped it tightly in one hand. The photo of the two Pines began to burn, until only Stanley Pines was left.

He smiled.

Ria lay on her back on the front lawn of the Shack, next to a trashcan, a taxidermy gorilla, and Waddles the Pig, all of it lined up in a row. There was a ramp next to Waddles, and Stanley was on his bike a short distance away.

“Dude, I dunno if this is a good idea,” Ria said.

“Think he should wear a helmet?” Ford asked.

“No, I meant we should be filming this.”

Stan gripped the bars and revved them like a motorcycle. “Sixer! Drum roll!”

Ford banged two sticks on Waddles' head. The pig snored. “Do it!” Ford shouted. “Do it! Do it! Do
Stan screamed, “FOR NARBIA!” and zoomed up the ramp.

He flew exactly three feet in the air before the front wheel caught on the gorilla's arm. Stanley went flying, bouncing on Ria's stomach and rolling onto the lawn.

Ford jumped up. “Stanley?”

“That was awesome!”

Stanley jumped up, missing a tooth, with grass sticking out of his hair. “Ria's stomach's like a bouncy house, bro, you gotta try it!”

“Okay, hang on, hang on!”

Ford went to grab the bike, but the phone in the Shack started ringing.

“Your turn,” Ford said quickly, but Stan said it faster, which meant Ford had to get it. He dumped the bike on the lawn and ran inside.

He picked it up. “Hello?”

“Thompson Gables, Gravity Falls Gossiper.”

Ford blinked. Thompson? They hadn't seen him since they accused him of murder last week. “Hey, man. Heck of an alliteration you got there.”

“I'm really good at tongue twisters. Say, we want to interview you about whether you've seen anything unusual in this here town since you've arrived.”

“Seriously?! I thought nobody would ever ask! I've got tons of notes and theories and some sketches I did of that old lady's dog which I'm sure is a werewolf hybrid...” Ford got out his pen and notebook as Thompson told him where to meet. “Uh-huh...uh-huh...412 Gopher Road. Tonight? Got it!”

He hung up. Oh man, wait 'till Stan heard this! Ford was going to be in the newspaper! It was the first step to becoming known as a famous cryptologist! And maybe the girls would finally like him!

“Stanley! Stanley!” he shouted, running outside to share the news.

Thompson hung up the phone. He glared at the person sitting in front of his desk. “There, I called him, okay? Now you hold up your end of the bargain.”

A piece of paper fluttered onto the desk. Thompson gasped.

“Yes! A ticket to Comicon! Arigatou gozaimasu, senpai!” He clutched it to his chest dramatically, whispering in Japanese.

A shadowed figure arose from the chair and headed out into the gathering night.

Ford headed up the road. The sun was almost set and the redwoods threw long bars of shadow across the path. There wasn't a trail, but there wasn't a lot of traffic, either – it looked like the road
was hardly used at all. He pulled out his notebook and glanced at it, frowning. He knew he'd copied down the address right, but what could possibly be way out on the edge of town?

He came over a hill and a huge brick building loomed up before him, balanced on the edge of a cliff. It looked like some kind of old factory or warehouse, but the windows were grayed out. The smokestack at the top was even fitted with a lid, like it hadn't been used in a long time. The road lead straight up to the building's front door, and the mailbox in front of it read: 412.

Ford looked down at his notebook again, shrugged, and put it away. The building was creepy, alright...but chance for fame and girls awaited him! It was at least worth checking out.

The door wasn't locked. He pushed it open, and it creaked on rusty hinges. The building was pitch-black and quiet as the back of a hearse. He suppressed a shiver.

“Hello?” he called, stepping cautiously inside. His voice echoed back at him. Dark, lumpy shapes rose all around him, crowding the walls. “Thompson?” Ford called again, but only his echo answered. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned to go.

The door slammed shut.

Ford jumped and ran to it, pounding on it and trying to pull it open. He'd gotten locked him in!  

FLASH.

A lightbulb turned on, then another, and another. Ford glanced fearfully over his shoulder – he knew exactly what happened to that one kid in Haunted Factory II...

The last light flicked on, illuminating a tall-backed desk chair. It swiveled around.

Bud Gleeful sat in the chair, casually chewing a piece of straw, twisting it between his fingers. “Well, howdy, friend.”

Ford felt a rush of relief, followed by anger. He couldn't believe he'd been scared by some fake psychic! “Bud! What do you want?” he demanded.


Ford's hands tightened into fists. “I said, what do you want?”

Bud leaned back. “I just wanted to warn you, friend. This town has secrets you couldn't begin to comprehend…”

“Is this about Stanley?” Ford stepped forward, avoiding the boxes that littered the ground. “I told you, he doesn't want to hang out anymore!”

Bud lunged forward, gripping the chair's arms. Ford flinched back. “Liar! YOU turned him against me!” Bud jumped out of the chair, shoving it backwards so hard it rolled and crashed into a window. Ford backed up a step as Bud stormed towards him. “He was my best friend forever!”

Ford held up his hands and took another step back. He was starting to get the idea that Bud was less than mentally stable. “Uh, are you okay, man?”

Bud didn't answer, just stopped short like he was waiting for something. Ford glanced around, wondering if someone else was here – and noticed that the boxes seemed to be sinking.
No – Ford was *rising*.

Staring with shock, he floated five feet up – and then was suddenly hurled into a pile of cardboard boxes. He landed with a grunt, the boxes crushed underneath him, their sharp edges cutting into his ribs and legs.

Something fell out of one of them. He picked it up. It was a Bud Gleeful plushie that squeaked *“Howdy!”*

“Reading minds isn't all I can do,” Bud growled.

Ford stared at Bud. *He* had done this? “B-but...you're a...fake,” he stammered.

“Oh, tell me, Stanford, is *this* fake?”

He held up a fist, and dozens of mugs, plushies, bats, and coasters rose out of the boxes around him, each haloed in an eerie blue glow. Ford stared up, terrified. How was he supposed to fight *that*?!

Stan was sitting on the porch, absently stabbing a nail into a hot dog. It was practically dark out. Ford *was always* back by dark. Ever since Stan had messed with his UFO keychain and accidentally made it blink in morse code, Ford was convinced that aliens were trying to contact him. He didn't want to miss it when they finally visited, so he was practically paranoid about being back by nightfall every night.

Night fell. Still no Ford.

Where *was* he?

The Shack's front door opened and shut behind him. He glanced up and saw Boyish Dan standing on the porch, dusting shavings from his beard and grumbling to yourself.


Boyish Dan grunted. “Tried carving Viking runes into the cash counter. Stupid thing started glowing and Mrs. Mabel said I was seein' things, sent me home early.”

“She'll do that,” Stan agreed absently, looking up the road. It was so dark he could barely see the trees four yards away. “Hey, Dan –”

*Boyish Dan."

“D'you think you could give me a ride?”

Ford darted around, ducking boxes and flying calendars. There was some kind of amulet or something in Bud's hand. It glowed the exact same color as the floating merchandise, but there was no way to get close to him with all the ammo flying around. Ford zig-zagged and ducked, but a coaster smacked him in the back. He went down, tumbling and hitting the wall with a *THUNK."

“Grauntie Mabel was right about you!” he shouted, his head throbbing. “You are a monster!”

“Your brother will be mine!” Bud laughed coldly, advancing on Ford. Bud's hair had slowly been turning white, and his pompadour gleamed in the half-light like a hideous blank eye.
Ford pressed back against the wall and something touched his hand – a baseball bat lying on the floor. He grabbed it and launched himself at Bud, raising the bat with a yell.

Bud grabbed the amulet and lifted Ford high into the air, upside down, so fast that Ford dropped the bat. He kicked his legs and lashed out, trying to get purchase on something, but he was suspended in the middle of the room. “You leave my brother alone!” he shouted. “He doesn't want anything to do with you!”

“That's a lie!” Bud snapped. Something seemed to catch his eye, and he smiled like a reptile. “And Ah'm gonna make sure you never lie to me again, friend.”

A pair of sheep sheers sliced its way out of a box to Bud's right. They slid through the air, their shiny steel blades scissoring slowly.

The invisible force holding Ford up seemed to tighten, squeezing his arms and legs together. He struggled, grunting with the effort, but the scissors were coming closer and closer...

The factor doors slammed open.

“Bud!” Stan shouted. “We have to talk.”

Bud turned around quickly, and the scissors dropped to the floor. Ford exhaled deeply with relief.

“Stanley!” Bud said, looking a little nervous. “What're you doin' here?”

“Look, Bud. It was really fun hanging out with you, and the petting zoo thing was a pretty wild. But I'm not going to stuff myself into some star-shaped costume and be your mascot, ever. Comprende?”

Bud's breathing went a little strained. “Ah...ah don't understand,” he said, squeezing the amulet.

The invisible pressure tightened around Ford's throat. He choked and scratched at his neck. “Kah – uh, Stan? Now's not the time to be – ghkk!”

Stan ignored him. He went up to Bud, holding out his arms in a gesture of welcome. “Hey, but we can still hang out sometimes, right? You could buy me more free stuff!”

“R-really...?” Bud looked up at Stan hopefully.

Suddenly air rushed back to Ford's lungs. He blinked in time to see Stan rear back, the amulet in his hand. “NO, NOT REALLY!” he bellowed. Ford dropped like a rock and landed on the armchair, cushioning his fall. “You made fun of my grauntie and attacked my brother, what the heck?!”

“Stanley, give it back!”

Ford scrambled out the chair. Bud and Stanley fought, but Stanley was taller and he'd had a whole year of boxing lessons. He shoved Bud away, took aim, and threw the amulet just as Bud scrambled to his feet. “FORD! CATCH!”

Ford grabbed for it, catching it by its slim gold edge. “Hah!” he cried. “Not so powerful without this, are y–”

“AAAAAAAHH!”

Bud crashed straight into Ford like a raging bull. The momentum drove them both through the window and they plunged down the side of the cliff.
For a second Ford just fell, his hands and face stinging with cuts – then something lashed out and slapped his cheek.

Bud was falling beside him, his grubby little hands reaching out like a rabid gnome. Bud grabbed Ford's sleeve and yanked, slapping his face again. Ford shouted and slapped him back as hard as he could. They tumbled through the air, kicking and hitting. Ford drew back a fist for a solid left-hook when a shape caught his eye – the top of a tree. They were a split-second away from hitting the ground!

Ford felt Bud let go and they screamed. He squeezed his eyes shut and threw up his arms –

And then there was a familiar swooping sensation in his stomach. Ford cracked open his eyes.

Ford and Bud were hovering inches above the forest floor, their bodies engulfed by the amulet's greenish glow.

Stanley was floating in the air above them, silhouetted against the full moon, the amulet in his hand. His feet were spread apart and one hand was on his hip. His hair waved slightly in the wind. Ford stared. He'd never seen that look on Stan's face before.

Stan floated gently down to the ground and stepped up to Bud, putting his face a scant inch away from Bud's dough-boy cheeks.

“Listen, Bud. It's over, got it? We are never hanging out again.”

“Yeah!” Ford added.

The glow suddenly disappeared. Ford and Bud hit the ground with an oomph (which sure beat a splat any day of the week).

Stan raised his arm high and threw the amulet, smashing it against a rock. It crumbled like a sugar cube and emitted a puff of green smoke shaped like a skull.

Bud gasped. “My powers!”

Ford got up quickly and backed away behind Stan. It was one thing to try and fight when he was falling through the air, full of adrenaline. But his hands were shaking as he stuffed them in his pockets and he was covered in aches and bruises. Stan's arm came up a little to shield him. When Bud stood up, Ford cringed and edged a little closer to Stanley.

But Bud only glared at him, backing slowly into the shadows. “Oh, I'll get you for this, Stanford Pines,” he hissed. “You mark my words. You haven't seen the last of widdle...ol'...me.”

He vanished.

For a moment, Ford and Stan just stood there, silent. Then Stan cleared his throat.

“So, uh...did Bud's hair look different, or was that just me?”

But went straight to the news station and...arranged it so that no further news stories would be centered on the Tent's “Future Mascot”. Alexander Anker had looked pretty upset at first, but Bud knew how to be charming. He knew how to make people like him. And then they'd do whatever he wanted.
Everyone except Stanley and Stanford Pines.

Bud left the news station with a wave of his chubby little fingers. He kept his face cutesy and smiling, but a hot coal of fury was burning in his chest. The one time, the *one time* he'd actually found someone to hang out with who wasn't just another town idiot, Stanford Pines ruined it.

He took the last bus home. The driver, of course, was so star-struck that he took Bud straight to his house. Bud gave him an autograph and a Bud Gleeful pin, then hopped off.

As he approached the house he could hear his father yelling and throwing stuff around in the living room, but Bud was still so mad he didn't care. He opened the door and didn't even flinch when a lamp smashed into the wall beside his head.

The whole living room was in ruins: the coffee table overturned, the sofa shredded, the paintings smashed and one lamp was bent at a funny angle, as if it had been crushed in a very strong hand. The TV and the Gleeful “Throne” were the only things left in one piece. His father stood in the middle of the carnage, fists balled up like two giant hams.

“Father,” Bud said sharply.

Gideon whirled around, his eyes a little crazy and glittering with malice. “Bud,” he hissed, his eyes narrowing. The red flush of anger was leaving his cheeks. “Boy, where in blue blazes have you been? That Pines woman was in here not ten hours ago and stole my lucky bolo tie –”

“Call it what it is, Father,” Bud said, “your magic amulet. Which you only have because I found it for you. If she stole it, then file a report with the police.”

“That pink viper has an evidence file with my name on it –”

“Then *I'll* handle it,” Bud snapped. “I'll take care of the whole Pines family. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do and I haven't got time for your nonsense.”

He marched to his room and slammed the door, leaving Gideon sputtering behind him.

Mabel dragged herself into the living room, rubbing her eyes. *Horsefeathers, what a miserable day.* She'd been working on those stupid security cameras for hours and she still couldn't hook them up right. Even Ria hadn't been able to help. Fat lot of good a security system would do her if she couldn't even turn it on.

She heard a noise and looked in the living room. The grephews were flopped on the seat of her armchair, leaning heavily against each other. Ford looked like he'd been mudwrestling with a warthog, and Stan looked downright exhausted.

“Whoa. What the heck happened to you two?”

“Gleeful,” Stan moaned.

“Gleeful,” Ford groaned.

“Gleeful,” Mabel growled. She sat on the arm of her chair. “Yeah, I heard the news this afternoon. *Please* tell me you're not actually gonna be his mascot.”

“You kiddin’?” Stan lifted his head and looked at her, his jaw set. “That kid's a two-bit con artist with
no respect for human decency. Or Ford. If that jerk ever comes around here again, I'll punch his lights out!"

Mabel laughed and ruffled his hair. "That's my grephew!"

"Yuck it up," Ford mumbled, his eyes closed. "Bud got so mad he practically swore vengeance on us. Who knows what else he's got up his sleeve?"

"Heeey, cheer up, buddy. Ol' Mabel's got a few tricks of her own. And I bought a brand-new security system for the Shack!" She winced. "Even if it's still in the styrofoam-peanut stage..."

"Yeah," Stan said, starting to cheer up. "Besides, we already took him down once and broke his stupid charm thing. What else is he gonna do? Try to read our minds with his 'psychic powers'?" He made sarcastic quote marks.

A smile spread over Ford's face. "Yeah! How's Bud going to destroy us now – try to guess what number we're thinking of?"

"He'll never guess what number I'm thinking of," Stanley said. "Negative six! Nobody'd guess a negative number!"

Mabel laughed. "Yeah, bet the little twerp's planning our destruction right now!" She belly-flopped on the boys, making them squeal with giggles. They tried to get her off by tickling her armpits, but she weighed them down and stuck her fingers in their armpits. It was an extremely moist and satisfying tickle fight.

Bud locked his door and propped a chair against the knob. Once he was sure it was secure, he turned, catching sight of himself in the mirror. His hair had turned as white as a baby barn owl.

Fine. It would only add to his mystique.

He went over to the bed. No one had cleaned under there in years, but there was a wide, clear swath across the carpet, parting the dust bunnies on either side. Bud got down on his stomach and inched his way along until he reached the wall. There was a loose flap of carpet where he had hidden something he'd found a long time ago.

"Not so powerful without this, are you?"
Wrong, Stanford Pines. I have more power than you can possibly imagine.

He squirmed his way out, holding his treasure tightly. He went to the vanity and clicked on the lights, casting a harsh, bright circle of light across the desk. He placed his treasure in the light, taking a moment to admire his new reflection in the gold-plated cover.

Then he opened Journal #2 and began to read.

Chapter End Notes

Me: Aaaand that's a wrap! Great job everybody!

Bud: You turned my hair white.
Stanley: *snickers*

Me: Well, uh...yeah, but you used the amulet so -

Stanley: You look like a chubby Santa Claus!

Ford: You mean that's a side effect of using the amulet? Fascinating! Can I borrow a few hairs to test them? You don't happen to still have that hairbrush around with pre-amulet hairs, do you?

Me: Uh, guys -

Bud: Sure, Stanley, we've got a spare bedroom you can use if you want to sleep over! (Forever.)

Stanley: LIKE THE LADY SAID THAT'S A WRAP WE ARE SO OUTTA HERE.
Stanley stumbled down the stairs, rubbing sleep-gunk out of his eye. Ford trailed behind him, yawning.

“We got anythin’ to eat?” Stan slurred, opening random cabinets and sticking his head inside. A bat flew out of one and he was so tired he didn't even flinch.

Ford, however, ducked. “I sure hope so, because I am not eating bat meat. Like, ever.”

“Don't knock it 'till you try it!” Mabel said cheerfully, bounding into the room. “Who's ready for a Mabelicious breakfast?”

Stanley eyed her warily. “You know what? I'm actually not that hungry.”

Ford smothered a chuckle and went to the fridge. “Cool, eggs. Hey Grauntie Mabel, you got any cheese?”

“Just don't...cut it,” Stan said, exaggerating the pun.

“Har, har. But seriously.”

“Yeah, I think we got some moldy parmesan behind the brown sugar canister.” Grauntie Mabel went over to get it, then paused in front of the sink and peered out the window. “Uh, why is there a large cardboard box on my lawn?”

Stan came over to look. He squinted. “It looks like there's writing on the side. 'Harry's Sucker...’”

“Harvey's Super Auto Store,” Ford supplied.

Stan shrieked so loudly the bat came back and flew around his head, chirping wildly. Grauntie Mabel winced. “Watched the hearing aid, will ya, kid?”

But Stanley was already out the door, sprinting across the lawn in his pajamas. He leaped onto the box and tore at the industrial-strength masking tape with his bare hands, using his teeth when the tape wouldn't break.

“Whoa, whoa, kid, slow down!” Grauntie Mabel called, as she and Ford came out of the house. “You get bit by a were-beaver or somethin’?”

Stan tunneled straight through the box without stopping, then, when he’d hit all the weak points, climbed off and kicked it in just the right place. Instantly the whole box fell away in a poof of styrofoam peanuts. In the center of the box was a beautiful, gleaming, shining El Diablo, complete with a retractable cover, its deep crimson paint almost glowing in the early morning light.
Stanley wiped a tear from his eye. “It's perfect.”

Grauntie Mabel groaned. “Kid, if you've signed on for another credit card –”

“Nope! This thing is totally, one-hundred-and-ten-percent credit-card free and absolutely mine!” He raced for the side door and tried to open it. “Shoot, I forgot, the key's gotta be around here somewhere –”

Grauntie Mabel caught his arm and he flinched on reflex. “No, seriously, kid, where in the name of peppermint cotton candy did this thing even come from?”

“Bud bought it for me,” Stan said. “You know, back when he was being friendly in a really creepy way. I thought after the fight at the warehouse he might've cancelled the order, but it looks like he totally forgot – and I made sure there was a no-refund policy before he bought it!” He looked at the car proudly. It was practically his first con. “This thing's all mine, all the time, forever!”

Ford was running a hand over the hood of the car, admiring its satin finish. “This thing's amazing, Stanley. It's even big enough to actually ride in. Is it remote-controlled, or how does it work?”

Stanley grinned and flicked the key up from the packaging with his foot, catching it in mid-air. “Just like a regular car, bro! Like with an engine and everything! All it needs is some gas and we're good to go!”

“You don't even have a license,” Mabel pointed out.

“Oh contrare!” He pulled out his fake IDs and waved them in the air. “I've got several licenses! All's I gotta do is change my name to match one and I'm golden!”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Alright, color me impressed.”

Ford frowned suddenly. “Don't cars need gasoline, though?”

“Right!” Stan turned to Grauntie Mabel. “So, about your motorcycle...”

“Oh no you don't,” she said immediately. “Ain't nobody touches my bike but me.”

“Just to siphon a little bit of gas! It's not like we could push it all the way to the gas station.”

She rolled her eyes. “That's exactly what you'll do. Your car, your responsibility. I'll help you get gas after work, but I gotta get ready for work. You're just gonna have to figure out what to do in the meantime.”

What she said was: “You're just gonna have to figure out what to do in the meantime.”

What Stan heard was: “You're just gonna figure out how to siphon gas in the meantime.”

Easy mistake, right?

Two hours later Stan was driving through the woods in his first-ever car, Ford riding shotgun with a sack of snacks and supplies sitting on his lap. Mabel's motorcycle had made a generous transfusion to the Stanley Mobile through a garden hose, and not only did Stanley's baby have a full tank, but the smell made him think it was premium stuff, too. The top was down and the wind whipped through his hair. He laughed aloud.
“Man, this is awesome!”

“It really is,” Ford agreed, scanning the trees eagerly. “Can you imagine how much ground we can cover with this? We can see miles and miles of forest in a single day!”

“We could do treasure-hunting!”

“And bring back specimens to study!”

“Or piles of gold!” Then he frowned. “Although I may have to get Mabel to make seat covers. I don't want a speck of dirt on my baby.”

Ford nudged him with an elbow. “Don't look now, but you sound exactly like Mabel.”

“Wrong, bro-bro, she sounded like me.” He grinned and whipped the wheel hard around the next curve in the road, making the back of the car fishtail slightly and the tires squeal. He laughed. Man, who know driving was so much fun? No wonder Mabel drove like a maniac!

Ford appeared to disagree, adjusting the seatbelt nervously. “Geez, Stan, warn me before you do that.”

“C'mon, Ford, where's your sense of adventure?”

“Right next to my sense of survival.”

Suddenly Stan saw something bright blue and glittering flash between the trees. “Alright – warning!” he shouted, and whipped the wheel. The tires spat gravel and Ford white-knuckled the side of the car and Stan laughed as he drove the car straight into the trees. The trees were so wide it was actually easy to drive through them, even though the roots seriously tested his shock pads. He hit the gas. Squirrels scampered out of the way, screeching at him like, I am not completing your driving experience by turning into roadkill!

Then the trees opened up and Stan slammed on the brakes. The car slid to a perfect stop one inch from the water.

It was a bowl-shaped clearing in the middle of the trees, with a pool of the bluest water Stan had ever seen collected in the middle. It was about five times the size of a kiddie pool and clear as crystal. Stan could see all the little gray and brown and rust-colored pebbles at the bottom.

Ford sat up, adjusting his glasses. His hair was sticking out all funny and there were leaves in it – must've caught a branch. Luckily he was too fascinated by the pool to notice.

“Incredible,” Ford said, as they hopped out of the car. “It's so blue...have you ever seen water that blue?”

“Nope,” Stan said, eyeing it appreciatively. “Looks like some kinda Cool Aid. Hey – Pool Aid!”

“There's nothing living in it, either. You think it's some kind of poisonous bacteria that...Stanley!”

He'd knelt at the edge of the pool. The water looked incredibly like blueberry soda.

“Stanley, don't drink –”

Stan plunged his whole head into the water and slurped.

It was the sweetest water he'd ever tasted. It wasn't even sweet, it just sort of floated over his tongue
and slid down his throat like he was drinking pure silk, or maybe starlight, and then it hit his gut and fizzed and bubbled like he was filling up with popcorn –

He felt a hand grab the back of his shirt and yank him out.

“– you *doing*?!” Ford demanded angrily. “*I just said* nothing grows in it! For all you know you just drank straight poison!”

Stanley smacked his lips and grinned, looking up at his brother. “Don't knock it 'till ya tried it, Sixer. That's the best stuff I've ever TASTED.”

They jumped. When Stan said “tasted”, his voice had suddenly gone all deep and loud, like he'd just jumped straight into puberty and held a microphone to his face. A few birds and a freaked-out squirrel ran out of the nearest tree and shot out of sight.

Stanley grinned. “AWESOME,” he said, and the tiny branches on the trees shivered. He tried to talk even louder. “AAAAWWEESSOOOMMEE.” The tops of the trees waved and a bunch of crows took off, cawing angrily. Stanley laughed and the pond rippled.

Ford was holding his ears. “Cut it out, I'm gonna go deaf!” he barked, but he was smiling, too, and he was getting that excited gleam in his eye. “Now I've gotta know what this stuff does. It's like anti-helium! How does it make your voice go deep like that? Does it work on animals? You think it does it to everybody, or just you?”

Stanley gave him a little shove. “ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT!”

Ford tested it. Apparently the water did *not* work the same for everyone. His voice went so shrill it cracked the glass on one of Stan's headlights.

Ford insisted they take samples. He dug the two water bottles they'd backed out of the supply bag and dumped them, refilling them with the strange blue water.

“We'll need to test this on a much wider sample size,” he said, holding the two bottles carefully in his lap as they trundled away from the pool. He'd already marked the location in a map he'd drawn in the journal. “We can try it on Waddles, and we can probably slip some into Grauntie Mabel's Mabel Juice, although I'm not sure how it'll react with the other ingredients.”

“Probably make her sound like a pirate. Hey – think we could rig it to that water fountain in the park? You'd get a ton of samples that way!”

Ford laughed – and then the side of the car smashed into his ribs.

Stanley pulled a one-eighty to avoid hitting a tree that had suddenly decided to move into their path. They shouted and narrowly avoided broadsiding a redwood.

“What the heck was that?!” Stan asked. Ford turned to look.

The tree that had moved was actually slightly different from the other trees – it was huge, definitely, but the bark was sort of orange-ish and peeled off in weird places. And the branches weren't branches at all, they looked more like weird stiff ropes with little mossy growths on them resembling leaves.

And at the bottom of the trunk, instead of roots, there was a foot.
Ford looked up.

“Oh, man...”

“No sudden moves, right?” Stan whispered. “Right, Ford? Or do we drive like crazy? I dunno if the car can go faster than...”

_Than a tree giant._

Ford swallowed.

But the giant didn't even seem to notice they were there. It was sort of hunched over, crouching so they could only see the top of its head over its knees. It had actual full-grown trees caught in dreadlocks the size of pythons, if pythons were green, shaggy, and covered with pine needles. They could just see one massive green eye staring out from under the dreadlocks, but if the giant held still, it blended almost perfectly with the forest.

“Okay,” Ford whispered. “I-I read about this guy in the journal. He's actually pretty shy and reclusive, because lumberjacks keep trying to chop at his legs, thinking they're trees. So – so if we just –”

Suddenly a huge hand came down and grabbed the car, smashing them against the seats and shattering the windshield. They screamed, thinking they were about to get squashed like flies, and then Ford felt a horrible swooping in his stomach and realized they were being carried up in the air.

“IT'S GONNA EAT US!” Ford screamed. He pounded at the calloused palm, but it was tough as granite and it didn't seem to feel him. “HEY! HEY! STEVE! DON'T EAT –”

“**PUT THE CAR DOWN.**”

Ford had a split-second to realize that the huge, booming voice was Stanley's, before the car suddenly dropped like a rock. They shouted – Stan very, very loudly – and the car crashed to the forest floor, bouncing so hard the axles creaked and Ford was sure something in the engine jarred loose.

“**GENTLY!**” Stan bellowed. “I MEANT GENTLY!”

The giant howled and reared back, perhaps unused to being scolded, especially by something it could barely see. It started stomping the ground frantically and waving its fists in the air.

Ford stared up at it, stunned. “Is he...throwing a _tantrum?_”

“**STEVE!**” Stanley roared. “**FOR PANCAKE'S SAKE, CALM DOWN!**”

If anything, the giant seemed to freak out even more. It stomped and kicked and redwoods toppled like bowling pins. One of them fell, so slowly that Stan and Ford had plenty of time to see exactly where it would land. They screamed themselves hoarse as it landed so close to the car that it sheared off the rearview mirror.

“**NUTS TO THIS, I'M NEVER GOING IN THE FOREST AGAIN!**” Stanley shouted. The giant howled harder.

The giant was acting like a baby – a big, overgrown baby who was being scolded for the first time in its life. Well, it probably was. It was so big and so tall that Ford doubted anyone had a voice loud enough to talk to him without climbing the nearest tree. Stanley's booming voice was probably the
only voice loud enough to reach its ears, and even if it didn't know the words, Stan sure sounded angry. He'd made the giant had let them go, but if it didn't calm down, they were going to get crushed anyhow.

What would calm down a baby tree giant?

Ford patted around frantically. “The water – Stanley, where's the water?”

“You're thirsty now?” Stan asked incredulously, his voice abruptly changing back to normal. He quickly helped Ford look and shoved the second bottle into Ford's hands. Ford took a tiny swig.

“There, there,” he said soothingly, his voice a high, feminine falsetto.

For a second, both Stanley and the giant froze, staring at him.

Stanley, of course, burst out laughing.

Ford turned bright red, but the giant was still moaning and stomping around, now obviously trying to find the source of the voice.

Ford cleared his throat and took another drink. “Such a big tree giant you are. You don't have to be afraid. You can calm down…”

The giant stopped stomping around. It was apparently so used to hiding that it had never stood up straight, even when it was doing the stomping, instead bending over all hunched-backed. Ford felt kind of sorry for it. The giant squatted down again, rubbing where Ford assumed its eyes were. It was making little whimpery noises.

“There now, you're all better,” Ford said. (Admittedly, his voice was a little strained, because there he was saving their lives and Stanley was laughing so hard his face was turning blue.) “Now you go be a good tree giant. And don't you eat any more cars. They're bad for your teeth. Alright?” His voice went back to normal on the last word, but the tree giant seemed calmed enough. He moaned a little more, then plucked up a redwood and started petting it like a cat. Then he moved off, his long legs shaking the ground so hard the shockwaves vibrated up Ford's spine until the giant was several miles away.

“Oh g – oh – fre –” Stan tried to say, but couldn't catch his breath for laughing.

Ford looked around coldly. “Yes. Well. He broke the windshield and the mirror got chopped off, but let's hope the engine starts so we don't have to walk home.”

That sobered him. Stanley sat up, inspecting the damage. “Aw, geez…”

Ford sighed. He wasn't actually trying to be mean. “Well, you got the car for free, anyway. And we did get some use out of it.”

“A tree giant though?!” Stanley looked up at the sky, apparently asking the universe at large. “A tree giant who eats cars? Really?!”

Ford sat back with a groan. “I should've remembered him from the journal. I can't believe this.”

Stanley looked at him. “You mean you knew. About a tree giant. Who eats cars. And you didn't think to mention this.”

Ford sank lower in his seat.
Stanley shook his head and tried to start the car. It took a few tries, but the engine caught and Stanley backed carefully out of the fallen trees and onto the road. It died when he tried to switch gears, though, and Stanley made Ford sit in the driver's seat while he messed with the engine and tried to turn it on.

“But you don't know anything about engines,” Ford protested.

“It's like a big, fiery, exploding metal puzzle,” Stan said. “Eazy-peazy. Just get in the car and start her when I say.”

Ford had to admit he was slightly impressed. Neither one of them had any idea what Stanley did that made it work, but they were back on the road again in less than half an hour. Even though the engine whined and growled like a cat when somebody went to wash it.

Ford held up the water bottle they’d been drinking from. There was barely any of it left, and the other bottle had gotten cracked and spilled all over the floor. At least the carpet was kind of dark, but Ford hoped it wouldn't stain. Stanley had been so excited about the car, and here it was one gear away from being wrecked.

“I'm really sorry about the car, Stan,” Ford said.

“Aw, don't worry about it. The forest is huge! Who knew we'd run into a giant? I mean, we drove around like crazy in that golf cart a while back, and nothing happened.” He was holding the wheel tightly like he could keep the car going through sheer force of will.

“I'll help you fix it,” Ford offered. “I mean, you already got it fixed once, so if we get some books from the library –”

Stanley burst out laughing.


“If we get some books from the library,',” Stanley mimicked, a huge smile on his face. “That was just such a you thing to say.” And then he added, with a sly look, “You know what, Ford? You make a pretty good mama tree giant.”

Ford turned beat red all the way up to his hair, but he couldn't help it. He laughed, too.

Chapter End Notes

I GAVE STANLEY THE CAR SQUEEEEEEEE!!! <3 <3 <3

Can a car count as a character? I'm counting it as a character. (Cars can have character, so it's the same thing, right?)

Now picture Ford speaking in a ridiculously high-pitched feminine voice and soothing a baby tree giant. You're welcome. ;D
"Hey Ria, hey Ria!" Stan shouted, sliding down the staircase banister. He ran butt-first into the fancy knob thing at the end and fell sideways with an "oomph." "Ow. Hey Ria, hey Ria!" He skidded into the Gift Shop, waving a rolled-up magazine. "Guess what I --"

He stopped. The shop was empty except for a young woman with a bright yellow off-shoulder T-shirt reading "I ♥ TV." She had high cheekbones, full lips, and chestnut hair pulled back in a very fluffy ponytail. And she was standing behind the cash register.

Stan stared at her. "You're not Ria." His most brilliant pick-up line ever.

She looked up. "Hi! No, I'm definitely not 'not Ria'."

The front door dinged and Ria came in. "Oh hey, Stan."

"Ria! Who is this beautiful imposter?!"

"Oh, this here's Seandra Jimenez. Dan's taking a week off to go do some logging competition up in Washington, so we got Seandra to fill in for him."

"Seandra?"

Stan half turned as Ford came up behind him. He grabbed the magazine from Stanley, flipped the pages furiously, and held up an article. "Like the Seandra who wrote the article on Big Foot in Whacky Magazine?"

The girl smiled. "The one and the same!"

Grauntie Mabel walked in. "Oh, good, you're all acquainted. I'm headin' out. Seandra, Ria, you two watch the Shack while I'm gone, alright?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Ria said, standing at attention.

Seandra smiled slyly. "Suuure, Mrs. Pines."

"Good. You two stay out of trouble." She ruffled Stan's hair and headed out the door.

The moment she was gone, Seandra slipped out from behind the counter and started searching the room.

"What're you doing?" Ford asked.

"Research." Seandra picked up a few bobble heads, checking underneath. "I mean, a place called 'The Mystery Shack'? I bet there's tons of unsolved mysteries in this place! Secret cupboards! Fake exhibits! Real exhibits!"
Ria looked worried. “I don't think Mrs. Pines would like –”

“Whoa!” Seandra pulled back a heavy green curtain on one side of the room, revealing a ladder that went straight through the ceiling. Stan and Ford gasped, moving closer. They'd never seen that there before! “What is this?” Seandra asked. “A secret ladder to the roof?”

Stan grabbed the bottom of the ladder and started climbing. “We gotta check it out!”

“Uhhhh,” Ria said nervously.

“You wanna come with us, Ria?” Seandra asked.

“Uhhhh...”

“'Uhhhh'?”

Ria jumped. “How did you mimic me so perfectly?”

Seandra laughed and scurried up the ladder, Ford close behind her.

The ladder went straight through a square-shaped tunnel that ended at a trap door. Stan, being first, braced his feet against the ladder rungs and shoved it open. Light poured down the shaft and wind ruffled his hair.

“What is it?” Ford called up.

“Whoaaa! Neat-O!” Stan clambered up, the other two close behind him.

Ford looked around, amazed. The ladder really did lead to the roof! To the very same platform of tiles where Ford had fought Wax Sherlock Holmes. Ford pulled himself out and let the back door swing shut behind him – it was almost invisible now that it was shut, unless you know what to look for.

The view was amazing. They were nearly level with the treetops, even higher than the totem pole out front, and they could see clear down Gopher Road for at least half a mile.

“This is amazing!” Stan said, skidding to the edge and looking down. “I bet if you fell you'd break like, all the bones in your body!”

“Then let's not do that,” Ford said quickly, grabbing his brother's shirt and yanking him back.

“What is this even doing here?” Seandra asked wonderingly. “Who would build something like this into the Mystery Shack in the first place? What's it for?”

“Maybe it's for practicing your aim. Check it!” He grabbed a pinecone off the roof and chucked it at the totem pole. It bounced off the wing on the raven. “BOOSH!”

Seandra was still looking around, her hands on her hips, thinking hard. “Or maybe it was to get a good view of something...something you can only see from exactly this vantage point...”

“There's those mountains,” Ford said, pointing to a spot between the trees.

“Can't be them,” Stan said. “You could see them from the Gleeful Warehouse, too, just up the road.”
“But that's someone else's property. If you're going to put this much effort into getting a view of something, it's gotta be something really important.” She reached for her back pocket. “Aw, man! I left my notebook downstairs.”

“You have a notebook?” Ford asked, surprised.

“Can't afford an iBerry yet and I gotta take notes on something. I'll be right back.”

Ford watched her head down the ladder. She had a notebook. He had a notebook. And she wrote actual articles on actual supernatural creatures. That got actually published.

“Ugh, Stanford!”

Ford jumped. Stan was glaring at him. “What, what?” Ford protested.

“How the heck am I supposed to score all the cute honnies if you got a crush on one?” Stan demanded.

“I do not have a crush,” he said, blushing hotly.

“Right, bro. Sure.”

Ford pushed him. “C'mon! We just met her, for cryin' out loud. She could have like, weird deodorant or a thing for claymation. It's not like I'm gonna lay awake thinking about her!”

That night Ford lay wide awake, staring at the ceiling, visions of Seandra's perfect smile flashing before of his eyes.

“Uh-oh.”

The next day Ford and Stan hung out at the cash register with Seandra. Actually, Stan was hanging out, sitting on the counter and gesturing while he told a story about an exhibit idea he'd come up with. Seandra was writing furiously in her notebook, taking down everything she said, while Ford stood across the room, also pretending to make important notes in his notebook. Seandra was always writing notes for her next news article. It made her look super smart.

Ford wrote, I am pretending to write things down.

“– and she said it was so good we could try using it as an exhibit,” Stan said.

Seandra glanced up at Stan. “She didn't actually do it, though…”

Stan grinned. “She did! We painted footprints in the bottom and stuck the whole glass coffin in the museum with a sign saying, 'Invisible Corpse of the Invisible Man.'”

A slow grin tweaked the corners of Seandra's full mouth. “And people bought that?”

“Tourists will literally buy anything.”

She laughed. “Oh, man, this is the craziest stuff I've ever heard.”

“You ain't seen nothing yet. Hey Ford!”

Ford jumped and nearly dropped his notebook. “Yes! What?”
“Tell Seandra about the time we got fairy circles in the front lawn!” Stan said.

“Fairy circles?” Seandra repeated eagerly. “Like, circles of actual fairies?”

“Uh, uh, no –” Ford stuttered.

Stan leaned back on his arms, grinning slightly wickedly. “It just means a circle of mushrooms. Although Ford here wanted to try dancing around it to see if fairies really would appear.”

Ford blanched. “Stan!”

“Did it actually work?” Seandra asked.

“Are you kidding?” Stan said, as Ford gave him a scorching Look that said Stop this now or die painfully. “The only dance he knows is the lamby da–”

Cu-KOO! Cu-KOO!

Seandra glanced at the clock. “Whoa, that was fast. Welp...” She flipped her notebook closed and slid her pen through the spiral binding. “Thanks for all the info, Stan. Think we could do this again tomorrow?”

“Sure!” Stan said, but Ford spoke over him.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Hanging out with some friends after work.” She pole-vaulted over the desk. “See ya!”

“Wait!” Ford said quickly. “Maybe I could – we could, come with you guys?”

Seandra turned back. “I dunno. My friends and I can be pretty intense. How old did you say you guys were?”

“We're thirteen!” Ford said, as Stan opened his mouth. “So, technically a teen.”

Seandra shrugged. “Fine with me. Lemme get my purse, 'kay?”

She left to grab the back it from the hook in the den. Ford was almost afraid to look at the expression on Stan's face.

“Oh, broooooo,” Stan said, and there was a wide, gloating smile in his voice. He threw an arm around Ford's shoulders. “Your first big lie! I am so proud of you.”

Ford squirmed away. “It's not a big lie, it's just...I just wanted to hang out with the cool kids! And Seandra and whatever,” he mumbled.

“I knew it!” Stan shouted. “You love her! Love, love, love, love, love!”

“Hey what's that?” Ford pointed.

“Huh?”

Ford flicked the back of his head.

They went outside and saw a blue van parked on the front lawn. Three guys and a girl were standing
around it. One of the guys, who was skinny as a matchstick with a long black ponytail, was standing on the roof of the van. Another guy, who was built like a linebacker with a sweater tied around his neck, was standing close by, with his back to the car. The other two were watching

The buff guy was laughing. “C’mon man, do it, do it, do it!”

The other guy chuckled nervously and stepped onto the buff guy’s head. He wobbled a little and waved his long noodle arms to stay balanced.

The buff guy looked vaguely impatient. “Dude, just put your whole weight on me.”

“This is my whole weight.”

“Seriously? You’re like a chihuahua!” he laughed again and the skinny guy almost lost his balance.

*Click.*

They all looked up at the sound. Seandra had snapped a photo with her phone.

“Seandra!” the four teens said. The skinny guy lost his balance and landed on buff guy’s shoulders.

“Yeah!” he shouted. “FREAK THE MIGHTY! FREAK THE MIGHTY!”

“Who you callin’ a freak, freak?” The buff guy promptly fell backwards on the grass. The two of them got up, still laughing.

“Alright guys, tone down the bromance,” Seandra said with a smile, leading the twins over.

“Everyone, these are my pals from work, Stan and Ford. Guys, this is Reggie and D’Andre.” Reggie, the skinny guy, leaned against D’Andre like he was an oversized armrest, and they both smiled at the twins. Seandra gestured to the girl next, who had rust-red hair and purple lipstick that matched the skull on her shirt. “Janice, who’s going by ‘Ja-Mean’ this week.”


Seandra grinned. She turned to the last guy, who looked like was standing against the van wearing a collared navy shirt with a blazer and pressed khaki pants. Everything about him screamed “American All-Star,” right up to his waved black hair and strong cleft chin. “Aaand –”

“ME!”

A horrible monster jumped out of a bush, its huge mouth gaping, its wild eyes rolling. Ford yelped and Stanley screamed, but nobody else looked surprised.

“I have come to join in today's youthful adventure!” it roared.

Seandra didn't even glance up. “Go home, Toby.”

The monster, Ford realized, was actually the ugliest human he'd ever seen. Toby pouted, which made it even worse. “But I brought whole-grain nut bars for ever–”

“GRAWR!” Janice screamed, brandishing her fist, and Toby shrieked and dove back into the bushes.

“He's the nut bar,” Stan said.

Ford was squinting at the last guy, who was checking his reflection in the van's window. “Don't I
know you from somewhere?” he asked.

The guy gave him a half-smile. half-smirk. “You should. I'm Aaron Anker, the future face of *Gravity Falls News*.”

Ford blinked. “You mean you initials are A.A.?”

D'Andre snorted and his cheeks went red from holding back laughter.

“I can't believe I never noticed that,” Reggie said, chuckling and shaking his head. “man, tough break, huh?”

Aaron narrowed his eyes in a death-glare. Ford squirmed.

“Come on, guys!” Seandra said, clearly impatient. “Let's get going, huh? I got big plans for tonight.”

Reggie and D'Andre cheered and hopped in the back seat. Ford went for the front seat, but the door pulled shut when he opened the handle. Aaron stuck his head through the window.

“Sorry kid, I ride shotgun, got it?” he drawled, smiling a Colgate smile. Ford backed off and headed for the last row of seats in the van. At least he wound up sitting next to Stan. And better yet, it was D'Andre's car, so he was driving and Seandra was sitting in the middle seat, between Reggie and Janice. One seat in front of Ford. If he reached out he'd touch her hair.

“Alright guys, who's ready for some real-life adventure?” D'Andre asked, gripping the steering wheel like he was driving a monster truck. The group cheered and punched the ceiling as they took off down the road.

The back of Ford and Stan's seat was ripped up in places with the stuffing coming out. There was a lot of writing on the roof and sides of the car – *Die Laughing, Zombies Rule, POCKY*, a tic-tac-toe game. Ford didn't pay much attention. His gaze was focused on Seandra's bouncy, perfect pony tail.

He swung his feet nervously. Large groups made him nervous anyway, mainly because people tended to yell or throw things at him. And these were *older* Seandras...er, kids. How was he supposed to impress them?

Stan poked his butt and he jumped. “Hey!”

His brother had grabbed the pen from the notebook in Ford's back pocket. He uncapped it and wrote on the side of the van:

*Anker is a Canker!*

“Ha! Ford, check this out!”

“Stanley!” Ford hissed, grabbing the pen back. “Be serious!”

“What?” Stan grinned. “Am I embarrassing you in front of your new...GIRLFR—”

Ford quickly slapped a hand over his mouth. Then he felt something slimy. “Ew! Did you just lick my hand?!”

Mabel was snoring loudly in her armchair. The TV had been left on, and the ending credits of the last show played across the screen. Abruptly the credits music changed to old-timey piano music.
Mabel jumped awake. “Huh, whazzat?”

“You're watching the black and white period piece old-lady boring movie channel,” said the TV.

“Hey! I'm an old lady!” Mabel said enthusiastically.

“Stay tuned for our Friday night movie, *The Duchess Approves*, starring Sturly Stemblerburgiss as 'The Duchess', and Grampton St. Rumpterfrabble as irascible coxswain 'Saunterblugget Hampterfuppinshire'.”

“Kids! Are you home?” Mabel shouted. No answer.

The intro music began to play.

Mabel stood up and grabbed several planks of wood and a hammer from behind the chair. “Welp, time to board up the doors and windows! IT'S MABEL TIME!”

The store's sign read “D U K D N” in neon letters, burning acid-green in the night. The building was quiet, the parking lot deserted. Just a gray little building in the middle of nothing, a dumpster pressed up on one side like a dark gray cat. There was no one around. The whole street was still, and dark, and there were no other buildings in sight. D'Andre had parked right outside the chainlink fence, and they'd all gotten out to look. It gave Ford the creeps.

“There it is, fellas,” Seandra said, her voice throaty with eagerness. “The condemned Dusk to Dawn.”

“Wh-why did they shut it down?” Ford asked. “Was it like a health code violation, or...?”

“Try murder,” said D'Andre. “Some folks died in there, and the place's been haunted ever since.”

Ford swallowed. “Really?”

“That's what we're gonna find out,” Seandra said. “C'mon.” She started scaling the fence.

“Race you!” Stan shouted, and zoomed to the top in seconds. The others quickly followed suit, laughing.

Ford glanced at the sign on the fence. Someone had graffitied it so that it now read: *No Trespassing Violators Will Be DEAD.*

He gulped.

Seandra was first on the other side, jumping halfway down and landing in a graceful crouch. Reggie was next, partly because D'Andre playfully shoved him a little too hard. He landed on his back with an *oomph* and a chuckle. Stan came third, followed closely by Aaron, Janice, and D'Andre.

Ford, unfortunately, had gotten stuck at the top.

“Come on, Ford!” Seandra called.

“I'm coming!” he called back. “Just gotta get a – a foothold, here...”
Aaron scowled. “Dude, your brother did it and you’re twins.”

“I know, I know…” Dang it, how does Stan make it look so easy?

“Y’know what? Just…” D’Andre stepped forward and, being so tall, plucked him off the fence and dropped him on the ground. “There ya go.”

“Way to yank the kid off the fence, genius,” Reggie said.

“Your mom's a genius.”

The group headed over to the front of the store. There was a rusty trashcan next to the doors and some grass growing from the rain gutter. The paint looked dingy and vaguely fuzzy, like it was covered in a fine mold. The place had definitely seen better days.

Aaron yanked on the front doors, trying to get them open. Seandra cupped her hands around her eyes and peered through the glass.

“Whoa, this place is amazing!” she said.

Stan mimicked her pose, then breathed on the glass and drew two dots. “Haha, look, it's haunted!”

Aaron gave up on the doors. “Great, it's locked.”

“I could open it,” Ford offered.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Sure. I can't get in, but I'm sure junior's gonna break it down like Hercules.”

“Come on, leave him alone, Aaron,” Seandra said. “He's just a little kid.”

Ford's face fell. He stuffed his hands in his jacket.

Suddenly he felt a shove from behind. “Go on, Poindexter,” Stan said. “Show the wimp what you can do!”

Aaron sputtered. “Excuse me?”

Ford glanced at Stan, then Aaron, and set his jaw. He turned and strode quickly around the store to the dumpster. He climbed on top of it and scaled a drainpipe to get to the roof, pulling on the rain gutter for leverage.

Reggie looked vaguely worried. “Hey, whoa! What are you doing?”

Ford ignored him. He walked straight up the roof to the top of the store where he knew there’d be an air conditioner or vent. (There was always a vent.) He found it and yanked at the grill. When it wouldn't budge, he slammed his shoulder against it, jarring its screws loose, and finally punched it in so the grill fell down the shaft.

“Go, Sixer!” Stan shouted. “Punch that metal thing!”

“Hey, Ford!” Seandra called. “Take it easy!”

Ford crawled into the duct and braced his back and feet against the walls. He slid down quickly, landing where the vent angled horizontally and crossed the ceiling of the store. He crawled to the nearest opening, punched his way through, dropped onto a shelf, and climbed down from there. He reached the front door in seconds, just in time to hear Aaron say, “Who wants to bet he doesn't make
Excellent timing. He pushed the door open and stepped out, gesturing grandly. “Tada!”

“All right!” Reggie said, leading the way inside. He high-fived Ford on the way in. “Your new name is Dr. Fun Times!”

D’Andre followed, then Janice, who gave a grumbled, “Whatever.” Aaron practically stomped through the door. Seandra lightly punched his shoulder as she passed.

“Nice work,” she said.

He grinned and followed his brother inside.

This night was going to be perfect.

The inside of the shop was even creepier than the outside, but in a cool way, like someone had designed an awesome Haunted house for Halloween. The fine white lines of cobwebs laced the corners of the shelves and threaded between the long light bulbs on the ceiling. Random items – cereal boxes, deodorant, chapstick – had been left strewn around the counters and the edges of the floor. A thick dust covered everything, softening the shapes and muting the colors. The neon signs outside filtered light through the dirty front windows, giving the whole place an eerie bluish glow.

“Whoa, would you check this place out?”

“Seriously awesome.”

“What even is that?”

They fanned out to look. Ford headed to the right of the shop, where there were old food machines lined up along the wall: a rotating hotdog rack, mustard-and-ketchup dispensers, a Pitt Cola machine. Seandra and Aaron followed, looking around with excitement.

Seandra couldn’t stop smiling. She had her notebook out and was taking notes as fast as she could. “This is so cool. Even creepier than I imagined!”

Ford met Stan by the cash register. He was scooping all the pennies out of a Leave Two Take One dish.

“Free cash!” he said, grinning happily and pocketing the coins.

Ford picked up an old newspaper from the rack by the register. He actually had to dust it off. It was a copy of USA: NEWZ, circa May 2, 1995. The headline: Cheese Crust Pizza Declared Delicious!

“Pfft.” Seandra was looking over his shoulder. “They put a fluff piece on the cover? So lame.”

“Hey dude,” they heard D’Andre rumble, two aisles over. “Where do you think they keep the dead bodies?” There was an umph and a laugh as Reggie jabbed him with an elbow.

“Guys, check it out!” Aaron said. He’d found a set of light switches near the back. “I bet these still work.”

He flicked them on.
The ceiling lights flickered and buzzed to life, and the giant fake soda over the soda machine started spinning. Even the *Dancy-Pants Revolution* game turned on and started spitting out cheesy show tunes.

“*Al-right!*” Aaron cheered.

“*Jackpot!*” Stan said.

“What do we do now?” Ford asked Seandra.

Reggie came up to them, grinning. “We do *anything we want!*”

Thus began the best night of Ford's life. They scarfed chocolate Twinkies and Choco Puff Muffins from the shelves – those things were practically indestructible and wouldn't expire until the Apocalypse. Stan challenged Aaron to an eating contest and almost beat him before keeling over, his stomach like a small watermelon – only to get up seconds later when D'Andre and Reggie found the mentos. They dumped several in a bottle of Brite Soda and turned it into a soda fountain (“*Take that, Le Fancy Diner!*” Stan shouted, for no discernible reason.) They found a packet of balloons in the “Holiday” section, loaded them all with soda, and had a soda-balloon fight. Ford sat on D'Andre's shoulders and Stan sat on Reggie's, and they battled until everyone was thoroughly sticky and they were out of balloons. Afterward Reggie and D'Andre took turns slamming each other with bags of kitty litter, with everybody else rooting for them to keep going until one of them passed out from internal bruising. Even Janice nearly cracked a smile, or at least looked less hostile for about five seconds.

At one point Ford rigged a temporary slingshot and taught Reggie how to use it. Reggie promptly went after Stan and tried to bean him with the candies, missing every time. Stan laughed and ran circles around him – literally – before racing down the next aisle, where he came face-to-shelf with a display of Smile Dip.

“*Omigosh, omigosh!*” Stan grabbed a packet. “Smile Dip! I thought this stuff was banned in America!”

Ford raised an eyebrow. The display was covered with ribbon reading: DO NOT SELL. “Maybe they had a good reason,” he suggested.

*SPLAT.*

A leftover soda balloon hit him square in the face and he laughed, racing off to find the culprit.

A few minutes later, Ford found himself sitting on top of the Cereal shelf, swinging one leg while Seandra took notes in her notebook.

“*Welp,*” she said, slapping it shut, “looks like this place isn't haunted after all. Although I do think it's a little weird that the electricity's still hooked up after so long. Once, when we didn't pay the bill at my house, we had no power for a week.”

“Don't forget the ice,” Ford mentioned, pointing to Reggie, Sean, and D'Andre. They were taking what they called the ’ice cube challenge’, which involved stuffing as many ice cubes as they could down each other’s shirts and pants to see who could hold the most. “When we came in, Sean had to turn the power on. But the ice was still perfectly frozen.”

“Eh, that may just have been the light switch. The power might've been on the whole time.”

“You really think this stuff out,” Ford said admiringly.
“Sure I do. Someday I wanna be a real reporter, and that means scrutinizing every fact, poking holes in every story. I want to become known as, like, a conspiracy-buster.” Ford laughed appreciatively, and she smiled. “Still, I think we can call this night a rousing success.”

“How d'you mean?”

“Well, we disproved the ghost theory, and everyone's still having a great time. Guys are bonding...” She gestured. “I've never even seen Janice look so happy...” Janice was sitting in a corner, knees hugged to her chest with her arms crossed, squeezing a stress ball with a smiley face on it. “And your brother seems to be going nuts with that Smile Dip.”

Ford looked. Stanley was flopped over, his head propped up against the Smile Dip stand, mumbling vaguely and making weird gestures with his hands, his pupils the size of dimes. Ford snorted with laughter. Yep, he should've known his brother would go overboard with sugar.

“So you really don't think this place is haunted?” he asked.

“Nah. I mean, one of us would've seen something by now. Although it's not like a real, actual haunting until you've got more than one eyewitness to the same phenomenon. Otherwise you could just pin it down to hallucinations, or the placebo effect, or some baby trying to get attention.” She leaned back on one arm. “Y'know, to be honest, I wasn't sure you could handle our crew at first. But you're surprisingly mature for your age.”

Ford nodded solemnly. “Yes. Yes I am.”

He then proceeded to stick his ice cream bar into his cheek, missing his mouth twice in a row.

“Hey! We need more ice!” D'Andre said.

“I'll get it!” Ford hopped down from the shelf and jogged to the back of the store. He opened up the cooler and a breath of icy air whooshed over his face. He picked up a bag, humming a little.

And then he felt it. Something much colder than the ice bags.

He looked up.

Above the bags, inside the cooler, floated a giant, glistening brain. Its spinal cord branched into half a dozen dark pink tentacles, like the grasping arms of a deadly octopus. More nerves were attached to a gaping human mouth hanging just below the brain, and two more nerves sprouted like gruesome wires from the brain's front, leading to a pair of horrible human eyes, rolled back and showing white.

The eyes rolled forward, and Ford saw their poisonous red color, and the eyeballs stretched forward as if by sight alone they could devour him –

He shrieked and dropped the bag, slamming the freezer door shut. The ice cubes spilled over the floor. He leaned heavily against the door, his pulse pounding in his throat.

He hadn't really seen that, right? That was some kind of messed-up reflection or something...right?

Or was it slowly creeping up behind him, phasing through the glass...

He whipped around. Frost coated the inside of the door, hiding the interior, but he didn't see those sickening tentacle eyes – not yet. But it could be coming through any second.

He sucked in a breath, gripped the handle and yanked, a scream in his throat –
Ice bags. Nothing else. Just a freezer full of ice bags.

Ford stared at the empty space where the thing had been. He hadn't imagined it. He'd studied the paranormal for way too long and that thing was far too vivid for him to have just made up. But...where did it go...?

“What was that?”

Ford jumped and turned around. The whole group had come over, all of them, even Seandra. Aaron looked at the bag and then looked at Ford. “I thought I heard, like, some old lady scream back here.”

D'Andre grinned. “You freakin' out, kid?”

“No, no!” Ford said quickly. “No, I'm fine, everything's fine!”

Aaron squinted at him. “Really. Then what's all this about?” he asked, gesturing to the ice cubes strewn across the floor. “Did the boogieman scare you or something?” Janice smothered a chuckle.

“That's, uh...” Ford's gaze darted around. “Hey, look! Dancy Pants Revolution! The game that tricks people into exercising!”

“Woohoo!” D'Andre shouted.

Reggie grabbed D'Andre's arm. “Get on it, get on it!”

“You get on it, I'll break it!”

“Haha, yeah,” Ford said, giving a forced laugh. “Let's all go – go play that, yeah...”

*Great. My first ghost is a fugitive from the Musee Dupuytren, and it wasn't even there when I checked again, so how can I say anything without looking like a scared little kid?!

He glanced back over his shoulder at the freezer, but it was still just full of regular ice bags. He knew he hadn't imagined it. It was like seeing a spider in your room and then not being able to find it when you came back to squash it. It could be anywhere...watching them, waiting...

He hurried to catch up with the rest of the group. Maybe he could come back later and investigate with Stan. When there weren't any cute gi– When there wasn't anyone else around.

The teens played Rock Paper Scissors to decide who would go first on the game. Aaron lost.

“Alright, c'mon Aaron!” Reggie shouted, and the others joined him, chanting: “Aa-ron! Aa-ron! Aa-ron!”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine. Pay attention, losers, lemme show you how it's done.”

He stepped up on the dancing pad and popped in a quarter. Instantly the music changed and colored arrows started falling. Aaron was despicably good at it and even finished the whole song with just two mistakes.

“Woo-hoo! Go Aaron!” Seandra shouted. She nudged Ford, still staring at Aaron. “Wow, he's really good at this!”

“Haha, yeah, that's...that's great.” Something in the window caught his eye, and he looked over.

*Skeletons. Instead of their normal reflections, they were all skeletons, still wearing their clothes –
Seandra's even had a ponytail stuck on the back of her skull, and when Ford looked at his own reflection, his skeleton-self tilted its skull, mimicking his movements. He broke out in a cold sweat.

Then a monster worse than anything he'd ever seen jumped against the window and suckered its face to the glass and he screamed.

Everybody jumped, and Aaron tripped and fell off the dance pad.

“What! What?!”

“There!” Ford pointed a shaking finger at the window. They looked.

“Ugh, Toby,” Seandra groaned.

“What the actual heck, Ford!” Aaron shouted from the floor.

Janice rushed to the window and started banging on the glass, glaring bloody murder. “We told you, go home, Toby!” she snarled.

Toby winced and scuttled away like a fish in a fish tank.

Aaron had gotten to his feet and stalked over to Ford, looming two feet taller. “Look, kid, chill out or go home. You're being a major buzzkill.”

Seandra gave him a light nudge. “Oh, relax, Aaron, Toby would freak anybody out. Once he even got Janice, and that is saying something.”

Janice grunted.

Ford swallowed. “You know what, I'm just gonna...find my brother. I'll be right back.” He hurried away.

He couldn't tell Seandra about the skeletons now. She'd just assume it was a Toby-induced nightmare – or worse, that he was a little kid freaking out. He fought down panic.

There was a payphone along one wall, wedged in the shadows between the fridge section and the canned goods. He dropped in a couple dimes and punched in the number to the Mystery Shack.

It rang. And rang. And rang.

“C'mon, Grauntie Mabel, what are you doing?” he whispered urgently.

The doors were boarded shut and the windows were covered with blackout curtains. The only light cam from the electric glow of the TV. Mabel sat in her yellow armchair, a blanket over her lap and a tub of chocolate-and-jellyworm ice cream in her lap. On the other side of the room, the telephone on the table started ringing. She dug out a scoop of ice cream and ate it, oblivious, her eyes glued to the screen.

The Duchess faced her mother, a fire burning in her eyes. “I don't care about dukes or commoners or Prince Lionel of Cornwall,” she said, her voice trembling with passion. “I'm not afraid anymore, mother!”

Her mother narrowed her eyes, her mouth pressed into a thin iron line. “Duchess. I forbid you.”
“I may be a Duchess...but –” She whipped off her hat, and her long hair billowed in the wind. “I'm also a woman!”

“Yes! YES!” Mabel shouted, pounding on the armrests. “You go girl! Be free, you beautiful wild dove!”

Click. The phone had rung so long that the line automatically disconnected.

He hung up and poked his head out of the niche between the shelves. Looks like the gang was searching for more quarters around the cash register. Aaron was leaning against the counter talking to Seandra – no chance he could catch her alone now.

He dashed down the aisles until he found the Smile Dip display. His brother was still sitting there, facing away from him, another packet of Dip in his hand.

“Stanley! I need your advice.” Ford started pacing. “We're hanging out in a haunted convenience store, which would be really cool if it wasn't trying to kill us, but I don't have any proof and every time I try to say something Aaron makes me look like a scared little kid!”

Usually that was the part where Stan jumped up to defend him, or put an arm around his shoulder and told him it would be okay. But this time Stan didn't move at all. That's when Ford noticed how he was sitting all rigid, and he was holding the Dip so hard his knuckles were white.

“...Stanley?”

Ford walked around him and blanched. Stan's pupils were so small they were practically nonexistent and he was staring into space, seeing nothing. He was even foaming at the mouth!

“Stan!” Ford grabbed his shoulders and shook him, trying to snap him out of it. “How many of those things did you eat?!!”

“Shmeben...teen...” His eyes rolled back.

“Oh man.” Ford dropped him and looked around, panic rising in his chest. “Oh man oh man oh man...”

Suddenly he heard Reggie's voice. “Hey guys!” he called. “Come check this out!”

Ford hurried over.

Reggie, D'Andre, and the rest of the gang were gathered around the cash register, staring at something behind the counter. For a moment Ford actually hoped it was the creepy eye-brain thing – but when he reached them he saw something almost worse: the outline of two bodies drawn in chalk on the tile.

“Whoa, that is so cool,” Aaron said.

“I guess there really was a murder here,” Seandra said, fascinated. “The only do chalk outlines for murder victims, right?”

D'Andre nudged Aaron. “Dude, dare you to lie down in it.”

“Good idea!” Aaron pushed Reggie's back. “Go lie down in it.”
Reggie laughed. “Haha, I'm a dead body, look!”

Ford watched it as if in slow motion. Reggie stepped towards it, grinning, raising one foot slowly in the air, already starting to crouch a little, the sole of his shoe going down, down, about to touch –

“Wait!” he cried, jumping forward. “Maybe let's not do that.”

Aaron grunted with disgust. “Here we go with the buzzkill.”

“No, it's just – what if this place –”

“Dude, it's just a chalk drawing,” D’Andre pointed out.

“But –”

“Look, Ford,” Seandra said kindly, “if this is scaring you –”

“I am not scared!”

“Yeah right.” Aaron scowled at him. “I knew it was a mistake to bring this guy with us. What do you expect from a little kid?”

“I'm NOT a kid!” Ford shouted, stepping back into the chalk drawing. “I'm thirteen!” He flopped down angrily, spreading his arms as wide as he could to fill the space. “Technically a teen!”

A weird vibration hummed through his whole body. On the floor next to him, a small ball of light burst into being and raced around the chalk outline, leaving a trail like pale green fire.

Instantly the lights on the ceiling buzzed and died. The Pitt Cola machine whirred to a standstill. For a split-second, the whole store was plunged into shadow, but the air was thick and heavy and the hair on Ford's arms stood on end.

Janice disappeared.

Her stress ball dropped to the floor and they jumped back. It rolled towards them, the happy face now distorted with fear.

They screamed and Ford scrambled to his feet, looking around frantically. She couldn't be dead, she couldn't be dead, he'd read a science article, matter and energy cannot be created or destroyed...

“There!” he shouted, pointing to the television.

Instead of the grainy black-and-white security footage of the store, it showed the store, utterly empty – except that Janice was standing in the middle of the floor, and the shelves were rearranged to form a maze around her. She spun around and caught sight of them – but when she raced towards them she was stopped by the glass of the TV. She pounded on the screen, bellowing with fear.


“Can you hear us?” Ford called.

Janice didn't answer. She tried to break down the glass with her shoulder, then clawed at it.

“Why's she doing that, why's she doing that?” Reggie asked, his voice rising.

“Get a grip!” Ford barked.
“Let’s just get out of here!” Aaron shouted, making a run for the door.

“Wait – just let me grab a couple of sodas,” D’Andre said, going for the freezer.

_The brain!_ Ford lunged for him. “No – stop!”

Too late. D’Andre opened the freezer and seemed to stare up, his shoulders tensing. They couldn't see anything behind his bulk but Ford knew he must've seen it because D'Andre started screaming – and then suddenly they could D'Andre with no skin, and then no muscles, and then no skeleton, and then even his brain and eyes disappeared. Reggie's scream made a corner of Ford's glasses crack.

“Ow, stop it!” Ford shook Reggie's arm.

“Is this ghosts?” Seandra stammered, her face white. “Is that what this is, did you all see –”

“The door, get to the door!” Aaron sprinted for the front door, everyone right behind him. Seandra was faster and she reached it first, but when she pushed against the handle it rattled but didn't open.

“Guys – it's locked!”

“Outta my way!” Aaron grabbed the coffee machine next to the hot dog turner and threw it at the door. Rather than crashing through the glass, the coffee machine – coffee and all – phased right through the door and disappeared in a flash of bright green light. They screamed and backed away, clinging together in a tight knot.

_Stan, have to get Stan_, Ford thought, but he knew that wouldn't help – even if his brother wasn't hopped up on sugar, there was no way out, nowhere to go. They had to stop whatever was attacking them if they wanted any chance of getting out.

“Whaddowedo, whaddowedo,” Reggie said over and over, clenching the fabric of his shirt in his fists.

“Just stay calm,” Seandra said quickly.

“Guys, whatever's doing this has to have some sort of reason,” Ford said, taking out the journal. He quickly flipped to the page with the ghosts – he'd liked that one so much the page was already dog-eared. He held up the sketch of a Level 1 Ghost. “Maybe if we just figure out why they're haunting us, then they'll let us out of here.”

Seandra stared at him. “How did you get –”

“_Uuuh, they'll let us out of here!_” Aaron said, mimicking him. “Yeah, that makes a lot of sense!”

“It's worth a shot,” Seandra said.

“Bad idea, _bad idea!_” Reggie said. “You want to talk to a ghost that made D'Andre scream his brains out? What kind of sick joke is that!” Then he cried out as his body was lifted into the air, glowing blue for a moment. Then, with a flash, he disappeared.

Ford spun around, searching. A cereal box glowed blue and Reggie appeared on the design on its front, swimming in a bowl of Choco Chunks. The mascot, an orange rabbit in overalls, stood on the edge of the bowl, raising a giant spoon.

“You look good enough to eat!” the rabbit squealed, and the spoon came down. Ford shuddered when he heard the scream.
“Reggie!” Seandra grabbed his shoulder. “Quick, Ford, what else does your book say?”

“**WEEELLLLCCOOOOMMEE.**”

They looked up in horror. Stan floated before them, his whole body glowing with an eerie bluish light, his hair and clothes waving in a nonexistent wind, as if he was underwater. His eyes were rolled back, showing pure white, and his arms were held out from his sides.

“*Welcome to your doom, young trespassers! Muahahahaha!*” Stan rumbled, in a voice that was clearly not his own: it was deep, rumbling, and sadistic.

“They’ve got Stan!” Ford shrieked.

“We’re super sorry for hanging out in your store!” Seandra said.

“Yeah!” Ford added. “Can we just go now and leave forever?”

The ghost paused thoughtfully. “*Well...okay. You're free to go.*”

There was a ping sound, and they turned as the front doors opened. Ford stared at them. It couldn’t really be that easy...

“*But before you go...Hot dogs are now half off!*” The ghost floated over to the hotdog rotator, gesturing with a grin. Ford wondered for a split second if Stan had any control over the ghost. “*I know it might be crazy, but you gotta try these 'dogs!*”

Aaron balled up his fists, his jaw clenching angrily. “Just let us out of here already!” he shouted.

The ghost scowled. “*I don't like your tone!*”

He snapped his fingers and Aaron vanished. As one, Ford and Seandra turned to look for him. Something in the hot dog rotator caught their eye: a hotdog that was paler than the rest, with a bump exactly like a cleft chin.

Because it had Aaron's face on it.

Aaron's hotdog eyes filled with panic. “What? No – I'm a hot dog?! At least make me a prime rib roast –” His voice muffled as the rotator turned him away.

“*It begins.*”

The ghost raised Stan's arms even higher, and gravity immediately reversed itself. Things started falling towards the ceiling. Ford shouted in alarm, his feet lifting off the floor. He twisted wildly in midair as the ceiling zoomed towards him. He smashed his chin against the little dotted tiles, but he only had a second to scramble to his feet and dodge Janice's TV. Boxes, cans, bags of chips, metal shelves, the Pitt Cola machine – everything that wasn't nailed down fell on the ceiling. Seandra gave a cry as a Choco Puff Muffin hit her in the head with an audible thunk.

Stanley was the only thing that was still upright – which meant, since they were glued to the ceiling, he now looked like he was floating upside down. “*Welcome to your home for ALL ETERNITY!*” he roared.

Seandra backed up. “Ford, what do we do?”

“**DUCK!**”
He grabbed her arm and yanked just as the ice cream cooler went sailing through the air. They hit the floor/ceiling and started belly-crawling under a hail of flying soda cans. Suddenly Ford saw the Pitt Cola dispenser just a few yards away, lying on its side, the doors under its dispensers swinging open. It looked like there was just enough space inside to hide.

“Quick – in there!”

They scrambled over and dove inside. Seandra quickly reached back and shut the doors. They lay on their stomachs, facing the doors, like the ghost would find them any second. Ford tried to quiet his breathing, but he was panting hard.

“I thought ghosts just moved stuff around and yelled 'Boo'!” Seandra whispered, her eyes wide. “What exactly are we supposed to do here?!”

“I got it, I got it,” Ford said, pulling out the journal. “Okay, ghosts always have some sort of reason for their haunting. So if we just figure it out, maybe we can get out of here.”

“How do we do that?”

“Okay, let's try to figure out the pattern here. Why was each person taken?” He ticked off his fingers. “Stan was stuffing himself with candy, Janice was frowning at everything, D'Andre put off leaving just to get a soda, Reggie was complaining, and Aaron was being demanding.”

“So what? We were just being normal teenagers!” She rubbed her forehead. Ford felt awful. If he'd just spoken up sooner and didn't let that creep Aaron get to him –

He blinked. “Wait. What was that last part again?”

“What?”

“You were just being normal teenagers...” A light seemed to flash in his brain. “Of course, that's it! Stay here until I get back!”

He pushed open the doors and crawled out.

“Ford! What are you doing?!”

Ford kept his eyes on his brother's floating form. At least the ghost had turned so that he looked right-side up now. A vortex of high-calorie processed snack foods whirled around him, the wind whipping at Ford's hair.

“Hey ghost!” he shouted over the wind. It turned Stan's head backwards, smiling crazily. He gulped. “I've got something to tell you!”

The ghost turned Stan's body around to match the head. Ford felt his own body start to lift into the air. He waited until he was level with Stan. Then he shouted, loudly and clearly: “I'M! NOT! A TEENAGER!”

The ghost dropped him.

He landed on his butt as the snack foods fell around him. The wind died, and the store fell quiet. He looked up.

Two glowing forms appeared behind Stanley, slowly condensing into the horrible shapes of...

...an old lady and an old man.
The lady looked like a pudgy, storybook Grandma, with 50's-styled hair and a name tag reading “Ma”. The man had skinny, liver-spotted hands and a well-padded stomach under a name tag reading “Pa”. They were wearing matching aprons and cheerful smiles.

“Well, why didn't you say so?” Pa chortled kindly. He let go of Stan's shoulders, and his brother dropped into a pile of individual-sized chip bags. Ford knew Stan would be fine – those bags were 90% air anyway. The ghost looked at Ford, a twinkle in his eye. “How old did you say you were?”

“I'm...” He could feel Seandra's eyes on his back and he winced, shoving his hands in his pockets. “...I'm twelve,” he mumbled. “Technically not a teen.”

“When we were alive, teenagers were a scourge on our store,” Ma explained.

Pa nodded. “Always sassafrassing our customers with those 'boomie-boxes' and those disrespectful short pants.” The twinkle in his eye was replaced with a red gleam, and Ford stepped back nervously. “So we decided to up and ban them. But they retaliated with that new-fangled rap music.”

Ma nodded emphatically. “The lyrics...they were so...hateful!”

Loud music suddenly filled the store and Ford jumped. “Homework's whack / And so are rules! / Tucking in your shirt's for fools!”

Both ghosts shuddered. Ma touched her cheek as if newly scandalized by the word 'whack'. “It was so shocking, we were struck down with double heart attacks!” The music faded away to a monotonous beep, like a heart monitor when someone died. “That's why we hate teenagers so much!” she concluded. “Don't we, honey?”

The ghosts rubbed noses. Ford shuddered at old-people affection.

“But – they're my friends!” he said. “Except maybe Aaron. Isn't there anything I can do to, y'know, help him?”

“Weeeell,” Pa said slowly, a smile spreading over his pale green face. “There is one thing...do you know any funny little dances?”

“Uhhh...” He glanced over his shoulder. Seandra had propped open a door and was watching him with a worried expression. “Is there anything else I can do?”

Pa suddenly blazed with fire and grew ten feet tall, like a ghost on steroids. “NOOOOOOO!” he bellowed. The veins on his temples literally throbbed with rage and his arms were suddenly bulging with muscles. Ford backed up so fast he tripped and bumped his head on a shelf.

“Okay, okay!” he squeaked. The ghost slowly faded back to normal, watching him through slitted eyes. Ford got shakily to his feet, still pressed against the shelf. “I, uh,” he stammered, and cleared his throat. “I...do know...the 'Lamby-Lamby' dance. B-but I can't really do it without a lamb costume!”

The ghost snapped his fingers, and suddenly Ford was dressed in a one-piece lamb suit, complete with a giant pink bow. The ghost was grinning, like, Tada! Instant humiliation!

Ford swallowed a groan. But between the ghost's insane rage and everyone counting on him, he couldn't really get out of it now.

He took a deep breath. Then he started to sing.
“Welllll, who wants a lamby-lamby-lamby? I do! I do!” He waved at the ghosts, who smiled. “So go up and greet your mami-mami-mami...Hi there! High there!” He made his voice go high and cutesy, and Ma giggled. “So march-march-march around the daisieees...! Don't don't don't you forget about the baaaaabyyyyyy!”

He finished with one knee on the ground, one arm thrown wide, the other poking a cutesy-wutsy dimple into his cheek. He even winked.

The ghosts were practically glowing pink with pleasure. “That was some fine girly dancing, boy!” Pa said, wiping a tear from one eye. “Your friends are free.” The front doors opened noiselessly.

Ford sighed with relief. “Well I don't think you have to worry about us coming back, so...” He trailed off as the ghosts disappeared.

The lights flickered back on and a quarter fell up towards the floor. Ford had a second to register what that meant before he fell – again, as gravity reasserted itself. This time he managed to land in an awkward crouch, grabbing the busted Smile Dip display for balance. He got up with a groan, looking around.

Seandra crawled out of the Pitt Cola machine. Nearby, Janice was standing up from behind the cracked TV, wincing and rubbing one arm. D’Andre was pulling himself out of the refrigerator, and Reggie clawed his way out of a pile of cereal boxes. Aaron was sitting on top of the hotdog rotator, which looked completely squashed under his weight. Except for Seandra, they all looked decidedly dazed, like someone had punched them squarely between the eyes.

Ford heard a familiar whine and whipped around. Stanley was slowly sitting up in the pile of chip bags, holding his stomach. “Oh, man,” he moaned. “I'm never gonna eat or do anything ever again...”

“Hey!” Ford scooped up the open packet he'd been eating. “There's still some –”

Stan smacked it away. “Dude. I see one more sugar packet and I'll puke all over your jacket.” He lay down on the chips, holding his stomach.

The gang had gathered together on the floor, sitting cross-legged while Seandra looked them over for bumps and bruises.

“What happened after everything went crazy?” Aaron asked, as Seandra checked his pupils.

“Yeah, was...were there animals in here...?” Janice asked fuzzily.

Seandra grinned, stepping back. “You are not going to believe it! The actual ghosts appeared, and Ford had to –”

She stopped short and she caught Ford's eye. He held his breath. She was all about cracking conspiracies...telling the truth...she'd probably just tell them the whole thing...

“Um,” she said. Then she went on, “Ford had done a ton of research on these things, he knew exactly what to do to convince them to leave us alone. I mean he was doing stuff I've never even seen. It was like a live version of Ghost Harassers.”

“Haha, nice!” D’Andre said, and Reggie nodded his agreement.

“Definitely Dr. Funtimes.”
Even Aaron grunted his acknowledgement.

Seandra glanced back at Ford and drew two fingers over her lips, like she was locking them and throwing away the key. Ford did the same thing back. There was a funny feeling in his chest, like he might start rising back towards the ceiling any second.

They headed out of the store. Most of them were still fairly woozy – Stan had one arm wrapped over Ford's shoulders and was leaning on him pretty heavily. D'Andre was doing the same thing to Reggie, who must've been stronger than he looked, because he was holding him up pretty well.

They piled into the car. Aaron, of course, called shotgun, and then fell asleep the second he was belted in. The same was true of the others. Except for Seandra. She shoved Janice's arm in and belted her up, since the girl was already practically asleep. Being on live TV must really take a lot of energy.

“Well,” Seandra said, turning to Ford. “I'm probably scarred for life. How about you?”

He laughed a little. “Yeah. That was pretty crazy.”

“I know I told you my friends are pretty intense, but that was like a whole 'nother level.”

“At least you got material to write up your article.”

Seandra backed out of the car and dusted off her hands. “Yeah, right. Bet you ten to one these guys won't remember anything when they wake up. Not that I blame them. And there is no way I'm heading back in there for more proof.”

They shuddered.

“You know what?” she said. “Next time we hang out, we should just stay at the Mystery Shack.”

“Next time?” Ford repeated, staring up at her. She nodded, smiling a little.

“Sure. I'm actually really curious about that book. You could tell me more about ghosts – that stuff I read online was way wrong.”

Ford smiled so wide his cheeks felt squished. “Sure! Yeah! Let's hang out at the Shack!” He hopped into the car before she could see how hard he was blushing. He crawled to the back and buckled in next to Stan. He watched the Seandra's perfect ponytail as she jumped in the driver's seat and started up the car. It didn't even bother him that she was sitting right next to Aaron. He sighed. “Next time.”

Stanley groaned and started sliding down the seat until his head banged into Ford's knees.

“Where's the bus that hit me,” he grumbled.

“Ghost, Stan, not bus.”

“Don't make me kill you, Ford, I'm not in the mood.”

Ford half-grinned and patted Stan's shoulder. The van roared to life and trundled down the road.

Mabel stared at the TV, tears glittering in her eyes. Three empty tubs of ice cream sat around her, and a blender half-full of Mabel Juice stood on the T-Rex skull. Orchestra music swelled from the television.
“Finally, the wedding!” she squealed. “I've waited so long for this...!”

Suddenly, on the screen, the doors of the church flew open and a broad-shouldered man stood in the doorway.

She gasped. “Count Lionel! What's he doing here?!”

“I've come to reclaim my bride,” the Count declared.

Mabel gritted her teeth. “You had your chance at the Cotillion, you!”

The groom scowled. “You had your chance at the Cotillion, you.”

“That's what I'm sayin'!”

But the Count strode forward as if he had not heard. He clasped the Duchess' hand in his own, even as she stepped away. “Duchess, please, listen to me. From the moment I saw you my heart has beat only for you, no matter what I may have said before.” His voice went throaty with emotion. “I know I was callous and disrespectful, to the one person who deserves nothing but kindness from me. But Duchess, I never cared about the money, or the fame, or the cats in your bedroom –”

The groom went bug-eyed. “Cats? Duchess!”

The Duchess blushed, dipping her chin. “Well, I...”

The Count brought her hand up gently, cradling it like a dove. She was no longer pulling away. “Duchess, darling. If you would only find it in your heart to give me one more chance...”

_Boop._ The TV went black.

Mabel stared at the screen, unblinking. “What? Wait – no, no, no!” She jumped up and grabbed for the TV's antennae, twisting them madly. The picture fuzzed in, fuzzed out, then disappeared in a static storm. “No, come on, I can't miss the wedding scene!” But her antennae-wrestling proved utterly futile. She screamed with heartbroken rage, grabbed the TV with both hands and –

_SMASH._

Mabel froze, staring at the hole in the shattered window. She'd thrown it right through the nailed-up planks.

_Oh, phooey._ Now she'd have to reset the counter for “Days Without Throwing Soap Opera Tantrums” in her office.

She stuck her head out to check if it was permanently broken. Movement in the lawn caught her eye. The twins were home and had stopped halfway up the walk, staring at her. Apparently they'd seen the TV's crash-landing.

“Uh...couldn't find the remote,” Mabel fibbed quickly, and pulled her head back inside.

_Nuts._ Now she'd have to pry the boards off the doors, too.
Hello everyone! Thank you to everyone who's left a kudos so far!

I hope you'll take the time to leave a comment or two. I work hard on these, and I'm really interested in hearing what you think.

That said...anyone wanna take a guess at who Janice is as an adult in the GF canon? (She's pretty different the way she is now, but she's based off of an actual character!)
“...known to be Masons. But as new information and new artifacts are discovered, we may soon find out that the Masons have had a far greater influence on history than we ever suspected.”

The film ended in a burst of dramatic music.

Ford and Seandra were sitting in the living room, sharing Grauntie Mabel's yellow armchair. Ford read the TV manual to fix it (making him the only person he knew to read an actual manual, ever), and Seandra had brought over a DVD player and some documentaries on secret societies.

“I always think it's funny when they make documentaries on secret societies,” Ford said with a grin.

Seandra smiled back. “Hey, every conspiracy’s gotta get cracked sometime. Plus it's not like we know everything about the Masons, or most really secret societies. Part of me always wonders if the Masons realized they were gonna be exposed, so they planted false clues and evidence so close to the truth that nobody ever uncovered their real secrets.”

“Whoa...I never even thought of that.” He stared at the television, frowning. “You think maybe the Masons weren't treasure-hunters or knowledge-keepers at all? Maybe they were, what, actually a secret society of assassins or something?”

“Probably not assassins, but if we keep digging – 'we may soon find out more than we ever suspected,'” she said in the narrator's voice. Ford chuckled. “You wanna watch another one? I've got one on JFK called The Magic Bullet.”

“Nah, they probably just used powerful narrow-beam magnets for that.”

She stared at him. “Have you watched it before?”

“No, but if there really wasn't a hidden shooter, what else makes sense?” Ford shrugged.

“You're one crazy-smart little dude, you know that?”

He blushed bright red and coughed. He hoped he wasn't sweating.

Luckily he didn't think Seandra noticed – she was getting up to take out the DVD. “Man, I can't wait 'till I crack my first big conspiracy,” she said absently.

“You have anything in mind?”

“Not really. Conspiracies don't exactly advertise themselves, you know.” She turned around, casually waving the DVD. She had these beautiful deep blue eyes that sparkled when she talked about her passion. “But I've read tons of books – Meltzer's History Decoded: The 10 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time, The Encyclopedia of Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories, even stuff
about conspiracies I knew were fake, like the Y2K stuff, just for contrast, so I could figure out how to tell what might be a real conspiracy and what isn't. I still need actual practice, though. Like, I do research and stuff, but I gotta be in the field, talking to people, even spying on stuff.”

“We could spy on Stanley.”

The words were out of his mouth so fast he didn't even realize he'd said them.

She looked at him with surprise. “Isn't he upstairs?”

“No, every Tuesday he goes to this one guy's house to play cards. They even gamble – Stanley loaded the laundry hamper with tons of stuff he's won. I've never gone, but we could practice spying on them if you want.”

She looked intrigued. “Sounds harmless enough. Who's supposed to be there?”

“A lot of the biker guys who hang out at Skull Fracture.” Ford hopped out of his seat. “You could drive us on your moped, and we could park a couple blocks away so we'd be really quiet. And we could change into darker clothes, too. You got any binoculars on you? I can get mine from upstairs. And I bet I could grab a dark blanket or a jacket or something to hide us with...”

Stanley laid down his cards. The others groaned.

“Dang it, Sal, I told you not to teach this kid to bluff.”

Stanley just shrugged and grinned, grabbing all the stuff on the table and scooping it towards him. So far he'd won a couple of really nice pens with polished wood, six hot pockets, a pair of headphones, a packet of skittles, a war bond, and, for some reason, a small plastic cow.

They were playing in Sal's house, as usual. It was barely more than a bungalow, and the kitchen and living room were sort of smooshed together with no wall in between. It was dirty in a clean sort of way – Sal didn't leave dirty laundry or magazines lying around, and the books on the shelf over the TV were all lined up right, but the kitchen linoleum was a little gray with dirt and the living room carpet bred dust bunnies every few feet. There were two windows, one in the kitchen and one in the living room, but both of them had cobwebs in the corners. There was a big couch, best piece of furniture in the room, but it was too small for all of them. So they'd hauled the table over from the kitchen and gathered the chairs and an overturned bucket around it. Sal sat on one of he chairs, Lawnmower sat on the other, and Leather Vest sat on the bucket. Stanley had won the right to sit on the sofa in the last round. He had officially declared himself the “Sofa King” for the second week in a row.

Leather Vest lay down his hand with a groan. “You start chanting 'Sofa King' again and I'm gonna string your butt up to the ceiling.”

Stanley grinned, because he knew the teen would do it. “You want me to chant 'Poker King' instead?”

“Har, har,” Sal said dryly, getting up. “I need another soda.”

“We gotta start betting sodas only,” Lawnmower said. The skull-and-crossbones tattooed on his forehead was half-covered by the dealer's bill. He shoved it back to wipe his face. “This kid's cleaning me out of everything I got.”
Sal got another four sodas from the fridge. “Aren't you glad I said we wouldn't bet money?”

“Yeah, what's the deal with that?” L.V. asked. “I gotta supplement my allowance, Sal. I got a girl friend now. Those dinner dates don't come cheap.”

Lawnmower lightly thwacked the back of his head. “So get a real job, don't go mooching off your elders.”

Stanley, however, was intrigued. “You have a girlfriend?”

“Like it's that much of a surprise?” L.V. snorted. “I'll have you know, Stan Pines, I am a real catch and my girl friend's the most perfect woman ever to walk on one foot.”

“One foot?”

“Did I stutter?”

“How exactly do you romance a girl?”

Leather Vest leaned back in his chair, a dreamy look coming into his eyes. “Well, first ya gotta get her attention. Classy lady like her, you gotta make the right first impression. After that you gotta support her interests. She loves math, so we started this math club, next year we're gonna enter a math decathlon.”

Stan's eyes were glazing over. L.V. kicked him.

“Ow!”

“Second thing you gotta do,” Leather Vest growled, “is pay attention to her. You gotta show her you appreciate her. You gotta let her win a lotta arguments. And you gotta remember stuff. Her favorite color, her favorite music, the stuff she likes to do.”

Stanley looked horrified. “You have to like math?”

Leather Vest shrugged. “I gotta say, it helped more than I thought it would with budgeting my cash. Comes in handy when we go on dinner dates or out to the movies.”

Sal punched Leather Vest in the arm. “Not bad. You're gonna be a real gentleman soon enough.”

Stan pulled a face. “I hope you got all that, Sixer, 'cuz I'm gonna puke if I gotta listen all over again.”

There was a startled gasp and a small crash from outside.

Sal raised an eyebrow. He got up, went to the front door, and opened it. A second later, Ford and Seandra appeared, looking sheepish and dressed in dark clothes with leaves stuck in their hair. Seandra had binoculars around her neck.

Ford was stammering pretty badly: “I wasn't – I mean he wasn't – girl –”

“How'd you know we were there?” Seandra asked, mercifully cutting him off. (Although Stanley thought it was hilarious.)

Still grinning, Stanley jabbed a thumb behind him at the window over the couch. “You picked the wrong window to spy. You were probably watching us in the reflection on the TV, right? Which is exactly how I noticed you, too.”
Seandra laughed and shook her head. “Sorry guys. We were practicing spying on secret societies, and we figured this’d be fun. I hope we didn't ruin your night or anything.”

The old dudes were cool with it, but Leather Vest looked even surlier than ever. “I didn't say anything embarrassing. Got that? Not a single embarrassing thing.”

“You really didn't,” Seandra assured him. “All the same...” She put two fingers to her lips and drew them across, like she was locking her lips and throwing away the key.

Sal stepped back to let them in. “Well, since you're here, you might as well join the party. Be nice if Stanley picked someone else's pockets for a change.”

“Yeah,” Stan added, holding up his hand. “I only got $1.27 from Lawnmower.”

Lawnmower snatched the coins out of his hand and flicked him in the head. They laughed.

Chapter End Notes

I can totally see Ford getting all flustered and red-faced sitting next to Seandra in the dark and breathing deeply so he wouldn't pass out and then realizing he sounds like a stalker so he breathes shallowly and then hyperventilates and almost DOES pass out and turning redder than a traffic light the whole time XD Ford you are such a cute science owl!
Ford vs. Manliness

Chapter Notes

GUYS GUYS GUYS DO YOU REMEMBER STANLEY'S STORY ARC FOR THIS EPISODE??!!?

Well I got news for yous: Lazy Susan ain't in the picture (yet). But he does still have a romantic interest!

Hmmm...I WONDER WHO IT COULD BE...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So do you have, like, any Christmas stuff?” The trendy blond flipped her hair and snapped her bubble gum, looking around the Gift Shop from under heavy gold eyeliner.

A muscle in Mabel's face twitched. This girl came to the Shop at least once a week, dawdling for hours and asking asinine questions and only once had she ever made an actual purchase. “How about these crystals,” Mabel said through gritted teeth, pulling her cheeks back in a horrible smile. She shoved a bowl of glittering shards at the blond, remnants from last night's Duchess window debacle.

“Umm, I dunno, maybe...” She snapped her gum again, turning away. Mabel narrowed her eyes.

“Hey Grauntie Mabel!”

She turned. The her grephews ran through the Employees Only door, going so Ford almost fell down. She grinned.

“Can we go to the diner?” Stan asked eagerly. “We're hungry!”

“There’s leftover pizza in the fridge,” Mabel pointed out. “Don't kids like pizza?”

“Not when there's wasabi and watercress on it.”

“Pleeeeeease can we go?” Ford begged. “We're huuuunngrryyyy!” They grabbed their stomachs and started hitting them together. “Huuuunngrryyyy!”

“Alright, alright!” Mabel laughed. “As soon as this yahoo makes up her mind.”

The blond was now inspecting the singing fish mounted on the wall. “Do you have this in a C minor? I don't want it to clash with my ringtone.”

Mabel's cheek twitched. “On second thought – midget Pines, roll out!”

They ran out of the shop. Mabel locked it behind them by luring Waddles to sit in front of the front door – he wouldn't move until Mabel came home. The boys grabbed their helmets and jammed themselves into the sidecar as Mabel revved the engine. She glanced behind her. The blond was now comparing two practically identical shirts, frowning in deep concentration. Mabel laughed and zoomed down the road, her grephews shouting excitedly beside her.
The Greasy Diner was, true to its name, greasy. As they walked in Stan could even feel the grease from deep-fried french fries wafting through the air to coat his face. He sucked in a huge breath. Now that was some good eatin’.

The ‘Fallers, as Ford called 'em, were out in force today. As they headed to the booth, they passed Make Pizza Man, That Guy With The Haircut, and Goat Man (Ford insisted he was a “satyr”, but that didn't even sound like a real word and Goat Man made much more sense. Stan was good with naming things.)

Crazy Chu was sitting at the counter, three empty coffee mugs in front of her and a fourth between her bandaged fingers, literally vibrating with caffeine. Boyish Dan and his Manly Uncle Marcus were chewing on huge legs of mutton. Even the cop guys were here – Sheriff Velazquez and Officer Johnson were having an eating contest. Their plates were piled with two stacks of pancakes that reached higher than their heads. Johnson yelled “Go!” and they started shoveling the food into their mouths. Stan rolled his eyes. Amateurs.

They took a seat and the waitress came by to take their order.

“Hey there, Valerie!” Mabel said, tipping her fez. “Where were you yesterday?”

“Tapping radio signals from Russian satellites!” Valerie said cheerfully. One of her eyes seemed to twitch.

Stan raised an eyebrow, but Mabel wasn't even paying attention. “Great, great. Okay, we'll have two servings of the scrambled eggs, with a green salad and a veggie dish on the side.”


“Says the guy who literally went into a sugar coma two days ago.”

“It was not a sugar coma, I was hibernating. Can't we have some real food? Like pancakes or something?”

“Sure, if you're buyin’.”

He groaned. “Aw, come on...”

Across the table, Ford was leaning way over in his seat. Stan followed his gaze to a video game next to the front door. It was like a cross of Bicepticus and a cheesy carnival game, with a seriously buff dude at the top, holding a sign that read “TEST YOUR MANLINESS”. A small table next to the game held a stack of pancakes. The sign over that read “WIN GAME – FREE PANCAKES!!”.

Stan's mouth watered.

“No worries, guys,” Ford said, settling back confidently. “Pancakes are on me. I'm gonna win some by beating that manliness tester.”

Stan blinked. “'Manliness tester'? he repeated.

“'Beating’?” Mabel echoed. They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Stanley pounded on the table, practically crying he was laughing so hard.

Mabel wiped her eyes. “Oh, no offense, Ford, but you're not exactly 'Manly Manington.'”

“Or manly,” Stan added, and guffawed.

“Hey! I am too Manly...whatever you said!”

Mabel caught her breath, still grinning. “Look face the music, kid. Ya got no muscles, ya smell like baby wipes, and let's not forget last Tuesday's...” She leaned forward, raising a sly eyebrow.

“...incident.”

Ford had the radio on in the bathroom, and he'd just gotten out of the tub when a new song came on. He wrapped a towel around his waist, humming and tapping his foot. Dang that beat was catchy. He grabbed a hairbrush to run through his hair, and before he knew it he'd memorized the refrain.

“Disco girl, coming through...” He spun to the mirror dramatically, holding up the brush like a mike. “That girl is youuu! Oo-oooh! Oo-oooh!”

The door swung open. Mabel stared at him.

Ford jumped and swung the brush wildly, knocking the radio to the floor. “Don't come in, DON'T COME IN!”

Stan's eyes shone with glee. “You were listening to girly Icelandic pop sensation BABA?” This blackmail was good for months!

“No!” Ford protested, too quickly. “I wasn't – that's not the point! C'mon, guys, I'm plenty masculine! You see this chest hair?” Ford pulled down the collar of his shirt. It was so hairless and smooth it literally glowed like a baby's halo. Stan yelped and covered his face, shouting “My eyes!”

Mabel squealed. “Put it away, put it away!”

The glare stopped and Stan looked up: Ford was gripping his jacket closed with both fists. “Oh, man,” he muttered.

Stan guffawed. Ford was pretty cool, but manly he was not.

“Fine, family of little faith,” Ford said, his voice edged with anger. Stan looked up to see Ford rising to his feet. “I'm gonna make you eat your words. ...And a plate of delicious pancakes.”

Stan and Mabel glanced at each other, sharing a Look.

Stan knelt on the seat and twisted around to watch as Ford marched up to the game. He was making such a big deal over it that everyone in the whole diner turned around to look. Then he paused in front of it, rubbing his hands together and muttering under his breath. Stan knew that trick – he was trying to psyche himself up.

Mabel squinted. “What does the scale say?”

“How should I know?” Stan grumbled, squinting, too. Ford was the one nerdy enough to wear glasses.
Ford examined his nemesis carefully.

The game had five placards lined up like a thermometer, with a lightbulb beside each one. The harder he squeezed, the more lightbulbs would light up. Wimp...Middle-Aged Woman... Barely Passable... Man... Manly Man...

Ford wiped his hands on his jeans, flexed his fingers, reached slowly for the handle...

“QUIT STALLIN’!” Stan shouted.

Ford grabbed the handle and squeezed.

The first lightbulb went on. Ford squeezed harder, feeling the tendons in his forearm cramp with the effort. The second lightbulb lit up. Sweat broke out on Ford’s face. C’mon, six fingers has to be worth something here...!

Fourth lightbulb...

For a split-second Ford could’ve sworn the fifth lightbulb lit up – and then his grip gave out. The lights went down and the game buzzed at him, spitting out a card at the bottom. He picked it up.

It was a baby-pink card with a farting baby on it. The caption read, You are a Cutie-Patootie!

“Oh, c’mon, that's not even on the scale!” He stuffed it in his jacket before Stan could see it – before anyone could see it. “This game must be broken. It's totally broken, you guys,” he said loudly, turning to the restaurant. He sweated harder: everyone was staring at him. “It's like, a million years old, probably ran out of... steam power, or something –”

Something knocked him over. Manly Uncle Marcus had apparently decided he wanted a try at the game and literally walked into him, stomach-first.

Ford got quickly to his feet. “Uh, it's rickety man, you shouldn't even –”

Marcus didn't listen. He cracked his knuckles and then just touched the handle with his pinky finger.

The lightbulbs lit up so fast the muscle-guy at the top literally exploded. One of its arms fell off and hit the pancake plate, sending the pancakes on the dish raining down on the restaurant. The pancakes even landed perfectly on everybody's plate.

“BOOYAH!” Marcus shouted. “PANCAKES FOR EVERYONE!”

The restaurant cheered. Velazquez and Johnson immediately starting using their pancakes like frisbees, trying to catch them in their mouths.

A spare pancake landed with a splat on Ford's head. Stan and Mabel laughed.

He winced. “I need to get some chest hair and fast.” He turned to sprint for the door – and immediately fell flat on his face. He jumped up again, glancing at his family. “I'm fine!” he said, and then immediately tried to make his voice deeper, backing out of the restaurant. “Everything is fine!”

The door shut behind him and he jumped to the side, out of their line of sight, before walking down the street. His stomach felt like ice. It didn't help to remember that Stan was exactly as smooth-chested as he was. Stan was fearless, and even though that led to some pretty stupid stunts, he still got a lot of attention for it. And he was confident. And he even smelled more like a guy, like stale
cheetos and wood varnish. He'd probably grow a full beard before Ford could grow one stupid chest hair.

How was he supposed to compete with that?

Stan grimaced as the diner door shut. “Yeesh. How am I related to that?”

“Oh, come on, little midget.” She mussed his hair, squishing his head down between his shoulders. He was so cute when he was acting all tough. “I'm sure deep down you've got a soft side.”

“Nope!” He shrugged her off and puffed out his chest. “Nothing in here but a manly, pirate-loving, death-defying –”

The front door chimed. A girl walked in. She wore a wide pink skirt with a white poodle on it, a soft teal shirt and a crisp white scarf knotted around her neck. A small pink flower peeked out of her curly black hair.

The girl walked past the booths on her way to the counter. Mabel nodded hello and thanked Valerie when she brought them their orders. When she looked back down, Stan was gone!

She ducked her head under the table. Stan was on the floor, crawling silently away.

“Hey!” He froze. “What're you doing, kid?”

“Uh, nothing! I'm not doing anything! Oh, look, free gum!” He yanked a dried wad from the bottom of the table and shoved it in his mouth. He choked and spat it out. “Ew! Banana flavor!”

Mabel straightened up and watched the girl, who was eating a plate of bacon and grits at the counter. Stanley was still hiding under the table. “Wait a minute,” she said slowly. “I think I have an idea happening here. You…”

“No!”

“And her…”

“Grauntie!”

She squealed. “You have a thing for Carla McCorkle!”

His head popped up. “You know her name?”

“You don't?” she countered.

“Well it's kinda hard to ask someone's name when you're following them around…”

“You stalked her?”

“Hey!” He pulled himself partway onto the seat, resting his elbows on the cushion. “Stalking is a pretty ugly word, let's not use 'stalking.'”

“Stanley, if you like her, you should just tell her already!”

“Easy for you to say,” Stan shot back. “I've been rejected by every girl I've met since I got here. Even the really crusty ones with no hope left. And she's – look at her!” Stan said emphatically,
gesturing. “She's so classy.”

She had rolled her bacon into a tube and was using it as a straw to drink her milkshake.

Mabel picked up Stanley by the back of his shirt, holding him up like the dejected fluffy kitten he was. She set him on the seat. “Grephew, you are a cranky, gross, obnoxious little boy. But we are going to get Carla to like you. Because nothing is stronger than the power of –”

“Love?”

“– MABEL!” She'd forgotten to order drinks, so she grabbed the side of salad dressing. “To victory!” she cried, and drank it in one gulp.

Ford walked down the street, his hands stuffed into the pockets, muttering to himself. He couldn't believe Marcus had actually made the thing explode just by touching it. He literally had more manliness in his little finger than Ford had in his whole body!

But so what, right? Brawn wasn't everything. Ford had one first place in his school's spelling bee every year since kindergarten and was a regionally ranked chess champion by the age of seven. He'd read all of Carl Sagan’s books and most of Stephen Hawking's and even understood a lot of it and he was thinking of taking an online college course in physics this year and so what if he wasn't manly enough? The college course would be online, nobody would even have to know how old he was! For all they knew he'd be some seriously buffed-out hunk who smelled like steak sauce when he was sweating and –

“AGH!”

A forceful jet of water pummeled the side of his head. Ford covered himself with his arms and backed up quickly, sputtering. Apparently a fire hydrant had exploded for no apparent reason.

Velazquez and Johnson were already standing around it.

“Another hydrant destroyed,” the Sheriff mused, bending to take a closer look. “Whoever's doing this is really –”

“Annoying?”

“Impressive. Wish we'd thought of it.”

Johnson grinned. “No reason we can't enjoy it, though!”

In seconds they had their shirts off and were running around in circles, hooting and laughing in the spray. And both of them had hair on their chests.

Ford turned to leave and ran smack into a lady.

“Oh – I'm sorry,” said the lady. It was the Park Ranger they'd pranked while hiking with Mabel, but she didn't seem to recognize him. She held up a handful of envelopes. “I was just looking for the mail man.”

Ford's throat squeezed. “Oh, what, are you saying I'm not a male man?” he said, his voice going so high it cracked. “That I'm not male, that I'm not a man, is – is that what you were getting at?!”

She raised an eyebrow. “Son, are you crying?”
His breath hitched and he bit his lip, then ran straight into an alley between two buildings and into the forest behind him.

It occurred to him later, of course, that she'd said “mailman”, not “male man”. Not that it mattered. For Sagan's sake, he and Stan were twins! That meant that if Stan was manly, surely Ford could be just as manly! Right?

He wandered the woods for a while, thinking, planning, and finally found a good-sized stick to practice with. He pulled off his jacket and set it on a nearby stump – no sense getting it all sweaty when he was pumping iron. He lay on his back, held the stick across his chest, and used both hands to push the stick up.

“One...”

Back down. Push back up.

“Two...”

Back down. Push back up...

“Three...”

Were sticks usually this heavy?

“...Four...”

With a gasp, he shoved the stick off to one side. If he had to do that again he was pretty sure he'd drop it and crush his ribcage.

He lay on his back for a minute, panting. A couple of rabbits pattered right over next to his head.

“Get lost, I'm a big tough man!” he shouted, waving at them with one hand. One of the bunnies curled up by his head and put its little pink nose in his ear. He sighed with disgust. He couldn't even scare a rabbit.

He lifted his head and peered down his shirt.

“Great. No chest hair yet.” He let his head fall back down, and the bunny snuggled up again. “I don't get it. Stan doesn't have to pump iron. Is it physical? Is it mental? What's the secret?”

He sat up and wiped the sweat from his face. Walking around and working out had made him hungry. He pulled some emergency jerky from his back pocket.

It was “Real Man Jerky” (Stan's choice). There was a guy on the wrapper with a speech bubble that read: “You're Inadequate!”

“You said it, brother,” Ford told the package. “I need help.”

He opened the package, took out a stick and chewed. Maybe if he used jerky for deodorant, the smell would make him seem more manly...

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Ford dropped the jerky. The whole ground was shaking like an earthquake – or footsteps. Exactly
what had happened when they were chased by the Gobblewonker! He scrambled to get his jacket and nearly got clipped in the head by a deer hoof – a huge swarm of woodland creatures poured out of the forest, leaping, crawling, flying, slithering away from whatever was coming. Even Kevin Corduroy ran out of the trees, screaming, “FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT’S HOLY, RUUUN!”

Ford turned to follow and tripped, and a huge shadow fell over him. He looked up and rolled aside just as a huge redwood came plummeting down, crashing to the forest floor and exploding with needles and twigs. A deep, terrible roar shook the air. Ford kicked himself backwards, trying to hide behind the log, but it was no use – he couldn't fit under it. The thing, whatever it was, finally appeared. It was so large and so close it blocked out half the sky.


The thing stomped closer. It was still backlit by the sun, but now Ford could make out two cloven hooves, a thick waist covered with a linen kilt, a seriously ripped chest and arms so thick they would've made Bicepticus jealous. It had a pig-like nose and two ivory horns curving up from his temples. And it was covered in reddish-brown hair – hairy beard, hairy shoulders, hairy arms, hairy legs, and a chest so hairy it had actual grass growing out of it.

The thing roared again, stretching up its arms like it was going to hit him. Ford shrunk back, terrified, but the roar turned into a massive yawn. It was missing a tooth in the middle, just like Stan. The thing grabbed a buck that had been hiding in a bush, scratched its back using the antlers, and tossed the deer away like a used napkin. The deer got up, looked around, and leaped gracefully away.

Ford got to his feet, looking the thing up and down. Suddenly it turned its head to look at him and Ford jerked back – and promptly fell over a rock.

“Pleasedon'teatme!” he blurted. “I haven't showered! In like a week! And I'm – and I'm like all elbows, elbows and gristle –”

“YOU!” it roared.

“GAH!”

“...gonna finish that?” The monster pointed at the jerky.

“No,” Ford said quickly, tossing it over. It put it on the ground and grabbed handfuls of the jerky, shoving them into his mouth even faster than Stan did. The likeness, plus the fact that the thing probably wasn't going to eat him, made Ford relax a little. He got up again, studying the monster. Its upper body was definitely that of a man – a very muscular, hairy, manly man – but its legs were obviously bovine.

“I can't believe it,” he muttered. “Part animal, part human. Are you some kind of minotaur?”

“I'm a MANOTAUR!” it roared, punching the ground for emphasis. “HALF MAN, HALF...uh...HALF TAUER!"

“Wow.” Ford pulled his notebook out of his pocket and started sketching. “Half man, half tour...so did I, like, summon you?” he asked, glancing up from his sketch.

“The smell of jerky summoned me! JERKY!” he shouted, and punched a tree in half. Ford covered his face with a notebook as tree bark and centipedes showered down at him. Then he grabbed a boulder and crushed it against his skull. The Manotaur raised his arms and roared with manly aggression. (Interestingly, his armpits were the only thing about him that weren't hairy.)
“Cool,” Ford said.

Suddenly the Manotaur started sniffing. He leaned close to Ford and sniffed so hard it ruffled Ford's hair. Ford held perfectly still, making no sudden moves, just in case.

The Manotaur straightened up, frowning in deep concentration. His hair waved manfully in the wind. “I smell...emotional issues.”

“I got problems, Manotaur,” Ford admitted, staring down at the sketch he'd made. He couldn't ever imagine looking like that. “Man-related problems.”

The Manotaur sat down so hard the ground shook. He patted his knee. Ford sat down next to him and rested his head on the Manotaur's leg.

“Well, my own Grauntie called me a wimp,” he started.

“Uh-huh.”

“And I kinda flunked this manliness video game thing...”

“Mmm.”

“Hey, y'know, you see pretty manly,” Ford said, sitting up. “Maybe you could...give me some pointers?”

The Manotaur paused for a moment, thinking. Finally he nodded and stood up. “Very well. Climb atop my back hair, child!” He turned and pointed to his back with his thumb. (His back, of course, was covered in hair, and a few flies were buzzing around it.)

Ew, Ford thought.

But imagine if he went back even half as manly as this guy...!

“Okay,” he said, and grabbed a few fistfuls of hair, climbing up.

The Manotaur took off at a dead run. His hooves hit the ground so hard that Ford's teeth clicked with every step, and tree branches whizzed by so fast it was like sitting in Grauntie Mabel's motorbike. They raced through the forest, and all the animals raced away from them, sometimes barely getting out of the way. They nearly hit something Ford thought was a hiker – it was tall and skinny with long black fingers – but when Ford looked back he only saw trees.

The Manotaur let nothing stand in his way – literally nothing. One leg kicked right through a boulder and he crashed straight into a tree and kept on going. Ford was nearly thrown off when a bird's nest hit him in the face. He threw it aside just in time to see them heading towards a gorge fifteen feet wide, with nothing but a sheer stone wall on the other side.

“Hey, watch out!” Ford screamed, but the Manotaur didn't even slow down. He reached the gorge and took a flying leap, bellowing a war cry. Ford shrieked, certain he was about to end up a six-fingered splat – his life flashed before him –

And the Manotaur punched straight through the wall.

Stone chips rained down on his head, assuring Ford that he was still alive. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

“...Whoa.”
It was a huge stone cave filled with Manotaurs. Manotaurs sitting on huge purple couches, bicep-curving with moose femurs. Manotaurs competing to see who could do the most push-ups using just their pinky fingers or, sometimes, their beards. Manotaurs in the corner playing pool and hitting the balls so hard the sticks cracked in half. Manotaurs playing darts or foosball, comparing scars, or practicing their grunts. The whole place literally reeked of manliness.

Ford hopped off, his eyes wide with awe. “What is this place?”

His manotaur led him into the cave. “The gnomes live in the trees,” he said grandly. “The Merpeople live in the water...’cuz their losers! But we Manotaurs crash in the MAN CAVE!”

He grabbed a moose femur and hit a huge gong standing against the wall. All the manotaurs looked their way.

“BEASTS!” shouted his manotaur. “I have brought you...A HAIRLESS CHILD!”

They looked at him.

He waved. “‘Sup.”

His Manotaur started introducing him to everyone. Ford grabbed for his sketchbook, but it must've fallen out or gotten snagged by a treebranch.

“This is Pubitaur, Testosteraur, Pituitar...and I'm Chutzpaur,” his manotaur finished. “AND YOU ARE?”

“My name's Ford,” Ford said.

The other manotaurs instantly started cat-calling.

“Boo!”

“Weak!”

“That's not even a real name...”

Ford thought quickly. “The uh, Phenomenaur?”

Several manotaurs nodded. Pituitar crossed his thick gray arms, grumbling, “Yeah, that's better.”

Chutzpaur struck the gong even louder. “Ford the Phenomenaur wants us to teach him the secrets to our manliness!”

“I need your help,” Ford added. He pulled down the collar of his shirt. “Look at this, guys. Look at this!”

Pituitar furrowed his brow. He was clearly one of the leaders of the manotaurs: he had gray-streaked hair everywhere, but he was so ripped even his muscles had muscles, and he had scars on both ears.

“I must confer with the high council,” he rumbled. He turned and all the manotaurs huddled like a bunch of aggro football players. Ford leaned in, trying to listen.

“So,” said Pituitar, “teach him our man secrets or what?”

“He's a human,” someone else said. “I don’t like him.”
“I don't like YOUR FACE!”

The huddle immediately degenerated into a free-for-all, with manotaurs wrestling, punching each other in the face, or putting them in headlocks. They weren't even mad, it was like they just needed an excuse to punch each other in the face. A couple of them were actually daring each other to knock their teeth out so they could use them for weapons in their slingshots.

“I like these guys,” Ford said, as a tooth flew past his head.

Stan and Grauntie Mabel had gone back to the Mystery Shack. She had actually closed the Shack for the day so she could devote the next five hours to turning Stan into “The World's Most Perfect Man”.

Stan was sitting at the table in the den, nervously shuffling his favorite deck of cards in his lap. They were so worn that the cardboard had gone all soft, making them even easier to shuffle, and he had memorized the almost-invisible nicks and creases on the back of every card. He could literally predict the outcome of any game with these babies. But he had no idea what Mabel had up her sleeve.

She burst into the room with a spray of confetti and the flash of a camera. He jerked in surprise, and the cards went flying. “Congratulations, Grephew!” she called, waving her camera. “You are about to embark on an epic quest for romance!”

“Epic quest”?! He knew a DD&MD scam when he heard it.

“I'm out!” he shouted, leaping off his chair.

She grabbed him by his shirt and he gagged. “Nope! Siddown, Romeo!” She threw him back in the seat and stood to one side. Ria and Boyish Dan had been standing behind her. Ria was wearing a curly black wig with a flower stuck in her hair.

“Let's start out with some roleplay,” Mabel said. “Ria will play Carla McCorkle.”

“This is just like FCLORPing with my dad,” she murmured, patting her fake tresses. “I always play the dragon-slaying princess.”

“Stan, show me how you approach a lady.” Grauntie Mabel pushed him gently towards Ria. “Remember this is a safe, nonjudgemental environment...I'll just be off to the side judging you on a scale from one to ten!”

Stan walked over to Ria and looked up at her. She batted her eyes. He'd never felt so sweaty and puny and short.

He swallowed and put on his swagger, leaning against the wall. “Hey, good-lookin', is it hot in here or is it just me?”

FWEEEEET!

Mabel's silver whistle dropped from her mouth. “I call do-over!”

Stan went back to the chair, turned around, and walked towards Ria again. Then he walked right past her and did a double-take.

“Wow, sugar, that is one fine a–”

FWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEET!
Mabel took the whistle from her mouth with a frown. “This is gonna take some really great training music,” she decided aloud. She grabbed the radio and popped in an *Old Time-y Funk Music* CD. Stan started nodding his head to the beat but stopped when Mabel turned around, a slightly manic grin on her face.

“Okay, Stanley,” she said, a mischievous gleam in her eye, “time to get to work!”

The manotaurs had finally reached their decision. They crowded in front of Ford, most of them sporting missing teeth, cracked horns, and a couple of black eyes. One of them was still holding another in a headlock.

Pituitaur did the talking. “After a lot of punching, we have decided to deny your request to learn our manly secrets.”

“Denied!” Knuckletaur shouted, and punched himself in the face.

“Denied?” Ford repeated. Then he frowned. He was sure he could think his way out of this one. There had to be a way to get them to change their minds... “Okay,” he said finally. “That's okay with me! Obviously you guys think it would be too hard to train me. Maybe,” he said more loudly, “you're not man enough to try.”

Pituitaur's eyes popped. “Not 'man' enough?”

“Phenomenaur...” Chutzpaur warned.

Pituitaur stormed over to Ford and loomed over him, his huge fists clinched and his nostrils flaring. “NOT 'MAN' ENOUGH!?!”

“He didn't mean it,” Chutzpaur assured him.

Pituitaur glared at Ford. If looks could kill, Ford would've been ashes, but he held his ground and gazed back coolly. Pituitaur thrust his finger at Ford. “I have SIX Adam's apples, THREE Y-chromosomes, pecs on my abs, and FISTS FOR NIPPLES!” He raised his arms, flexing. He actually did have fist-shaped nipples. Ford made a mental note to do a sketch of it later.

Ford smiled smugly. “Seems to me you're scared to teach me how to be a man,” he said. “In fact...buck bock...Hey that's weird” He held a hand up to his ear. “...bock bock...d'you here some – BUCK BOCK sounds like YEAH A BUNCH OF CHICKENS!”

The manotaurs gave a collective gasp. They retreated and huddled up again, this time looking more like a bunch of frightened kids than football players.

One of them grumbled, “I feel all weird.”

“He's using some sort of...brain magic!”

When they finally turned around, Ford worked very hard to keep the smile off his face.

Pituitar scowled at him. “After a second round of deliberation, we have decided to help you become...a man!”

“*Man, man, man!*” they chanted.

Ford grinned. “Great! Thanks, guys! Whatever it is, I will not let you down!”
The Manotaurs grabbed him and started hauling him halfway up the mountain. He'd been hiking so often with Grauntie Mabel that his legs were pretty strong, and he was actually able to keep up with them.

They led him up a wide trail to a dusty clearing with a hole in the ground. It had a sign next to it reading “Pain Hole” and it looked suspiciously like that Black Hole gimmick from the Shack.

“Being a man is about conquering your fears,” Chutzpaur told him.

“For your first man task,” Pituitar said, “you must plunge your fist...INTO THE PAIN HOLE!”

The manotaurs, all of them, immediately started wincing and squirming, slowly edging away from it. Ford's confidence wavered.

“The wha...?”

Pituitaur walked it to it, knelt down and stuck his fist into the hole. After a second he relaxed and started to laugh. “Pain hole, shmain hoWAAAH!” He started shrieking and pounding the ground, punching himself in the face with his free hand, as if the hole was causing him inexpressible agony. “WAEEAEAAAA! WAIAAAA!!!”

He finally got his hand loose and ran down the trail, cradling his hand to his chest. The manotaurs parted solemnly to let him pass, and a few even closed their eyes as if Pituitaur had just done something incredibly brave.

Ford looked at the hole and swallowed. He walked up to it and knelt down, his hands pressed tightly to his sides. The hole was so pitch-black it was impossible to see inside it. He didn't even know how deep it was, and it was just large enough for him to be able to fall inside. He swallowed again, imagining himself losing his balance and falling into a pit of angry vipers. He rubbed his hands together nervously, starting to sweat.

“Quit stalling!” shouted a manotaur. Ford jumped.

“Are you sure this is really necessary?” he asked Chutzpaur weakly.

Chutzpaur nodded. “You wanna be a man, don't you?”

The other manotaurs started chanting again. “Man, man, man, man, man!”

Stan would do it, Ford thought, and gritted his teeth. He stretched out his right hand and plunged it into the hole before he could change his mind.

His shrill scream scared several flocks of birds into the air.

“Alright, Stan, let's try and get that inner beauty on the outside.”

They'd been trying to teach Stan how to hold the door for a lady. Boyish Dan and Ria had taken turns walking through the front door, with Stan holding it open. He kept getting bored halfway through and let go, so it banged shut on them. He'd somehow managed to clip Boyish Dan right in the eye, giving him a beautiful shiner. He and Ria were in the kitchen icing it now, leaving Stan and Mabel alone in the den.
“Stan, focus,” Mabel said, snapping her fingers in front of his face.

He jumped. He'd been listening to her radio. “I'm focused, I'm focused!”

“Good! Let's work on your smile. Show me those pearly whites!”

He smiled, and she leaped back with a strangled scream.

“What?” he asked.

“Stanley Pines, when was the last time you brushed your teeth?!” she demanded, holding her nose.

“I dunno, when did you serve that rainbow-colored watercress?” He shrugged. “It's not that bad, they don't even feel fuzzy yet!”

Ria walked in. “Hey guys, Boyish Dan said he's heading home to show off his shiner before it fades. Did you see –” She stopped short and stared at Stan's mouth.

He smiled. “Say 'cheese'!”

She screamed and ran from the room, the black wig flying off her head like a bat and landing on the floor. He doubled over with laughter.

Mabel groaned. “Okay, we're going to need three bottles of mouthwash, some whitening strips, and some industrial-strength toothpaste.” She jumped up and ran for the door, grabbing her helmet off the hook. “Let's go, Stanley!”

“Can we listen to music on the radio?” he asked, running after her.

“...Motorcycle. I have a motorcycle.”

“We can just listen REAL LOUD!”

For both Stan and Ford, the day became a series of grueling tasks, one after the other.

The manotaurs started Ford's training by strapping him to a harness and made him try to pull a heavy wooden wagon – with all of them sitting in it. They moved exactly .00001 of an inch.

Grauntie Mabel, meanwhile, was holding Stan down while she applied the whitening strips. He hissed and like a cat and scurried up to the rafters – where he promptly forgot how to come down.

The manotaurs then insisted that Ford learn how to head-butt, so he spent over half an hour giving himself a mild concussion trying to break a rock with just his head. The other manotaurs cheered him on and shouted with excitement when he nearly passed out.

Stan was also using his head – trying to stand up straight with a stack of books balanced on his noggin. Instead of getting him to walk gracefully, he dipped and swayed like Crazy Chu on too much caffeine.

Chutzpaur took Ford into town and cracked open a fire hydrant with his bare hands, the way some people would open a water bottle. When the water shot out, Chutzpaur stuck his whole face in it, then gestured for Ford to do the same. It knocked him fifteen feet away, but he knew how to roll from falling off the top bunk bed so many times. When Chutzpaur realized he hadn't hurt himself, he made Ford keep doing it until he could land in a cool action pose.
Grauntie Mabel decided to teach Stan the names of all the little forks he saw at Les Homards. She took a huge piece of poster board and drew all the plates and silverware on it. Halfway through her explanation, Stan got bored and started drawing little mustaches on the diagram. He made one fork say: “Help, I'm too young to dine!”

Ford was thinking something quite similar, since the manotaurs decided his next task would be to cross an alligator-infested river. He stepped as carefully as he could, using the reptiles’ snouts and backs as stepping stones. He was seriously starting to wonder if the manotaurs weren't just trying to find more entertaining ways for him to die.

Yet Ford, at least, was slowly making progress. By late afternoon, he could make his stomach flop over his waistband, he'd gotten three scars and one of them actually looked cool, and he'd eaten so much barbecue sauce he was starting to smell like a prime rib. Best yet, after seventy tries, he even managed to leap across the gorge outside the Man Cave. He was so excited he actually high-sixed himself...and promptly fell backwards down the gorge.

He felt like he was finally becoming a man.

Ford sat in the natural hot springs under the Man Cave, Chutzpaur lounging next to him.

“Who wants to rub this on my back?” shouted Cranitaur.

Ford smiled with satisfaction, leaning back and resting his arms on the side of the pool. “Guys, I just wanna say that these last couple of hours have been really productive. I feel like I've actually made some growth.”

“I have a growth!”

Ford laughed. “Glark, you are hilarious today!”

Glark, a seven-foot manotaur with a boil the size of a frog on his face, grinned and winked at Ford. He sighed happily. Hanging out with a bunch of manly, supernatural creatures – did life get any better than this?

“You've done great today,” Chutzpaur told him, smiling.

Ford smiled back. “Yeah. You guys just took me under your wing and have been so – supportive.”

The manotaur blushed manfully. “Oh, stop.”

“No, you know what? You really have been.” He leaned forward, flexing one arm. His muscles were sore, but that just proved he actually had muscles now. “I feel like I’m finally becoming a man!”

“Not yet, Phenomenaur,” Chutzpaur said, as two manotaurs walked past, debating which oil to use to make their skin feel smoother. “One final task remains!” He lowered his voice ominously. “The deadliest trial of all...”

Ford sat up confidently, his hands on his hips. “I've survived 49 other trials. Whatever it is, BRING IT ON!”

The other manotaurs cheered.
They gathered back in the Mancave, standing in the huge cavern that served as its main hall, most of it in shadow. Pituitaur walked around, solemnly lighting bronze torches, lighting the hall with a fierce orange light. The other manotaurs worked steadily to prepare Ford for his final challenge.

He had been stripped of his clothes and now wore a loincloth made of gluten-free faux deerskin. Chutzpaur licked several temporary tattoos and pasted them over Ford's arms, back, and chest. “RAD DUDE” covered the length of his left arm and “CAN'T AFFORD THIS” covered his right. His back had a tattoo of two griffons fighting each other with wrenches in front of large inverted triangle. His chest had an Aztec-themed ball of fire raining scorched skulls over his stomach. The best part was that Chutzpaur's spit smelled like charcoal, so when he licked the tattoos and smacked them on, Ford smelled manlier than ever.

Three manotaur knelt solemnly and three more stood behind them, beating on the first three's skulls with moose femurs like living drums.

Chutzpaur stood with Ford in the center of the room. Now that all the torches were lit, it was easy to see the cavern almost in entirety: a large, circular room large enough to hold the entire Mystery Shack, with piles of bones, rocks, and cracked bowling balls piled around the edges. In the center was a raised dais that held the most enormous stone chair Ford had ever seen, roughly hewn from the very mountain itself.

The remaining manotaur lined up in two rows, facing inward, a look of either concentration or constipation on their faces. Chutzpaur raised a hand dramatically.

“Behold our leader...LEADER-AUR!”

Ford looked. A shriveled old manotaur tottered down the aisle of manotaurs. He did carry a spear, and his horns were the longest Ford had ever seen, but he was so hunched over the horns barely reached Ford's eyebrows. And he was actually humming under his breath.

That is Leader-aur? Ford thought, trying to hide his dismay. “Is he like, the oldest, or the wisest...?”

The old manotaur tottered closer and raised a shriveled hand. “Greetings, youngAAAAH!”

Ford gave a half-shriek and stumbled back. A pair of black jaws had plunged down and snapped the old manotaur up. The jaws went up, going higher and higher...

“Nah, he's just the offering,” Chutzpaur was saying. “That is Leader-aur.”

It was the biggest manotaur Ford had ever seen. The biggest thing Ford had ever seen. It was three stories tall, with pitch-black fur that covered every inch of its body, and horns the size of harpoons jutting from its head. It had glowing red eyes and shoulders so thickly covered in fur so shaggy fur they'd germinated their own coverings of moss and mushrooms. Its arms were even thicker than a redwood – each bicep was the size of a car – and its pectorals were each big enough to land a helicopter. It wore one huge kilt made of stitching several hundred regular-sized kilts together, and its cloven hooves were stained with something that looked exactly like dried blood. It slurped down the old goat like a mouthful of noodles.

Ford gulped.

Leader-aur turned slowly. He was so huge even the slightest footstep made the whole cave shake,
and pebbles rained down on Ford's head.

“You,” he rumbled, in a voice like thunder on steroids. “You wish to be a man?”

Ford grunted and pounded his chest. The manotaurs cheered.

Smoke billowed slowly from Leader-aur's nostrils. “Then you must do heroic act. Go to highest mountain...” He plunged his fist between his pectorals with a sickening squelech. He bellowed with agony and pulled a bone spear from a place just beside his heart.

_Was he seriously just walking around with a stab wound?_ Ford thought, amazed. _Hard core!

Leader-aur held the spear aloft, his chest oozing with thick green blood. “...and bring back head of...the MULTI-BEAR.”

He threw the spear at Ford's feet. The other manotaurs began muttering and gasping, obviously impressed with the difficulty of the task ahead.

Ford had a flashback to the alligator river. “Multi-bear?” he repeated uneasily. “Is that some sort of bear?”

_“He's our sworn enemy,” Leader-aur growled. “Conquer him, and your mansformation will be complete.”_

He hesitated. “Conquer? As in, like...”

_“Phenomenaur,” Chutzpaur said. Ford turned. The manotaur had been digging through his backpack. He held up something small and turquoise – Ford's BABA CD. “Is this yours?”_

Ford jumped at him and grabbed it, quickly hiding it behind his back. “No! I mean, haha, I'm – not mine, just holding it – for a friend – a very, uh, more of an acquaintance, actually...” Ford stuffed the CD into his loincloth (it had a surprising number of functional pockets).

The manotaurs were muttering among themselves.

“...thought he was becoming a man...”

“...girly CD...”

“...I don't know about this...”

“Uh, um...” It was like being in the Greasy Diner all over again, everybody looking at him and that stupid pink card popping out at the bottom.

Ford started pacing back and forth. So what if he had to conquer a Multi-Bear? Was one bear going to stand in his way of a lifetime of manliness and glory?

He looked down at the fallen spear. Then he grabbed it and raised it above his head.

_“I SHALL CONQUER THE MULTIBEAR!”_

The manotaurs screamed and stomped their feet, pumping their fists in the air. Streams of fire shot from Leader-aur's nostrils, scorching the rock on the ceiling. Ford ducked as burning pebbles skittered around his feet, one or two of them hitting his arms. He hurried to pat them out before they could set him on fire.
The woods seemed to know he was coming – knew that *Ford the Phenomenaur* was coming. The trees parted before him, a path practically spreading itself beneath his feet. The wind blew at his back. He raced soundlessly through the forest, bounding like a goat over massive rock piles, leaping over logs in a single bound.

He'd never noticed before how wonderful it felt to run, to just run and feel like nothing in the world could hurt him. What was there to be afraid of in the first place? He'd stuck his hand in a pain hole and stared at a poster of a lion until his eyes burned and even counted coup on a sleeping boar. He'd never known he could do stuff like that before. *Nothing* could touch him now.

When he was tired, he caught the scent of water on the wind and ran to its source – a clear stream unwinding in a shimmering ribbon from the mountain ahead. He knelt and scooped the water in his hands. It was so cold it felt like his gums were burning. A stag came up next to him, soundlessly, dipping its magnificent antlers to drink. It raised its powerful head and looked at him. Ford nodded. The stag, recognizing the wildness in him, nodded back.

Ford ran on, the mountain looming up now and ready to be conquered. Storm clouds gathered the mountain's peak like the dark wings of a bird of prey. Ford grinned fiercely at the challenge.

He reached the mountain's base and began to climb, relishing the small rocks cutting into his feet. They would toughen him, give him callouses. There was no trail to follow, but he made one, pole-vaulting over gaps in the rocks, crawling when the slope became too steep. Thunder boomed around him. Rocks sprayed from his heels as he climbed. He could see it now – a dark purple hollow near the top in the mountain. The cave where he would make his final mansformation.

“I'm comin' for you, Multi-bear,” Ford whispered, and the sky cracked with lighting.

“Okay, Stanley, let's see how far you've come!”

Mabel was sitting in her yellow armchair, Ria and Boyish Dan on either side. (Dan had come back because he got bored at home. And also Mabel had bribed him with carpentry magazines.) The radio was still playing on the den table. She held a photo of Stanley in front of her, which showed him leaning against the den table, shuffling cards and sticking a wad of gum in his hair for later. “You started like this,” she said, “but you became...”

She lowered the picture.

Stanley was leaning against the TV. His shirt had gone green and smelly from sweating so much, especially around the armpits. He had not one, not two, but five pieces of gum in his hair. They had apparently acted like glue, because he also had some twigs, a watch and a bird stuck to them. The bird was flapping hard and trying to get away, but Stanley didn't even notice, because he was trying to set fire to the TV antennae with a small cigarette lighter.

“ACK!” Mabel cried, jumping up. “NOT THE ANTENNA!”

“Should I set the power cord on fire instead?” Stanley asked, as she snatched the lighter away from him. The bird finally worked itself free and flew off, scratching Stanley rather harder than necessary in the process. He yelped and swatted it away.

“Where did you even get this?” Mabel demanded, holding up the lighter. Its triangle pattern glinted in the light.
He shrugged. “Won it from a biker in a game of Texas Hold 'Em.”

She groaned and sagged into her seat, covering her face with her hands. “You're incorrigible.”

“Maybe we're going about this the wrong way,” Ria said thoughtfully. “I mean, instead of trying to cram in a bunch of new skills and manners, why don't you just focus on the skills he already has?”

Mabel looked up, resting her hands on her chin. Her nephew was currently chasing the bird around the living room, trying to hit it with the ammo still lodged in his hair. But there was something odd about the way he was doing it.

And then it hit her: he was jumping at the bird in time to the music.

A slow smile spread across her face, and her eyes shone with excitement. “Ria, you're a genius. Stanley, come with me!”

She grabbed his arm and yanked him out of the room.

Ford crept into the cave, his spear pointed in front of him. It was almost pitch-black and stank of soggy gym shoes. Purple stalactites edged the shadowy ceiling, and small bones littered the floor. He paused to let his eyes adjust. He stared into the throat of the cave, straining his ears, but he couldn't hear anything over the patter of the rain outside. He checked the dirt ground for tracks, but there were none. It was like the place had been swept clean.

He bent down to pick up a small bone. It was about as long as his forearm – which was not encouraging – but it didn't even have teethmarks. Like it had been scraped clean without even scratching the bone's surface. He didn't know of any kind of animal that could do that.

“What is a multi-bear?” he muttered.

Suddenly the skin on his arms pricked. His head jerked up. An enormous shape was rising from the depths of the cave, huge and dark and misshapen. It was definitely a bear – but it had bear heads all over its body. There was one main head on top, surrounded by more heads like some kind of gruesome collar, with more bear heads sticking out of its armpits and waist. All of the heads had glowing orange eyes and pointed teeth and slavering red tongues.

“Oh, that's a multi-bear.”

The multi-bear stepped forward. Several of its heads roared.

“Bear heads!” commanded the main head, which was slightly bigger than the rest. “SILENCE!”

Most of the heads stopped roaring, but one of them kept doing it until the main head slapped it a few times. That was how Ford noticed it had multiple arms and legs. Ford knew how it felt to be stared at, so he tried really hard not to, but he'd never seen anything like it.

The main head turned to Ford. “Child, why have you come here?”

Ford gave himself a mental shake and brandished his spear. “Multi-bear! I seek your head! Or...one of them, anyway, there's like...what, six? Seven heads?

“This is foolish,” the bear said angrily. “Leave now – or die.”

A few hours ago, Ford would've turned tail and ran. But Ford was a different person now. And he
wasn't running from anything.

He gripped his spear and shifted into a fighting stance.

The multibear towered over him. “So be it!”

Its other heads roared a challenge. The Multibear tipped forward onto all fours and charged. Ford rain straight for the bear and swerved at the last second, running up the curved wall of the cave. He dropped to the floor just as the bear ran past, cutting him with the edge of his spear. The bear turned and skidded sideways, its heads snarling with fury.

With one sweep of a paw, the multibear sent a huge pile of bones flying straight at Ford like missiles. Ford scrambled to get out of the line of fire – the bones flew so fast they actually impaled the stone walls! He dove behind a boulder just as an extra-sharp shinbone cut into his arm.

He crouched, panting, and checked his wound. It didn't hurt, and it was barely bleeding, so slipping on blood wouldn't be a problem.

He felt the multibear approaching slowly. He could actually feel its heat, smell its dank animal odor. Ford set his jaw and gripped his spear.

This is it.

With a fierce cry, he leaped onto the boulder. The multibear roared and lunged for him, taking the bait. Ford stepped aside as one of its heads snapped at the space where he'd been, then used the as a stepping stone to scurry up the multi-bear's body. He reached the main head, and before it could turn to bite him, Ford got behind it and wrapped his arms around it, the shaft of the spear cutting into the multibear's throat. It roared and staggered, trying to break free, but Ford was too small for its arms to reach him. Ford squeezed as hard as he could. Finally the multibear fell to the ground with a bone-jarring CRASH.

Ford stood over him – on him, actually – and raised his spear. “A real man shows no mercy!”

The main head sighed and lowered its eyes, admitting defeat. “Very well, warrior. But will you grant a magical beast one last request?”

The manotaurs hadn't gone over that. Ford hesitated. “Uh...okay.”

“I wish to die...listening to my favorite song.” It turned its head, and Ford noticed a small black radio sitting on a rock towards the back of the cave.

Ford jumped off the multibear's shoulder and walked over. It looked like an old radio, almost like Grauntie Mabel's, with a little slot for cassettes and another one for CDs.

“The tape is already in there,” the multibear said, still lying obligingly on the floor. “You can just press any – that's it, that's it,” he said, as Ford pressed play.

A familiar, feminine voice rang against the walls.

“Disco girl, coming through, / That girl is you...”

Ford looked down, shocked, as the multibear nodded his main head to the beat. He picked up the CD, vaguely wondering how the multibear had even gotten it.

“You listen to Icelandic pop group BABA?” Ford asked, stunned. “I-I love BABA.”
The multibear looked at him, his orange eyes shining. “I thought I was the only one!” he said. Then he closed his eyes as if remembering something painful. “All the manotaurs make fun of me because I know all the words to the song, 'Disco Girl.’”

“Oh, you mean...*Disco Girl,*” Ford sang.

“*Coming through,*” the bear sang back.

They sang the last part together: “*Oo-oooo! Oo-oooo!*”

Ford laughed. “This is amazing! Finally, someone who understands and –” He caught sight of the spear in his hand. It had stopped raining outside, and the point of the spear glinted in the rising light. “Oh...I guess I'm supposed to kill you, or I'll never be a man...”

“I accept my fate,” the multibear said calmly.

Ford stepped back. “No...really?”

“It's for the best.”

Ford looked down at him. The multibear had his eyes closed, on all his heads, and lay on the floor, his arms crossed peacefully over his chest. The song wound to its end, leaving only echoes behind.

Then he looked down at himself. Stinking of sweat and charcoal, tattooed up his arms and torso, the bone spear perfectly balanced in his hand. He looked and acted more like a manotaur than ever – more like a man than ever.

He tightened his grip. Before he could change his mind, he raised the spear, gritted his teeth, and threw it –

– where it landed with a clatter on the dais of the Great Hall.

“I'm not gonna do it,” Ford declared.

He'd marched straight through the Man Cave without a word to anyone, afraid that if he talked, he'd change his mind. The manotaurs had followed him, unnerved by his silence, but his proclamation sent them into an actual tizzy, with little gasps and whispers and everything.

Leader-aur sat on his stone chair like the incarnation of a thundercloud. His breath rumbled in his chest and his nostrils steamed threateningly. “*You were told that the price of manhood is the multibear's head!*”

“Listen Leader-aur, alright?” he shouted, then turned to the rest of the manotaurs. “You too, Testosteraur, Pituitaur, and – I don't know, whatever your name is...Beardy?”

The manotaur nodded. “It's Beardy.”

Ford gestured angrily for emphasis. “You keep telling me that being a man means doing all these tasks and being all aggro all the time. But I'm starting to think that stuff’s malarky!”

They gasped.

“You heard me – malarky!” Ford repeated. “So what if I don't have muscle or hair in certain places, and yeah, when a girly pop song comes on the radio, sometimes, I leave it on! Because dang it, top
twenty hits are in the top twenty for a reason: they're catchy!”

Chutzpaur stared at him. “Phenomenaur, what are you saying?”

“I'm saying, the multibear is a really nice guy! And you're a bunch of jerks if you want me to cut off his head.”

Leader-aur growled and stood up, all three stories of him, sparks flying from his nostrils. He lashed out angrily, knocking over the bronze brazier that stood next to Ford, but Ford didn't flinch. Leader-aur put his massive face right in front of Ford, so close that Ford could see the nasty little gummies in the corners of his eyes. A vein ticked in Leader-aur's jaw. The other manotaurs backed up nervously.

He roared, and blowing Ford's hair back and nearly knocking him off his feet. “KILL THE MULTIBEAR OR NEVER BE A MAN!”

Ford looked him straight in the eye. “Then I guess I'll never be a man.”

“Booo!” Chutzpaur shouted, and the other manotaurs joined in, calling out names and hissing at him.

“Hey!” Chutzpaur broke into the jeering. “Who wants to go build something and knock it down!?”

“JYEAAAH!”

The manotaurs thundered out of the hall, Leader-aur bringing up the rear. Fire shot from his nostrils, making the guys at the back of the pack run a little bit faster.

Ford rubbed some of Leader-aur's spit from his face. Well, that was a total waste of my day, he thought. He kicked at a rock and went to find his clothes.

Carla stepped into the Greasy Diner, the envelope in her hands. The diner was open, but it didn't look like anyone was there.

“Hello?” she called, not moving from the door.

Suddenly the lights dimmed, just a little. With the harsh light gone, she saw an odd, sort of pretty glow from the booths. There was a soft sound, a throat being cleared, and she looked up.

“You!” she gasped.

“Hey, Carla.” The kid rubbed the back of his neck. He wore fine leather shoes shined to a pearl-like luster, and a black silk tux that clashed with a polka-dot bowtie. His hair looked funny all slicked back, and his hair was redder than a tomato from blushing so hard, but she recognized him at once.

“Are you the guy who's been following me around?” she demanded. She held up the letter. “Did you send me this?”

The letter read:

You are cute funny and sweet

Greasy's Diner is where we should meet
The letters were all cut out from different magazines.

“That may or may not have been me,” said the kid.

“I knew it! That is so creepy, why would you...” She trailed off, getting a better look at the rest of the diner. It was clean – she’d never seen this place so spotless. Even the floors were waxed. The ceiling was lined with fake flowers. And the funny glow coming from the tables – every single booth had been decorated with a bouquet of electric roses, glowing pink and orange and yellow, like miniature sunsets.

She stared. “Did you do this?”

“Do you like it?”

The boy – she could've sworn she'd seen him in a rolled-up shirt stained with sweat and mustard whenever he followed her around. And now, with that tux and everything, he looked...

“Mighty fine,” she whispered. “I like it mighty fine.”

He grinned with pride. “There's more. Watch.” He took a remote out of his pocket and clicked it. The jukebox started playing one of her favorite songs, Shut Up and Dance With Me. The kid held out his hand.

“Carla...would you dance with me?”

Mabel was in the diner's attic, lying on her stomach with her chin on her hands, watching them through the open attic door. It was like they'd rehearsed it: the two kids danced the same moves in perfect sync, their eyes never leaving each other's faces. When the song ended, Carla cried breathlessly, “Let's do it again!” and Stan immediately hit replay. They laughed as Stan twirled her around the floor, making her poodle skirt flair like a tutu. Mabel sighed with pleasure.

“So kawaii,” Thompson whispered, lying next to her in the dark.

She didn't even question how Thompson suddenly came to be there. She just smiled and whispered, “I know, right?”

They sighed again, watching the two kids dance, their faces aglow with first love.

Ford pulled on his jacket and stuffed his hands in the pockets. He was tired and sore and cranky from the wasted day. Mostly, though, he was worried about what Stan would say when he came back, just as nerdy and wimpy as before. Why couldn't Ford be the cool twin for once? Stan would probably just lord it over him for the rest of their natural lives...

“FORD!”

He jumped. He'd been walking right past the Greasy Diner. Even though it looked closed, Stan and Grauntie Mabel were sitting in one of the booths. Stan had his face smooshed against the glass...and it looked like he was wearing a tux.
Ford was so astonished that he didn't even notice Stan yelling at him – at first.

“RIGHT HERE!” Stan was shouting. “LOOK! THIS IS MY VOICE! I'M TALKING TO YOU THROUGH THE GLASS!”

Ford quickly made a shushing motion with his hands and headed for the door. He entered the Diner and walked up to the booth.

“Oh!” Ford said, stopping short.

There was a girl at the booth, like an actual female with hair and everything, sitting right next to Stan. She looked a little flushed but really happy.

“You must be Stanford,” the girl said. Her voice sounded a lot like the singer from BABA.

“Hey, Ford! Hey!” Stanley was kneeling on the seat and leaning way over the table, motioning for Ford to sit down. “Did you see me through the glass?”

“Yes,” Ford said, sitting down next to Grauntie Mabel.

“This is my girlfriend Carla,” Stan said, sitting back down. “Carla, this is Stanford.”

“Call me Ford,” Ford said automatically.

“Call me Carla,” Carla said back, grinning.

Ford kept looking from Stan to Carla. “Stanley, what – how did – are you wearing a tux?”

Stanley grinned wickedly. “C'mon, Ford, don't you know that every girl's crazy for a sharp-dressed man?”

Carla giggled.

“Where've you been, kiddo?” Grauntie Mabel asked him. “You missed all the excitement! I had to take photos!”

She showed him pictures of Stanley dancing with Carla. Stan had rarely looked so happy as he twirled Carla across the Diner, both of them barefoot, Carla's poodle skirt flaring like a ballgown. The pictures looked like they'd been taken from a higher vantage point, though, and he frowned.

“Grauntie Mabel, were you spying on –?”

“THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT!” she said loudly, grabbing the photos back. “I never miss a scrapbook-ortunity!”

“Are you alright?” Carla asked him, looking Ford up and down. “I mean, you look a little...”

“Mauled,” Stanley finished. “What did you do, Ford, spend the day wrestling a boar?”

“Sort of. It's just these half-man, half-bull humanoids were hanging out with me...”

Stan sat back. “Here we go...”

“But then they wanted me to do this really tough, horrible thing, but it just wasn't right. So I said no.”

“You were your own man and you stood up for yourself,” Grauntie Mabel said.
He looked up at her, startled. “Huh?”

“You did what was right even though no one agreed with you,” she explained. “Sounds pretty manly to me.”

Ford looked at his brother. “Really?” he asked.

Stan shrugged. “Sure. You don't have to ask me, Ford, I always like you just fine. You're plenty good enough for me.” He caught sight of Carla's face. “Uh, I mean, uh —”

“Stan Pines, you big squishy,” she said, and hugged his arm tightly. Stan turned beet-red and gave Ford a thumbs-up. He returned it, smiling. His brother's words had filled his chest with a fuzzy warm glow.

Yeah, he thought. And this is good enough for me, too.

Chapter End Notes

GASP! Carla McCorkle has entered the scene!

That dancing scene was so fun to write. I love showing Stanley's other sides, exploring his more sensitive self – and I will get to do more of that in future episodes. This may be a small start, but I have *big plans*!
“FORD FORD FORD FORD!”

Ford looked up from where he was working on his bed, his knees bent, pen in hand. He heard the front door slam, rapid pounding on the stairs, and then Stanley burst into the room, barefoot and flushed and still in his tux.

“It's the next morning, Stanley,” Ford said, raising an eyebrow. After the diner, they'd come home, but Stanley was so wound up that Ford had gone to bed without him. “Did you actually sleep in that thing?”

Stanley grabbed Ford's shoulders. “FORD I JUST REALIZED I HAVE A GIRLFRIEND FORD I HAVE A GIRLFRIEND LIKE A REAL LIVING HUMAN WHO IS NOT KIDNAPPED AND ALSO A GIRL – ”

Ford finally managed to clap a hand over Stan's mouth. “Dude. Breathe, or you're gonna pass out.”

Stanley nodded and Ford to his hands away slowly.

“And yes, Stanley, I know. I was there, myself,” Ford reminded him, but apparently Stanley was too excited to listen.

“She's perfect.” Stanley threw himself backward onto Ford's bed and waved his arms, making a blanket-angel. “She's got cute curly black hair and this little mole on her cheek you barely notice unless you're super-close and she likes to dance and she said I look cute in a tux –” He grabbed the front of his shirt. “I am never taking this off again.”

“First: I was there, and second: ew.”

Stanley sighed, oblivious. “She said she noticed me stalking her and was totally creeped out but then we danced and she said it was like I was being a secret admirer and she'd go out with me if I promised not to hide behind the bushes on her next date. Isn't she amazing?”

Given his excellent memory, Ford recalled perfectly everything that Carla had said. He debated repeating the conversation verbatim, but Stan was doing a decent job rehashing it all by himself.

Actually, what Ford found amazing was that Stanley had had a long-standing crush on a girl in the first place, and Ford hadn't known about it. Then again, he'd been pretty focused on cracking the codes in the journal. At least having a girlfriend would put an end to Stan's constant flirtations in the Gift Shop.

He set down his work and crossed his legs on the bed. “So, now what?”

Stan looked at him, blinking. “Now what...what?”
“You know...” Ford waved a hand. “Girls, dating. You're past the flirting stage. How do you go about being a boyfriend?”

Stanley sat up, a look of slightly stunned horror dawning on his face. “Hot Belgian Waffles, I'm a boyfriend. I don't know how to be a boyfriend!” Stanley grabbed Ford's shoulders, this time looking more scared than besotted. “Ford! You're the smart one! How do I be a good boyfriend?!”

“You might try inhaling so you don't pass out,” Ford said mildly. Stanley was turning a bit blue.

Stanley sucked in a breath – and held it. Ford poked him in the stomach and his breath whooshed back out.

“There we go. Anyway, how would I know? You gotta ask someone with actual dating experience. What about that guy at the poker game – the one with the leather vest?”

“Leather Vest?” Stanley shuddered. “The guy thinks doing math is romantic. Even I know that's lame.”

Ford tapped his chin thoughtfully. “It would have to be someone familiar with romantic relationships...someone who knows the female mind...someone both charming and clever...”

“You mean like Grauntie Mabel?”

They involuntarily pictured her batting her eyes and blowing a kiss. They shuddered.

Ford readjusted his glasses. “No, definitely not Grauntie Mabel. I was actually thinking –”

“Of course! Ria!” Stanley jumped to his feet.

“Well, sure, but what about Sean –”

“Thanks, Ford!”

Stanley dashed out the door.

Ford shrugged and went back to his work. He'd rarely seen Stanley get so worked up. The guy practically forgot how to breathe! Sure, Stanley had always been the more emotional of the two of them, but Ford couldn't ever see himself acting that crazy over a girl. He shook his head. Love definitely made people do crazy things.

He turned to the next page in the journal and started another sketch of Seandra.

Stanley ran downstairs so fast he almost fell and had to jump the last three feet. It was after hours, but Ria never seemed to go home. He was sure she was still here somewhere.

“RIA!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “RIA! ROMANTIC EMERGENCY! CODE VALENTINE!”

Ria stepped out abruptly from behind the stuffed dodo. “We have codes now?” Ria asked enthusiastically. “Do we get codenames? I want to be Green Desperado!”

“Why green?” Then he waved a hand. “Never mind! Ria, have you ever had a boyfriend?”

“Well, if you count dating games –”
“Great!” He grabbed her hand. “O Mighty Desperado, please teach me how to become the world's most perfect boyfriend!”

Ria quickly discovered that Stanley had stayed awake all night drinking Mabel Juice and eating leftover candy. She insisted on laying down some ground rules:

1. Get 6 hours of sleep each night. Otherwise skin gets a weird gray sheen that will make Carla want to avoid kissing you at all costs.
2. Put on clean clothes every day. Otherwise your clothes will smell like swazz and Carla will want to avoid kissing you at all costs.
3. Shower. Daily. With soap. Otherwise you will smell like a moldy orange and Carla will want to –

“Avoid kissing me at all costs,” Stanley finished. “Okay, okay, but how do I get her to want to kiss me? Plus stuff like, you know, hanging out and dancing with me?”

Ria's eyes shone. “Stanley, the fact that you asked that means you have real boyfriend potential. I am so proud.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “Now go follow the first three rules, including sleep. And don't cheat – I said six hours and I mean six hours. I have cleaned every species of dust bunny imaginable and I will be able to detect even the slightest gray sheen in your skin. Now march, Carla's Boyfriend! ONWARD TO VICTORY!”

“ONWARD!” Stanley roared, and charged back up the stairs.

Six and a half hours later (it took him a while to take a shower, since he was pretty smelly), the two of them sat in Ria's living room, her abuelito making them snacks in the kitchen.

Stanley looked around. The place was pretty much the same as before: saggy couch, doilies everywhere, a video game paused on TV.

“So why are we here?” he asked.

“We are here so that you can learn one of the greatest skills of all time,” Ria said, leaning forward. “The ability to listen.”

“Oh, I can already do that, easy! Watch.”

Stanley looked at Ria and thought about how neat his car was. He could keep eye contact on reflex, but people talking usually bored the heck out of him. Ford liked to talk about nerd things for hours, though, so Stanley had perfected the ability to look like he was listening while thinking about stuff he really liked. The trick was to keep thinking about neat stuff, because it showed up in your eyes if you looked like you were having fun or not. Plus he had to throw in an “Uh-huh” or “No-kidding?” every once in a while.

Ria had paused.

“No kidding?” he said, and went back to thinking about how to get Fiddleford to get that dent out of the side door –

Suddenly a really great smell made him snap to attention. Ria was holding a miniature corn dog under his nose.
“Neat!” He jerked forward to chomp at it, but she pulled it away at the last second. “Hey!”

“Alright, now what did I say?”

“Uh...did I mention you look really pretty today?”

Ria shook her head. “You weren't listening.”

“I totally was! My ears were working and everything.”

“So what did I say?”

“Uh...” He repeated something Soos had said under his breath in the kitchen.

She stared at him. “That was Spanish,” she said, obviously surprised. “You know Spanish?”

He shrugged. “No, but the way he said it, it sounded like he was cussing, so I wanted to remember it.”

“But your accent is perfect!”

“I don't have an ax, though...”

She rolled her eyes, a smile tweaking her lips. “Alright, let's try this. I say something in Spanish, and you say it back.”

“Okay.”

She said something very forcefully and turned bright red. Stanley grinned. Had to be a swearword, the way she was blushing. He said it back. She burst out laughing.

He turned red. “What? What did I say? You said it first!”

She wiped a tear from her eye. “You said, 'I am the most adorable baby duckling on the planet.'” She whooped with laughter.

Soos stuck his head into the room, grinning. He looked Stan up and down. “You know, he does resemble a baby duckling,” he said. “Especially around the ears.”

“Ducks don't even have ears!” He grunted with impatience. “What does this have to do with getting Carla to like me?”

“Simple. We are going to practice listening by doing something else. I am going to teach you Spanish, and you are going to romance her in the language of love. It will be an excellent icebreaker.” She said the last part in Spanish.

“I'm gonna guess that means 'pure awesomeness,'” Stanley said. “I'm game! What do we do first?”

It took about an hour to teach Stanley a few basic phrases. At that point, Soos got bored in the kitchen and came into the room to keep playing his video game. He practically forced them both to play with him, and in less than twenty minutes they were playing on Level 20 and egging each other on in a mix of Spanish and English.

Ria was quite pleased with herself. Stanley actually did quite a good job listening when it was
something he was interested in – he waited his turn to speak, paid attention to what they said, and how they said it.

Finally they left the house and Ria started walking him over to Carla's.

“Remember, girls are like beautiful and mysterious honey badgers,” she said. “You must pretend that she is speaking another language.”

“I'm the one speaking in another language.”

“Yes, but you must pay attention as if she is. Keep eye contact. Ask her questions about what she means.”

They reached Carla's house.

“I dunno,” Stanley said uneasily, staring at the deep green door. It had tan walls with green trim and a Northwest Inc. Weather Vane, which always seemed to be pointing Northwest. “I mean, she said she'd go out with me last night, but...”

Obviously, he needed encouragement.

“CARLA'S BOYFRIEND IS HERE!” Ria bellowed, and immediately dove for the bushes.

“Wha – HEY! Ria!”

He stood for a second, panicked, then ran straight for the porch and made just as the door opened. Carla stood there, wearing a soft pink dress with a matching flower in her silky black girls.

“Wow you're pretty,” Stan said. Ria grinned. His accent really was perfect.

Carla blinked. “What?”


She laughed. “‘Sparkly’? Where'd you get that one?”

“From your eyes,” he said honestly. “They are the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen.”

And she looked at him and her eyes sparkled even more.

“Did you come all the way here just to tell me that?” she asked.

“I – I also wanted to ask if you'd like to go dancing again sometime. I could wear the tux again. Or – or maybe see a movie?”

She smiled again. “You got any scary movies in mind?”

Ria watched Stan's whole face light up. “You like scary movies?!”

“Love 'em, but my little bro's too young to watch them with me.”

“You can come over to the Shack! We can watch Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies!”

Ria smiled, watching the two of them talking together. It was just as she had said to Ms. Pines – they had to play to Stanley's strengths. He really was very good at languages. He and Carla were leaning
in close like they were sharing a secret joke, laughing and turning pink.

She sat back in the bushes, satisfied with her handiwork. This was definitely going in her Pines Family fanfic.

Chapter End Notes

Would anyone be interested if I increased the rate of updates? I'm thinking of uploading an episode on Friday, then uploading a Short the very next day. Thoughts?
A Few More Fords

Chapter Notes

Guys! GUYS! GUESS WHO ELSE IS NAMED 'FORD'??!! YESSSS THERE ARE A FEW MORE FORDS COMING MY PRECIOUS YESSSS

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ria put a party hat on the stuffed Rhino head. The parlor had been repaired and decorated: it was strung with little white lights and iridescent purple stars that dangled from the ceiling like indoor constellations. Cheap plastic chairs lined the walls, and one corner by the door had been turned into a DJ stage, complete with speakers and Ria's electric keyboard. Ria had done most of the repair work herself, patching up holes in the wall and cleaning cursed wax off the ceiling. Mabel had hired someone else to help with the lights, though, since Ria nearly electrocuted herself twice trying to hook up the speakers.

Stan and Ford were sitting on the yellow couch under a stuffed moose head. Normally the couch was outside, but their Grauntie had dragged it in to provide extra seating. Ford was pretty sure there was a family of mice living in it, but he wasn't about to stick his hands down the cushions to check.

Besides, he and Stan were busy with something much more important.

“Oh, man, I don't feel so good,” Ford moaned, holding his stomach. “Watch out, Stan – I think I'm going to – BLARRRG!” He leaned forward, a can of silly string next to his mouth, and proceeded to fake-vomit all over his twin.

Stan pulled a face like he was seriously nauseous. “Grauntie Mabel, what did you feed us?” he groaned, and instantly strong-vomited right back on Ford. Ford retaliated, and Stan retaliated back, until they looked like they were covered in neon fish nets.

Grauntie Mabel, who'd been inspecting the refreshments table, glanced over her shoulder. “Oh come on, the ketchup fudge wasn't that bad!”

“I used for a chimney brick,” Dan said. He'd been trying to carve a Viking ship into the door of the parlor. Mabel snatched his whittling knife out of his hand and threw them in the box by the stage. So far she'd confiscated seventeen knives, two forks, and a knitting needle (Dan could whittle with literally anything sharp.)

“Hey Ria!” Stan called. “Want me to spray fairy wings on your stomach?”

“Alright! Finally, a pair of wings that will match my inner punk rocker!”

She put down the box of supplies she'd been carrying and Ford immediately began to spray. Stan reached into the box. There was a party-popper, which he stuffed into his jacket, and a huge bag of yellow confetti. He wooped and threw it into the air, dancing around Ria and Ford like a hyper leprechaun. “WOO-HOO!” he shouted. “COMEDY GOLD!”

“Alright, alright, you little gremlins!” Grauntie Mabel grabbed the bag out of Stan's hand and the silly string from Ford. ‘I'm cuttin' you off. Party supplies are now off limits until after the actual
party.”

“Whaaaat?” Stan whined.

Dan grunted, looking around and scratching his head. “Who's birthday is it, anyway?”

“Nobody’s. I thought this party would be a fun way to get a younger demographic to patronize the Shack.”

Ford blinked. “Is it me or does she sound like a competent businesswoman?” he muttered to Stan.

Then Mabel rubbed her hands together. “The people of this town want fun? I'll SMOTHER THEM WITH FUN!”

Stan grinned. “There she is.” He'd gotten into the Pitt Cola on the refreshment table and was pouring some into Ford's plastic red cup.

“Hey, hey!” Their Grauntie pulled the bottle away. “Okay, it is clear to me now that you both have the energy of a chihuahua on a sugar high. How’s about you channel some o’ that into copying these flyers?”

**FLYER**

She shoved a clipboard at Ford. It had a single pink flyer on it that read:

It might've been Ford's imagination, but the deer at the bottom looked seriously peeved, like it couldn't believe it had been rendered with so little artistic talent. *Should've asked me to do it,* he thought.

“Oh boy, a trip to the copier store,” Stan said in a perfect monotone. “Where we can pay for *new* printers to mess up just like old printers.”

“I had a new printer once,” Ria said dreamily. “It worked perfectly, didn't even jam, until it was possessed by the spirit of girl still waiting for her prints. They paper kind,” she added. “Not, like, *royal* prince. Paper.”

Grauntie Mabel rolled her eyes. “No, you do not have to go to the copier store. You can use the one in my office!”

Ford frowned. “The one that has cockroaches and moths living in it, that's mostly held together with duct tape, with the paper tray that looks like you took a bite out of it in a fit of frustration? *That* one?”

“It was not frustration, I was up late and it looked like a giant sugar wafer!” she said defensively. “And yes, that one. But good news! Our new tech support is already on the case!”

“All set, Mrs. Pines,” said a voice. They turned. A kid walked into the room, with watery blue eyes, straw-blond hair, and a rather long nose. He was had something like a tool belt wrapped around his waist, but instead of wrenches and screwdrivers, it had cables, batteries, circuit boards, copper wire, and a bag of assorted phone parts.

“Great! Kids, this is Fiddleford McGucket –”

Stanley burst out laughing and she whacked him on the head.

“At least *pretend* to be polite,” she scolded.
Ford stepped forward and held out his hand. “I'm Stanford, but you can call me Ford,” he said.

“Fiddleford,” said Fiddleford, “but my friends call me Fidds.”

They shook hands. Ford waited for him to comment on his fingers, but he didn't even seem to notice. Fidds turned to Grauntie Mabel. “I'm done with the printer, Mrs. Pines, but I had a question about that ink cartridge you gave me. It looks really old, and the ink looked kind of funny –”

“I'm sure it'll work fine!” she said. “So hurry up and get printing. The party starts in an hour. Dan, Stan, come get these banners put up!”

“C'mon,” Fidds told Ford. “I'll show you how it works.”

Ford followed him back to the office, the clipboard in one hand, his drink in the other. He was eyeing Fidds' tool belt.

“So you're the tech guy, huh?”

Fidds smiled. “And the cable guy. And the internet guy. If it's runs on electricity, I'm your guy.”

“And you work here? Like, you get paid?”

“Weell, I wouldn't say paid,” he said, putting the word in air quotes. “More like Mrs. Pines leaves money lying around where I'll find it. Child labor laws and everything. Still, it's a fun way to earn some money – I'm saving up for a pocket electron balance.”

Ford's eyes bugged out. “You know what that is?”

“Sure I do. I've been working on building my own physics lab.” Fidds grinned. “Hey, you hear the one about the atom who lost an electron? His friend asked him if he was sure it was gone, and the atom said –”

“I'm positive;” Ford finished. They laughed and headed into the office.

The printer looked slightly worse than Ford remembered, and that was saying something. There were new dents in the front and sides, at least twice as much duck tape, and a sign taped on it that said: “NO BUTTS – THIS MEANS YOU, STANLEY!”

Fidds grinned and jabbed a thumb at the sign. “I take it this is in reference to your brother?” he asked.

“Haha, yeah...” Normally he would've found it funny, but in front of Fidds it just felt embarrassing. He ripped it down and stuffed it in the nearest trashcan. Then he turned back to the printer. “So how does thing even work, anyway?” he asked, lifting the lid. The glass screen was thickly coated with dust. He put down the clipboard and started wiping it off with his arm.

“Oh – it's a little temperamental, but you just press the button on the left here, and then the second button to the right –” Fidds tapped the buttons as he talked, and the printer hummed to life.

A strip of bright green light slid over the glass surface and scanned Ford's arm. He pulled it back, startled, and a sheet of paper spat out the other end. Fiddleford went over to check it.

“Success!” he said, holding it up.

Ford had to admit, it was a pretty good copy. The best he'd ever seen, actually. He could even see the tiny creases on his palm, and the little shadow of his sleeve –
He gasped as the paper started to quiver in Fiddleford's hand. Fidds dropped it with a yelp and it fell to the floor. The whole paper wiggled and shook like it was full of live maggots.

The copy of Fiddleford's arm slowly pulled itself up from the paper, thickening until it became three-dimensional, wiggling its six round fingers. The arm began to inch its way towards them, its fingers clawing at the ground, its elbow bending like a spider's legs.

Fidds screamed and ducked behind Ford.

“Got this!” Ford threw his cup of soda and nailed the arm right on the elbow. The cup bounced but the soda spilled all over it.

Instantly the arm began to dissolve, melting with a hiss into a puddle of light brown liquid, which popped and hissed like stirred-up soda. The boys stared at it, breathing heavily. Fidds was still clutching Ford's sleeve.

“Ford,” he whispered. His voice was a terrified squeak. “Did – did you see...?”

“Yeah,” Ford whispered back. “I think this copier can copy human beings!”

For a moment the room was absolutely still. Then Ford whipped around, his face shining with excitement. “Just think of the scientific implications!”

Ford so excited he rushed back into the parlor. “Grauntie Mabel!” he shouted. Fiddleford was running right behind him. “Grauntie Mabel, Grauntie Mabel!”

“Oh, good, you're back,” she said absently. “Alright everybody, front and center!”

“But Grauntie Ma –” he stopped short and Fidds crashed into his back. “Seandra?”

“‘Sup, Ford?” Seandra waved at him. She was wearing her hair back in a perfect fluffy ponytail, and she had a black dress on with a denim jacket over it. The lavender light from the stars gave her skin a dusty glow, like sunset over the mountains. His brain short-circuited.

“Alright, alright, move along!” Mabel said. She picked him up and set him down next to Stan, who was standing beside Ria and Dan. Fidds scooted over next to him, blinking rapidly like he was trying to convince himself he'd hallucinated.

Grauntie Mabel put her arms behind her back like a drill sergeant and started marching up and down in front of them. “Alright, guys, here's how it's gonna go. Ria, because you're the only one who's not tone-deaf, and you come with a keyboard, you're going to be our DJ.”

Ria closed her eyes solemnly. “I will be the ultimate mix master,” she intoned in a whisper.

“Right. Dan, I'm puttin' you on security detail. You see a paint can, you confiscate it. You see toilet paper, you confiscate it. You see anything that even hints of potential misdemeanors, you confiscate it. You are the fine line between Fun Times and Sad Times, between Party and Police, between Civilization and Chaos. DO YOUR DUTY TO THE SHACK!”

“YES, MRS. PINES!” Dan shouted, saluting.

“At ease!” She turned to the rest of them. “Now I need two victims to sit at the ticket booth, outside, all night, away from all things fun, in the cold, and the dark. Volunteers?”
Three “Not it's” chorused almost at once.

“C'mon, Grauntie Mabel, I can't miss this party!” Stanley pleaded. “It's my first-ever chance to dance with my girlfriend! In public! Where people can see that I actually have one.”

She nodded curtly. “You are excused, private!”

He fist-pumped. “Yes!”

“And Fiddleford, I'll need you inside in case anything goes wonky with the sound system.”

He smiled. He definitely looked less pale than before. “Sure, sound system. I can handle that.”

“Good.” She looked at Ford. “Alright, guess that means it's you and Seandra on the ticket booth. Bring a jacket 'cuz it's gonna get nippy!”

His brain got stuck on you and Seandra. He felt like he'd been smacked in the face with a shovel and then told he'd won a Nobel Prize. “Yes ma'am,” Ford said, grinning in a dazed sort of way.

Ford stood in front of the bedroom mirror, fixing his a neat black bowtie around his neck. He'd debated keeping the jacket on or not, but he didn't have anything else with pockets, and he always felt more secure when he was wearing something he could hide his hands in. And being secure meant that he would sweat less.

He reached for his spray-on deodorant and had just started spraying when a pair of dirty overalls landed on his head.

“Hey!” He swatted them off. “Stanley, do you mind?”

“Sorry, bro!” Stanley said, his voice muffled. His head was buried deep in his suitcase.

Neither one of them had bothered to fully unpack, since it sounded exhausting and they had better things to do than look for clean clothes. Now, however, Stan was digging through his clean laundry like a mole through fresh dirt, spraying socks, underwear, and the occasional boxing glove. Finally Stan sat back, holding up black shirt that read IF FOUND RETURN TO PINES PAWN SHOP.

“Ugh, Mom!” Stan groaned, tossing it aside.

Ford turned back to the mirror and lifted up his arm to spray deodorant. When he finished he put his arms down and yelped. Stanley had appeared next to him, wearing a bright yellow shirt, like some kind of neon ninja.

“Dude, make some noise when you walk!” Ford said.

“Yep, this look works for me,” Stan said, flexing in the mirror. He'd also changed into a clean pair of jeans and his usual sneakers, which had been spit-shined to a grungy gray. The yellow shirt was the only shock of color. It had a sun with sunglasses on it with a caption that read My Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades.

Ford frowned. “Hey, that's my shirt!”

“Like you were gonna wear it,” Stan said, flicking Ford's bow tie. “You're selling tickets, not going on a hot date like me.”
“Har, har. Laugh all you want, but I've devised a fool-proof plan to make sure my night with Seandra goes perfectly.”

“Plan?” Stan repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Are we talking, like, I'm-a-normal-person-with-a-firm-grasp-on-sanity plan, or an I'm-so-brilliant-I'm-going-to-overcomplicate-everything-until-my-life-disintegrates-around-me plan?”

“First of all, life can't disintegrate,” Ford told him. “Second of all, my plan is not overcomplicated. It is a concise recipe for the perfect budding romance. Observe.” He took a paper out of his inside jacket pocket and opened it. It immediately unfolded three feet to the floor.

Stan groaned and sat cross-legged on the floor, his chin in his hand.

“Step 1,” Ford read. “Getting to know each other with playful banter. Banter is like talking, but smarter.”

“That sounds like a dumb idea for poopheads.”

“Yeah, see, this isn't banter,” Ford said, going back to his list. “This is what I want to avoid with Seandra. The final step is to ask her to dance.” A dreamy expression crossed his face. He could picture it now...

The parlor, bathed in a pearly white glow, cream-colored banners draped along the walls like the frosting on a wedding cake. Ria would be standing in a corner, playing the French Horn, the most romantic of all brass instruments. Ford, wearing a hand-tailored tuxedo, would lead Seandra in a perfectly executed waltz around the mother-of-pearl tiles, while the horn played notes so full of longing it made Seandra's lovely cheeks blush like twin roses.

“Oh Ford,” she would moan, leaning against him. Her breath smelled like peppermint. He dipped her and she looked up into his eyes. “You're so brilliant and organized. Show me that checklist again?”

He pulled it from his back pocket where he kept his notebook. She swooned.


Ford quickly wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Stan rolled his eyes. “Smooth. Look, as a former single-and-lonely loser, I sympathize with your cause. But somehow I doubt Seandra will want to dance with you, outside, in the dark, without music.”

“Maybe you could cover me at the ticket booth?”

“Did you not hear the part where I have a girlfriend?”

“Please?!” Ford begged. “Just for one dance. You can have all my desert for a week. And you can fart on my bed and I won't say anything. I'll let you win at chess!” he thw in, desperate.

“Hmm...” Stan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I do like winning things. Alright, broseph, you got yourself a deal! Just give me a wave and I'll be out sooner than you can say –”

“Stanley!” Mabel called from downstairs. “Carla's on the phone!”

There was a blur of yellow and Ford blinked. Stan had raced out the door faster than Ford could say
anything at all.

He turned back to the mirror and readjusted his bowtie. He checked his list again, reassured to see it folded in his jacket. He had already committed it to memory, of course, but it was still nice to have something to do with his hands. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried to strike a casual pose, like Stanley. If he just followed the plan, tonight would be absolutely perfect.

_Tonight is gonna suck._

Stan was leaning on the balcony of the parlor, flopped over the railing like a limp fish.

The party was already underway. The room glowed with red and blue lights, like the party was so much fun it was illegal. The disco ball sprinkled the room with white dots so it felt like the inside of a snow globe. The refreshment table was loaded with punch, chips, an assortment of dips (only two of which had glitter), and a bowl of marshmallow-and-gummies salad, Stan and Mabel's favorite. The room was already half-full of people, mostly kids and teenagers, including some of Seandra's friends. Most of them were milling around the edges of the room, waiting for the dance floor to fill up. A few people, though, were already dancing, all of them with partners.

Except him.

He rested his chin on the wood and puffed through his lips.

Mabel came bursting through the bead-curtained doorway behind him, singing to herself and doing a little jig.

“Ya-da-dee, ya-da-doo. Can your Grauntie throw a party or what?” she said, leaning on the rail and grinning. Then she got a look at his face. “Yikes. What's with the mopy mug, kiddo?”

“Carla can't come to the party. She has to babysit her neighbor's kid.”

“Aw, cheer up, kiddo! I bet there'll be tons of cute girls at the dance!”

“Doesn't count when you have a girlfriend, Grauntie.”

“Well, then how about dancing with me?” she asked brightly. “I do a mean square dance which people often mistake for a seizure!”

“If I want to die by public humiliation, I'll let you know.”

She crossed her arms. “Look, kid, you got yourself a choice. Either you can make the most of the party tonight, or I can give you a make-over so you look emo on the outside, too. What'll it be?”

He squinted at her. “You wouldn't.”

She grinned and pulled a tube of black lipstick out of her sleeve.

He yelped. “I choose life!” he shouted, and raced down the stairs to the dance floor.

Ford and Seandra sat outside at the ticket booth, their elbows exactly four and a half inches apart. He sat as straight as he could, trying to look tall and potentially manly.
Seandra handed a ticket to a kid in a gray sweatshirt. Then she reached for the bowl of popcorn set on the table. This close, he noticed that she had really pretty eyelashes, and there was just the faintest dimple in her cheek when she smiled...

_Ack! A list! I had a list, what was I supposed to do?!_

He leaned sideways and pulled the list out from his jacket. His palms were sweaty so he held it by the edges – why did he have to write in ink?!

The list said:

Step 1: Casual banter.

“So HERE's a caSUal queSTION,” Ford said, his voice cracking a million times. He cleared his throat – why now with the puberty voice, why?? “Uh – who's your favorite author of all time?”

She smiled. “D'you mean for books or newspapers? I don't know that I could pick just one!”

“No way – me too!”

She blinked. “Wait. What?”

_Ack!_ He stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth as a diversion. When another customer stepped up to the booth, he leaned over and grabbed for his list. _New topic, new topic!_

Stan wandered the dance floor, threading through minglers and glancing over his shoulder every so often in case his Grauntie was still watching. Ria was definitely getting way too into her DJ gig. Every so often she'd try to use her keyboard and the song would get interrupted with a loud _QUACK_. Fiddlenerd was hanging out by the back door with Dan, who was watching the party like a big surly bouncer, glaring at anyone who came too close. Next to Dan, who was built like a brick, the nerd looked like a Q-tip.

He walked by the food table, grabbed a fistful of candy salad, and headed for the chairs set against the wall, tearing the heads off the gummies as he went. He took a seat and heaved a sigh.

A snicker of laughter caught his ear. He looked over. Two boys were hunched over a phone a few chairs away, chuckling under their breaths. One was tall and skinny as a noodle with a face full of acne. The other kid was short, dumpy, and practically hidden in a thick green sweater. They were huddling around something in the dumpy one's hand, hunching their shoulders in a way that practically screamed _THIS COULD GET US IN TROUBLE._

Naturally, Stan was intrigued.

“Whatcha doin’?” he asked, leaning over.

They hid whatever they'd been messing with. “Nothin’,” they said together, and Stan grinned.

“Uh-huh. What, you guys catch a mouse or somethin’?”

They glanced at each other. “It's just a new filter,” said the dumpy kid.
“Yeah – watch!” The noodle guy grabbed the phone from his friend's hand. He held it up and took a close-up picture of the nearest dancer. Stan scooted closer so he could see. A giant hand appeared on the screen, and noodle-guy dragged it to make it look like she was picking her nose.

Stan grinned. “Dude, that is awesome. Can you text me that picture?”

“My pop stopped paying for service until I pay for Mrs. Finn's yard,” the dumpy kid said.

“What happened to her yard?”

“A few buried sardines and several hungry alley cats.”


“I'm Gordo,” said the dumpy kid. “This is Roman.”

“Sup,” said Noodles, aka Roman.

“Stanley. But you can call me Stan. And I think I know a guy who could help you out with your phone problem.”

Gordo looked interested. “Yeah? What's the catch?”

“You teach me one good prank for each bar you get.” Stan held out his hand. “Deal?”

Gordo grinned. “Deal.”

They shook on it, and Stan turned. “Hey, Fiddleford!” he called, waving him over. “You know anything about cell Phones?”

Ford had never realized there were so many people in Gravity Falls. The line never got shorter – if anything, it seemed to get longer as the night wore on. He and Seandra were so busy they'd had to divide up the tasks: Seandra took and boxed the cash, and Ford handed out tickets. At this rate, they'd be out here working until the party ended! How was he supposed to get his dance with Seandra?

A new song cranked over the speakers inside, and Seandra glanced over her shoulder through the window. Red and blue lights flashed over her face. “Oh, man, the party's getting nuts!” she said. “D'you think you could cover for me?”

“Huh? Oh, well, I, uh –”

“Thanks, man!”

“Wait!” *This wasn't in the list!*

She disappeared through the door with a flick of her chestnut tresses. Ford twisted around and watched through the window. Seandra danced her way across the floor, high-fiving her friends and whooping with excitement.

“I gotta get in there,” he muttered to himself. He ripped a flyer off the wall behind him – Mabel had taped half a dozen flyers around the window – and scratched a quick sign that read *Closed.* He folded it and set it on the table. “There! I'm sure Grauntie Mabel won't mind if I'm gone for just a few
“What do you think you're doin', kid?”

He jumped.

She frowned down at him. “You said you'd be out here doing the booth. I need at least one warm body to rip these people off!”

The line collectively scowled at Ford. “Yeah!” someone shouted.

“Besides, you promised!” Mabel added.

He blinked. “What? No I didn't!”

She held up a tape recorder and clicked it. “I promise,” it said, in Ford's voice exactly.

He sputtered. “But – what – I didn't – how did you get that?!”

“I have my ways, Stanford Pines,” she said, backing away into the shadows. “I have my w–OW!”

She tripped over a leaf blower and stumbled off, rubbing her ankle.

He sat back down reluctantly. But he turned around again when he heard Seandra laughing. Then he caught sight of Stan, huddled against one wall with Fiddleford and a couple other guys. He wasn't even dancing with Carla. Perfect timing!

“Stan!” he shouted, waving frantically. He tried to send his brother a Look. Now's the time, Stan!

“And you're sure this phone was broken?” Fiddleford asked dubiously. “It looked fine to me.”

“Positive,” Stan assured him. “Gordo here just paid the bill and everything, but he still didn't even get service! What a rip-off, huh?”

“Well...” He glanced at Gordo, frowning. Stan could totally tell that Fiddleford doubted the story, but he was too much of a softie to say so. “It should get full bars now, unless you head too far away from the tower,” the nerd said, handing the phone back. “But I'd call your cellphone provider first thing tomorrow morning. It's probably not a good idea to keep pirating service like that.”

“Great, great, thanks a lot!” Stan said, grabbing Nerdy by the shoulders and steering him away. He hurried back to his new posse. “Alright, guys, what's prank number one?”

Roman grinned. “We're gonna need some glue, a bathroom, and a huge rubber spider.”

Stan pulled his spare spider from his jeans pocket and held it up, shaking it slightly so its rubber legs twitched like it was alive. They laughed.

Now the party was getting started!

Ford grunted with frustration. Stanley couldn't even see him – wasn't even facing the right way. And then he watched Stan run straight out of the parlor into the Shack! So much for enjoying the party!

Ford flopped back down and took the next person's cash, thinking hard while his hands worked

“If I could just be in two places at once...”

A sudden wind rustled the flyers behind him. An idea popped into Ford's head.

“Hmm...”

Fiddleford sat on a chair, swinging his legs. Parties were fun, but he wasn't much for dancing. Although the music was pretty good, once he'd labeled Ria's keyboard with tiny pictures to help her remember what keys were what. He looked over at her and smiled, watching her press her headphones to her ear and snap with her free hand. She was enjoying the music more than anybody, and that was saying something, because the place was packed with people dancing and laughing and generally having a fun time.

Although...

Fiddleford's knee started to bounce, which happened whenever he got anxious or excited. Those kids Stan had been hanging out with...he was almost sure that Gordo had been lying about his phone. Gordo had tried to look all put-out and miserable over his lost service, but the sneer on his face ruined the look. He didn't really know Stanley all that well, but it didn't seem right to let him get tricked like that.

He bit his lip, anxious. Then he hopped off his chair and went in search of Stan.

The dance floor was hopeless – too crammed with people for Fidds to see anything. He considered asking Dan to take a look, but one glance told him that was probably a bad idea. Dan was taking his security duties a little too seriously. He'd been ready to throw out two kids for “laughing like criminals”, and Fiddleford had had to talk him down. One hint of potential miscreants and Dan would pop like a deep-fried corn kernel.

He headed for the balcony instead, but when he reached it, he heard familiar laughter coming from the hallway beyond. He pushed past the beaded curtains and headed down the hall.

Stan and his friends practically fell out of the bathroom, laughing and climbing over each other in a rush to get into the hall. The tall boy pulled the bathroom door shut fast, as if they were afraid something would come out.

“Oh, what're you fellas doin'?” Fiddleford asked cautiously.

The two boys jumped like they'd been stuck with hot irons, but Stanley just grinned. “Relax, guys, it's just Fiddlenerd. 'Sup?”

“It's Fiddleford, he said, frowning slightly. Gordo guffawed, but Fidds ignored him.

Stan got to his feet. “Hey, you've met my brother, I know a nerd when I see one!” Stan said, grinning. Then he seemed to remember something and smacked himself. “Shoot! I forgot! Hey, Fidds, can you go check on Ford for me? I promised to spot him at the ticket booth.”

“Sure, but – Stanley, about the phone...”

“Great! C'mon, guys, race you down the stairs!”
He took off at a dead run. The other two followed and the taller boy promptly slipped and fell on his face. Fidds started forward to help him, but he was already up and shouting good-natured insults as he scrambled to catch up. They disappeared through the beaded curtain.

*Well. At least Stan looked like he was having fun.*

And who was he to ruin it? He could always talk to Stanley later; he’d just have to keep an ear and an eye open in case there was trouble before the party ended. He turned to head out to the ticket booth.

Suddenly a low, almost inaudible hum reached his ears. The hallway lit up with a bright, poisonous, horribly familiar green glow.

And it was coming from the office.

Well.

At least Stan looked like he was having fun.

He gulped. “Oh, no.”

He tore down the hallway and burst into the room, terrified that he would be too late. But Ford was standing in the middle of the room, staring at his printer with his back to the door.

“Oh thank heavens!” Fidds panted. “Ford, I hope you're not thinking of GAH!”

Another Ford stepped out from behind the first one. “Hi, Fiddleford! Meet Nikola Pines.”

The clone turned and waved. “Hi, Fiddleford!”

Fidds backed up against the wall, pointing at the clone with a shaking hand. “Th-th-th-th-”

Another Ford popped out from behind the printer. “What?” he asked.

“GAHHH!”

All three Fords put their hands on their hips. “Would you relax?” they chorused.

It was freaky – they were all exact copies of each other, right down to the six fingers on each hand. The only difference between any of them were their shirts – he guessed original Ford was the one who was wearing a (relatively) clean white shirt. The other two clones had numbers written on theirs in black sharpie: 2 and 3. The one Ford had introduced as Nikola was number 2.

“Fords, this is crazy!” Fidds protested, pushing himself bravely off the wall. “You can't go around making copies of yourselves!”

“Uh, yeah we can!” they said.

“This way I can handle the ticket booth and still get to dance with Seandra,” Ford explained.

Fidds frowned. “Don't you only need one clone for that?”

“Well, sure,” Ford shrugged. “But we figured –”

The other two smiled. “If one Ford is good, more must be better!”

“No, see – you're all, uh, you, which means you'll all want the same thing. You're going to end up fighting each other just like the clones in the movies!”

Ford and Nikola rolled their eyes.
“Look,” said 3, “it's like you said. We're all us. Which means if one of us gets something, it's just like we all get it. Plus, if we get Seandra to like us, we can all go on dates with her!”

“On a rotating schedule, of course,” Nikola put in.

“Of course,” Ford agreed. “Better add it to the list.”

All three of them pulled tiny pieces of paper out of their jackets – which unfolded three feet to the floor.

“What happens if you disagree about something?” Fidds persisted, starting to sweat. “What if you want something just for one of you?”

“Look, Fidds, if you're that worried, you can just stay here and make sure no one makes anymore copies,” Ford said.

“Besides, you shouldn't be worrying anyway!” Nikola added. “I mean, we're clones. You could always just disintegrate us with water!”

“Yeeeaah,” the three Fords chorused, leaning together and tapping their heads. “Yeeeaah!” they repeated, tapping each other's heads.

Fidds felt like yelling, “Nooooo!”

Evidently, Gordo and Roman only knew pranks involving spiders (Gordo had a whole pocket full of them). So Stan decided he'd have to teach them a thing or two about pulling pranks at parties.

They were sitting behind the refreshment table, gluing string to the bottom of a bunch of red cups. The cups would all be connected by string. They'd put the cups back on the table, right-side up, and fill them with punch. The idea was, when someone came by and picked up a cup, it would drag the other cups with it by the string, and dump punch on the poor, unsuspecting party-goer. Boom! Instant laughs!

“Perfect,” Stan said. “Okay, now we gotta let it dry.”

“We gotta wait?” Roman groaned. “That's gonna take forever.”

“We could use tape,” Gordo suggested.

Stanley grinned and jumped to his feet. “On it. BRB.” He ran around the table –

“GMPH!”

Stan fell on his butt, hard, holding his nose. He'd plowed straight into a kid wearing the most expensive-looking sweat suit Stan had ever seen. It looked like it was made of silk or something with the word VICTORY running up each pant leg.

The kid peered down with disgust, like Stan had just covered him with cat poop. “Watch it, loser.”

“You watch it,” Stan snarled, getting up and still holding his nose. Someone else stepped out from behind the rich kid.

Ugh. Should've known.
Preston Northwest wore a sharkskin-gray Italian suit and a hairstyle that cost a small fortune. He was flanked by two rich-kid cronies, Sweatpants and a guy who looked like he was running for Mobster of the Year, wearing a black silk suit with a dark red tie. He even had a fancy gold watch on each wrist. All three of them reeked of Eu de Disdain.

“Spencer,” Preston said, curling his lip.

“Pimple,” Stan shot back.

Roman and Gordo came up behind Stan, looking back and forth between the two groups. Roman poked his shoulder. “Stanley, how do you know –”

“Alright, doods and doodettes!” Ria's voice came over the speakers. “Now it's time for the Party Dance-Off! Whoever, um...'party-hearties', what?...gets the party crown!”

She held up a crown which had Mabel's craftsmanship written all over it. He knew it was spray painted gold cardboard, with gold puff paint making swirly designs around gaudy fake jewels. But in the half-light, it actually looked like a solid gold crown, glittering with rubies and garnets. He tried not to drool.

“Whoever gets the most applause at the end of the night wins!” Ria said.

Preston strode to the DJ table and leaned on it like he owned it, his posse taking up their posts two feet behind him. “I'll take that, you're welcome,” Preston said, waving a hand impatiently.

Ria frowned. “I can't just give you the crown. It's a competition thing. You have to win it against your competitors.”

“Please,” he scoffed, grabbing the mike. “Who's going to compete against me?” He pointed to Roman. “Noodle boy?” Then Gordo. “Or Dunkin' Donuts?” He laughed, and the worst part was his laugh actually sounded cool. It rippled through the room and made people nearby start smiling, too, without quite knowing why.

Stan's cheeks burned and his stomach boiled. He stepped forward. “You're on,” he growled.

Preston didn't even look ruffled. “As if. Now run along and play, Stuart. You haven't got what it takes to keep up with a dancer like me.”


Ria was back in her DJ zone, oblivious to the impending warfare. She lifted an arm in a gesture of grand invitation and hit the keyboard with her free hand. Music blasted out of the speakers. “Let the battle for the party crown begin!”

Ford surveyed the dance floor. It was packed with people, and a lot of them were gathered over by the DJ table, although Ford couldn't really see what was happening through the crowd. Ria must be a better DJ than he'd thought.

He gave the room another scan and saw Seandra's pony tail peeking over the dancers' heads. She was hanging out by the couch, a soda cup in her hand. He glanced at the window, saw Nikola manning the booth, and gave his clone a thumbs-up. (He'd left Clone #3 in the office to help Fidds guard the printer.) He made his way over to the sofa, his heart beating faster. He ran over the list in
his head, concentrating so his brain wouldn't freeze up or fry a synapse or something. *Step 1: Casual banter. Step 2: Wear a bowtie. Step 3: Say, “How's it going” –*

“Hi, Seandra,” Ford said too loudly. “How's it going?” Then he coughed to make it sound more natural.

“Oh, hey, Ford.” She turned. Her brown eyes shone with excitement and her lip gloss shimmered, making her plush lips look like rose gold.

“Great rose,” he said, “I mean – great news, I got someone to cover the concessions for me!”

She grinned. “That's awesome! You can hang out with me and Aaron.”

The music seemed to screech to a halt. Aaron stood on the other side of Seandra, a motorcycle helmet tucked under one arm, swinging a set of Moped keys around his finger. He wore those stupid sports jerseys they always give MVP Varsity Players in high school, which made his shoulders look even bigger and stupider, and his hair and teeth were so perfect he could've stepped out of a Colgate commercial.

Aaron narrowed his eyes at Ford.

Seandra put a hand on Ford's shoulder and it tingled where she touched him. “Aaron, you remember Ford from the convenience store.”

“Oh, no,” Aaron said flatly. “Hey, Seandra, check out my new camera.” He pulled a mini-cam out of his jacket pocket and flicked the screen open with his thumb. “Custom-made. Has a shutter speed of 1/145 and shoots 11 megapixels and a high-quality screen that zooms like a dream.”

She bent for a closer look. “Whoa, cool. That's so perfect for a news reporter!”

“I know, right? You can borrow it sometime, if you want.”

Ford's brain froze up. A vision filled his mind:

*The parlor, bathed in a pearly white glow, with Ria standing in the corner, playing the French horn. Aaron led Seandra around the dance floor, dressed sharply in a black tux, as Seandra leaned against his chest. She sighed. “Oh, Aaron, you're a stupid arrogant fraud! But kiss me anyway because you have the world's most unattainable camera. Oh, wait, I forgot something.” She stepped away from Aaron and went up to Ford, who had been standing nearby, watching them dance. She punched him in the gut and he keeled over, groaning. Then she ran back to Aaron, shouting, “Let's get married tonight!”*

Ford's cellphone rang, jerking him out of his thoughts. He answered it.

“Hey buddy, it's me, you,” said his voice. Nikola was peering through the window, giving Aaron a death glare. “I just had the same jealousy fantasy.”

Ford stepped away, holding the phone close to his mouth. “We gotta get rid of Aaron if I ever wanna dance with Seandra!” he whispered urgently.

“Hey Ford!” Seandra called. “We're gonna go sit on the couch. Meet us when you're done.”

He gave her a thumbs up, then said, “Oh no – they're sitting on the couch!”

He looked around and something caught his eye: Aaron had left his moped keys on the stairs while
he showed off his camera.

“I got an idea!”

“I got the same one,” Nikola said. “But we're gonna need some help.”

Ford and Nikola ran back to the office. Clone #3 was sitting on the printer, casually picking his teeth with a pen.

“Where's Fiddleford?” Ford asked.

Clone #3 shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Well get off the printer, we've got work to do!”

He quickly explained the plan.

The clone hopped off, looking worried. “Sure, but what if Aaron catches me? I'll be all alone!”

“That's a good point,” Nikola said. “I've gotta stay behind and handle the ticket booth.”

“Why are there even people coming at this hour!?” Ford demanded rhetorically. “Alright, step aside.” He climbed up on the printer, lay down on the glass and pressed the button, while his clones sat on the desk and watched. The machine overheated and paper got stuck. Ford flipped onto his stomach, frowning.

“It ran just fine before,” he grumbled.

“It's a printer. They all do that,” said #3.

Nikola hopped off the desk. “I got it, hang on...”

He pulled out the paper and laid it on the floor. It was wrinkly and crumbled, but it quivered as the copy of Ford came to life –

“NAH NAH NAH NAH! NAAAAAH!”

The copy was a horribly mutilated version of himself, with some parts squished too thin and other parts wrinkled up. It looked like someone had cut out a picture of Ford and then folded it a bunch of times. It screeched in a weirdly high-pitched voice that sounded nothing at all like Ford. Its colors were all wrong, too – its pants were too pale, parts of its jacket were too dark, and its eyes...something was definitely wrong about the eyes. They were yellow and almost cat-like. It squealed and screeched and tried to climb over Nikola like he was a jungle gym.

“C'mon, you're not gonna make me partner up with him,” Clone #3 protested.

*Nikola frowned at him. “Sh, don't be rude!” He turned back to Folded Ford. “Hey buddy, hey. It's okay.”*


*Ford grimaced. “Alright, just one more clone.”*
some serious moves, but thankfully nothing that resembled a seizure). Then came the karaoke contest, which they'd somehow managed to turn into a rap battle.

Unfortunately, Preston wasn't as bad at it as Stan had hoped.

You try to step into my mansion  
Like a million-dollar stud,  
But my crew and I we blanchin'  
'Cuz we got the bluest blood.  
I'm the top of the pyramid,  
I make the rules in here period,  
So genuflect before your king  
Before I start to get serious!

The crowd whistled and clapped, but Stan shoved his way into the spotlight and held up his arm, the mike pressed to his mouth.

Kings were born to the throne,  
I smell that Eu de Cologne,  
Like being born gives you the right  
To all that money you own?  
I'll tell you what gets respect,  
What makes people genuflect,  
Is when you work to earn the ice  
That you wear on your neck.  
I got them beggin' for mercy,  
Cuz I get down an' dirty,  
Work is what makes a king  
And I'm the King of New Jersey!

He dropped the mike, his face flushed with victory. The crowd was literally screaming and stomping their feet, and to top it off, Preston's face looked redder than...well, something really red. His brain was kind of fried at the moment.

He hopped down from the stage. Roman and Gordo pounded him on the back.

“Dude, you were awesome!” Roman shouted over the noise.

Ria announced a short break in the contest so that the contestants could get some rest, and also that somebody's moped had gotten stolen. (Dan and another guy ran out the door.)

That gave Roman an idea. “You know what? I bet we should make a special prize of our own for ol’ Prissy Pants.”

Gordo grinned. “Yeah! Something that...suits his style? Whaddaya think, Stan-the-Man?”

Stanley wasn't paying much attention. The music had changed, and everybody was slow-dancing.
He sort of missed getting to hang out with Carla, but he was still flush with imminent victory. He liked being in the middle of a crowd of people who all knew his name and even maybe liked him. Then he spotted Ford over by the sofa, talking to Seandra. “You guys go ahead,” he told them. “I'll catch up in a minute.”

He threaded through the dancers and crept up behind Ford. Then he licked his finger and ran it up Ford's neck.

“YIE!” Ford shrieked, jumping a solid foot in the air. Stan burst out laughing.

“Dang it, Stanley, I hate when you do that!” Ford stage-whispered. He re-adjusted his glasses and glanced nervously at Seandra, who was sitting with her eyes closed, swaying to the beat.

Stanley grinned. He was gonna have his victory. Why shouldn't Ford have one, too? “Go on, bro!” he said. “Now's the perfect time to –”

“SHHH!” Ford clapped a hand over his mouth and quickly walked Stan several feet away.

Stan batted Ford's arm away. “Now's the perfect time to ask Seandra to dance. Just walk up to her and do it!”

“But –”


Ford glanced back at him, worry written all over his face. He took one step toward Seandra, then another, and another, and...

“I'll be right back!” he shouted, running straight past Stan, up the stairs and out of the room.

Stan shrugged, eyeing Seandra. He felt so good right now that he was definitely hot enough to give him a studly rep. But any girl Ford liked was off-limits.

He made a mental note to block Aaron if he got anywhere close, then went to go find his friends.

Ford paced the office in tight circles, his hands behind his back. Nikola paced in the opposite direction, his hands also clasped behind his back.

“Oh, I agree, you can't just go and dance with her,” Nikola said.

“The dance floor is a minefield. A minefield, Nikola!”

“What if there's a glitch in the sound system?”

“Grauntie Mabel might get in the way.”

“Aaron might come back!”

Ford stopped and threw up his hands. “There's too many variables! We need help.”

Moments later Ford was lying on the copy machine, as it printed out Ford after Ford. #5 had found a roll of butcher paper which they cut up to make a long and detailed Seandra Plan. They knew Mabel could come into her office at any time, so they moved their enterprise to the attic bedroom,
going in groups of twos and threes, each of them laden with paper, pencils, pens, and a few stickers to bullet-point the really important steps. One Ford had even found an easel which they carried upstairs to make a detailed and informative diagram of the parlor, including a little legend in the corner for which areas were “Seandra-Friendly” and the best places to block an “Aaron Intrusion” in the event that part of their plan had failed.

Ford was excited to see how well they could all work together – he’d say something and #6 would be thinking the exact same thing, or #8 would come up with an idea so brilliant only a Ford could’ve thought of it. It was like being in the middle of the world’s most agreeable Think Tank. Pretty soon the List stretched from one end to the other and they had to cut it in half so they could get to it more easily, but it was the most perfectly formulated, well-thought-out plan Ford had ever conceived.

At last he tapped a pen against the old camping lantern they used for a light. The other Fords looked up, grinning.

“Alright, guys, now's the time,” Ford announced. “You all clear on what to do?”

They nodded.

#10 headed straight for Ria, magazine in hand. “Hey, Ria! I found a hundred-page quiz to test your datability!”

(They’d found it in Mabel’s filing cabinet under a drawer marked DO NOT OPEN, and they’d edited it and covered with with glittery pink paper.)

Ria looked at it and gasped. “Oh my, I am so glad you showed me this. Nothing distracts me more than hundred-page quizzes.” She took it, sat down behind the keyboard, and immediately began filling it out.

#10 walked around the table and popped in their homemade Seandra Mix, which contained all of Seandra’s top-rated songs that they’d found after hacking her computer. #10 gave a thumbs-up to #7, who was sitting on a roof beam next to a spotlight. He put a filter over the spotlight so it shone with magenta light, Seandra’s favorite color. #7 gave a thumbs-up to #5, who pulled down the window shades in case Grauntie Mabel looked up and saw that they weren’t working. #5 gave a thumbs-up to #8, who was also sitting on a roof beam, placed directly over the refreshment table with a fishing line in his hand. The hook was baited with a Timmy the Teacup Pig calendar, which he lowered carefully just as Grauntie Mabel was filling her plate with marshmallow salad.

The motion caught her eye and she looked up. She snorted. “Hah. Floating pig-themed calendars. I really need to lay off the Mabeljuice,” she said, and kept filling her plate. Suddenly she jumped for the calendar so hard she face-planted into the wall behind it. #8 pulled the calendar away and she chased after it, her fez crumpled, glasses askew, screaming “GIMME THAT PIG ON PAIN OF DEATH!”

Grauntie Mabel ran right past #6, who had been standing by waiting for just that moment. He pulled a cord, which activated a rope-and-pulley system that wound out of the parlor and up to the attic bedroom.

Ford and Nikola had been standing in front of the mirror, making sure Ford’s bowtie was absolutely straight. The pulley system rang a small bell and they both looked up.

“There’s your cue!” Nikola said. He put his hands on Ford’s shoulders and walked him to the door. “It’s the perfect moment to ask Seandra to dance. Good luck, me!”
“I don’t need luck,” Ford said, smiling. “I have a plan.” He patted his jacket pocket and headed out the door.

This was perfect! Everything was going exactly according to plan. The other Fords would make absolutely sure that everything stayed just the way Ford needed it, and he’d memorized all the best ways to ask a girl to dance, and if he just stuck to the plan, the evening would end so perfectly he might even end up kissing –

“GAH!”

Seandra looked up. “Oh, hey Ford,” she said, waving casually at him with two fingers, a drink cup in her hand.

“What’re you doing here?” Ford asked, trying not to sweat. “Wouldn’t you rather be out on the dance floor? In like, uh, exactly forty-two seconds?”

“I’m just waiting for the bathroom.” She gestured to her jacket, which was stained a bright red. “Picked up a cup of punch and somehow dumped six cups on my jacket.”

“That’s fine, that’s totally fine!” Ford babbled. He turned and pulled out his list, scanning it quickly. “Small talk,” he muttered under his breath, like an incantation to find it faster. “Small talk, small talk...”

Seandra was smiling down the hall at the party, where people were still dancing like the night would never end. “Man, this is just like Dusk 2 Dawn. Wouldn’t it be crazy if we had ghosts at this party, too? What d’you think they’d get for refreshments – ecto-popsicles?”

“Uh...” Ford looked at his list, which, sadly, had nothing about desserts for the dead. He stuffed it back in his jacket. “Maybe...ghost graham crackers?”

“Or Spirits!”

“Haunted hot dogs!”

“Oh, man!” Seandra laughed along with Ford. “I gotta say, that store was pretty crazy, but it definitely got me interested in the paranormal.”

“Oh yeah?”

“For sure. I mean, the whole reason I liked digging up conspiracies was for the excitement, the challenge of it. But that ghosty stuff?” She gestured with her hands, like, Mind blown! “I’ve never seen anything that crazy. And you just ran in there like you knew what you were doing. It was nuts!”

Ford grinned. “Yeah, I’ve been researching the paranormal for years. My brother says it’s because I’m an anomaly myself –” He froze.

“Oh yeah?” She looked at him curiously. “What, you can curl your tongue into a taco, or something?”

“No, I...” He stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“Oh, come on! I’m dying of curiosity here!” She started pumping her arms, chanting, “Show me, show me, show me!”

He took a deep breath and held out his hands.
For a minute she just stared at them, puzzled. Then her eyes got wide and he could see her counting his fingers. His stomach rolled.

“Wow, I can't believe I never noticed that!”

He grinned awkwardly. “Yeah, it’s, uh, it’s called polydactyly.”

She was digging in her jacket pocket. She pulled out her wallet and slipped something from one of the slots. “Bet I got that beat...check this out!”

She held it up. It looked like a cutout from an old newspaper, showing a gangly girl in braces and a long maroon cloak outside the Gravity Falls library. The girl had somehow managed to climb to the roof. It looked like she was shouting through a megaphone.

“When I was younger I thought there was an actual cult in Gravity Falls, and I even found a moldy old cloak outside the elementary school. Made quite a spectacle of myself challenging the cultists to come out of hiding.”

Ford snorted with laughter. “Oh man, I can't believe you scaled a building.”

She chuckled and put it back. “You're telling me. So hey, guess we're both a little freaky.” She held up her cup.

Ford picked up a cup off the floor and toasted her – which he thought was maybe a little gross in retrospect, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Suddenly the bathroom door opened. A rich-looking kid in a gray suit stormed out and Seandra stepped to the door. “Wait for me?” she asked.

“Of course!”

He leaned back against the wall. That was so cool! He'd just had his first-ever conversation with a girl. And he'd made her laugh! Remembering that bell-like giggle made his brain feel full of fizzy bubbles. He couldn't wait to tell Stanley about it –

“Hey!”

He turned. The whole group of clones was marching down the hall, Nikola in the lead.

“What're you doing down here?” Nikola demanded. “#10 has been distracting Ria for fifteen minutes, but she’s gonna get done with that quiz eventually!”

A voice from afar called out, “Never!”

Ford grinned. “You won't believe it, guys – I bumped into Seandra accidentally and things are actually going okay! I even made her laugh!”

“That's nice. But not the plan.” Nikola pulled the Seandra Plan out of his jacket. “Do we have to remind you?”

The other Ford clones followed suit, pulling out their lists and muttering to themselves.

“No, I definitely remember we had six steps before we made her laugh –”

“That's sixteen, we were supposed to banter with her first –”
“— didn’t even write any jokes down —”

“Extrapolation from past experiences indicate that deviation from the list will end in failure —”

“Oh, man, you guys sound crazy,” Ford said, cutting through the chatter. “Look, maybe we don’t need to overthink it so much, you know? Maybe I could just go talk to Seandra like a normal person.”

The Fords gasped.

“You bite your tongue!” #7 said, jabbing a finger at Ford.

#5 narrowed his eyes. “If you're not going to follow the plan, then maybe you shouldn't be the Ford to dance with Seandra.”

The other clones began nodding, and several of them murmured that #5 had a point. Ford folded his arms impatiently.

“Guys, come on. We said we weren't going to turn on each other.”

Nikola looked him straight in the eye. “I think we all knew we were lying.”

The other clones immediately surrounded Ford, and before he could register what was happening they pushed him down and pinned him to the floor, both hands behind his back. He shouted and kicked at them, but they grabbed his ankles. They dragged him down the hall, still yelling, leaving claw marks in the floor as they pulled him away.

Getting dragged up the stairs was not a fun experience. Ford managed to kick two of them down the stairs, but after that one of them took off his jacket and they literally hog-tied him until they could get him back to the bedroom. Then they opened the closet and shoved him inside.

He landed with a thud, his chin banging into a small locked hope chest. He scrambled to his knees and turned. The clones, Nikola still in the lead, stood silhouetted against the light.

“Fords, wait —” he started, but they slammed the door shut. He threw himself against it and yelped when his shoulder became one massive bruise. “Guys! I can't breathe in here!”

“Yes, you can!” one shouted back. “Plus there's snacks and a coloring book in there for you!”

Ford looked. There was indeed a coloring book and one of those cheese and crackers snacks he loved. He growled in frustration. If those Fords were him, they’d know Stan liked the ones with crackers and he liked the ones with pretzels! He must’ve really ticked them off.

He pressed his ear to the door. He could hear them trying to work out which clone would dance with Seandra, but it was hard to hear over the sniffling noises because the clones weren’t talking very loud.

Wait. Sniffling noises?

Ford turned and peered into the recesses of the closet. His jaw dropped.

“Fiddleford?”

His friend was huddled in the corner next to jars of jellied animal guts, knees to his chest, head down, with his hands clamped in his hair like he was going to rip it out. Ford hurried over to him.
“Fiddleford, what are you doing in here?”

“Get away!” Fidds shrieked. He lashed out and clipped Ford in the jaw, knocking him backwards.

“Oh! Fiddleford, it's me! It's just me!”

Fidds looked up, his cheeks tracked with tears. He sniffed. “Ford?”

“The one and – well, the original one, anyway.” Ford scooted closer, cautiously, and put a hand on Fidds' back. “What on earth happened?”

“I...I tried to dismantle the printer. I didn't know how it worked, but I just knew this would turn out badly. And the other you, when he saw what I was doing – he –” Fidds broke off, sobbing into his knobby knees.

Ford was afraid to hear more. Fiddleford was really shaken up. How could a clone of his do this to anyone? The clone was supposed to be Ford, or Ford was the clone, but Ford knew he'd never hurt anyone this way. Especially Fidds! He was the only other kid Ford knew who dreamed being a scientist like him. What in Newton's name would possess his clone to attack him?

Ford set his jaw. “Well, we're gonna get you out of here. C'mon, I've got a plan.”

It took exactly four seconds for Ford to unlock the door, courtesy of Stan's lessons on lock-picking. Fiddleford was still sniffling and gasping a little, but luckily the clone mob was focused on feeding Foldord a snack (oh, sure, he got the pretzels).

They hurried out the door to the room across the attic and out the red-paneled window. It was the same path he'd taken when escaping Wax Sherlock Holmes.

“We're going out to the roof?” Fidds whispered, his eyes still swimming with tears. “Is – is that safe?”

“It's fine, c'mon!”

He pulled his friend carefully over the roof tiles, catching each other when they slipped on a wet grassy spot. They edged along the Mystery Shack sign and over to ledge where Seandra had stored an ice cooler. Ford got out a soda and sat Fidds down on top of the cooler.

“Here,” he said, handing him the Cola. “Sit, drink, and wait. I'll be back as soon as I take care of this.”

“You're not thinking of going in there alone!” Fidds said, grabbing his sleeve. “Those things are crazy and there are ten of them!”

“I made this mistake myself, so I'll take care of it the same way.”

“At least get Stanley to help you!”

Ford hesitated, then nodded, and Fidds let go looking worried but calmer. Ford scrambled over the roof. He wasn't so much worried about getting to Stan as getting to Seandra. If those Fords were really him, then maybe they wouldn't do anything to her except maybe try to dance with her. But after what they did to Fidds...well, he couldn't be too sure.

He slipped back into the house and closed the window quietly behind him, wiping off the fresh smudge marks so the clones wouldn't know where they'd gone. He checked both ways, but the attic
hall was empty, so he crept down the stairs as quietly as he could. He estimated that he'd used exactly 61.8 seconds to hide Fiddleford, which meant the other Fords were bound to have realized they'd escaped by now, but the house looked perfectly still. He crept down the hallway to the parlor.

He made it all the way to the balcony. He quickly scanned the ballroom. The dance floor had thinned as the evening got later, so he could see pretty much everyone at once. He didn't see any Fords, but Seandra was standing just a few yards away, glancing from side to side like she was looking for him. She was Fordless – and safe!

He smiled and raised his arm. “SEAN-mph!”

Nikola dragged him away and threw him into the hallway, where he was immediately surrounded by his fellow clones. Ford stumbled but kept his footing, glancing around for a way out.

Nikola noticed and frowned at him. “Give it up, man. You're overpowered!”

Ford backed up, hands raised in surrender. “Hold on, guys – think about it,” he said quickly. “We're exact equals, mentally and physically. If we start fighting, it'll just go on for infinity!”

The clones hesitated.

“Well, yeah, that is true,” one of them admitted.

“Maybe we should just give up?”

“You mean he should give up.”

“None of us would probably be able to outfight ourselves anyw–”

BAM.

Ford froze, his fist in the air, Nikola on the floor. Stan always said the winner threw the first punch, but now that he'd actually hit someone, he didn't know what to do next.

#4 solved that problem. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled “CLONE FIGHT!!”

Immediately the scene degenerated into chaos. Clones grabbed each other without bothering to check if they had the right Ford, punching, kicking, and twisting the skin on each other's arms. Ford went down when someone kicked the back of his knee. Another clone immediately stepped on his back and he rolled over, accidentally tripping another clone who went flying and ate floor. He covered his head and held onto his glasses. Two clones had grabbed a third and a fourth was hitting the captive's stomach, with his shirt all wrinkled up so his number was hidden. It gave Ford an idea and he quickly got out his Seandra Plan and shredded a piece of it off.

A few quick touches with the Sharpie from his notebook and his camouflage was adequate – he started to belly-crawl out of the fight and then tried to walk casually down the hall.

“HEY! Classic Ford's getting away!” #10 shouted.

Ford turned, trying very hard to smile naturally. His shirt had a large “7” written on it, and the tape holding it there was hidden by his jacket. “No, friends,” he said. “It's me, number seven!”

The clones looked at #7, who was pinned on the floor under another clone. “That's not me, guys,” he said. “That's not me!”

The “7” peeled off and fluttered to the floor.
#9 snarled. “GET HIM!”

The clones jogged toward him, fists clenched, jaws set, clone-murder burning in their eyes. Ford was literally backed into a corner. “Stay back – stay back!” Ford shouted. He pulled the forgotten party-popper out of his jacket, aimed it at the clones in desperation and pulled the string.

It popped. Yellow confetti drifted through the air in front of them. Nothing else happened.

The Fords all stared at it. “Well that was anti-climactic,” one said.

The clones looked back at Ford, bared their teeth, and –

DIIIIIIIIING!

The fire sprinklers went off, spraying the room with chemically treated water. The clones immediately started melting, booing and cat-calling the water. Foldord also melted, babbling and spitting, until there was nothing left of the clone army but a pile of fizzy pink ooze.

Ford breathed a sigh of relief.

Then a familiar voice behind him shouted, “YOU!”

Stan was practically wiping the floor with Preston, busting out moves he didn't even know he had. People had gathered around them in a circle like they were watching a gladiator fight.

Ria flicked on her microphone. “Alright, party animals! One more dance and then it's time to announce tonight's winner! It's gonna be the –” An explosion sound filled the room.

Stan wiped off his face – he was sweating pretty hard, but Preston looked practically laundry-pressed.

“Why isn't he sweating?” Stan muttered, as Gordo and Roman walked up to him. “Did he like, Shellac his skin or something?”

Roman was staring at Stan with a mix of awe and envy. “Dude, you might actually almost win.”

“Hardly.”

The Pimple himself came up to Stan and looked him up and down, as if measuring Stan for a coffin. “Northwests don't lose. Enjoy your fifteen seconds of fame while they last, Scotty.” He walked away laughing.

Stanley watched him go. “Hey, Gordo. You got any more of those rubber spiders?”

Ford and Nikola crept onto the roof. They made enough noise so that they wouldn't startle Fiddleford, who was sitting on the ice box, unopened soda in his hand, watching the sky. He turned, saw them and jumped to his feet like he'd been zapped with lightning.

Instantly, both Fords froze and held up their hands.

“Easy, Fidds, he's alright,” Ford said. “We...we talked it out down in the ballroom just now. We came up to talk to you.”
“Yeah, um...can I come over?” Nikola asked, his voice small.

Fidds looked back and forth between them. They were still standing on the slanted part of the roof a few feet away, hands raised, carefully not moving.

“Y-yeah,” he said finally. “J-just don’t...slip or something...”

The Fords got to the edge of the ledge and stood their with their hands behind their backs and their heads hung low, like they were waiting for punishment. Ford was having a hard time looking Fiddleford in the eye. What a mess he'd made...and his clone had scared Fiddleford something awful. Even though Ford had promised that everything would be okay.

He swallowed hard. “Look, Fiddleford, I'm...I'm sorry I didn't listen to you about the printer,” he managed.

“Yeah, and I'm sorry #3 scared you so badly,” Nikola added. If anything, he looked even more miserable than Ford.

Fiddleford hugged himself like he was cold, his shoulders still tense. For a minute no one said anything.

“Okay,” he said finally.

Ford looked up. “Okay?”

Fiddleford nodded. He still looked pretty pale, but he smiled at them. “Yeah. I mean, you said you were sorry. And maybe we can get rid of the printer, or at least sabotage it so it doesn't cause any more trouble.”

Ford wanted to protest, but after the night they'd just had, he had to admit it was the most logical course of action. “Yeah,” he said, “that's probably best.”

Fidds grabbed a couple of sodas for the Fords (“None for me, thanks,” said Nikola) and they sat on the edge of the ledge together, watching the night sky. A shooting star streaked across the sky. The three of them sighed in perfect sync, looked at each other, and laughed.

“Man,” Fidds said, “this has got to be my craziest day of my life.”

“Same,” said Nikola. “And I'm only a day old, myself.”

Ford sighed. “I can't believe it. All that work and I still didn't get to dance with Seandra.”

“At least you got to talk to her,” Nikola said. “Didn't you say you made her laugh?”

“Whoa, whoa!” Fidds leaned forward, smiling at Ford. “When was this? You got to talk to that girl you like?”

Ford grinned. “Yeah. It was awesome. We just bumped into each other in the hallway as she was waiting for the bathroom. And she didn't think my hands were weird and we talked about ghost snacks and I made her laugh...” His eyes went dreamy.

Nikola nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah...and it was the only time you didn't do any of that list stuff.”

“Wow. Stanley was right, I do overthink things.”

Fidds raised an eyebrow. “It wasn't just Stanley, y'know.”
The Fords grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, Fidds,” they said together, and the three of them laughed again.

Nikola sighed and stood up.

“Where you off to?” Fidds asked.

“I'm gonna go find #3 and #4,” he said. “They went into the forest with Aaron's bike, and they aren't going to come back until we give the signal. I figure the best thing to do is have them stay in the forest – and for me to go live with them.”

“You can't do that, it's dangerous out there!” Fidds protested.

Nikola smiled. “Yeah. But it's probably not a good idea to have an extra Ford running around. And you were right, Fidds. Us clones, we all want the same thing Ford wants – but only one of us can have it.”

“But what about your family?”

Nikola looked at Ford. The same thought seemed to pass over their faces like a dark cloud. Ford frowned. “But...Stanley –”

“Is your brother. But hey, we'll probably run into each other now and then. It's not good-bye. Just see you later.” He smiled and headed away, climbing over the roof.

The Ford and Fidds looked after him, feeling a little lost.

“Well,” Fidds said slowly. “That was –”

Nikola's head popped up over the roof. “By the way, hope you don't mind if I raid our stuff for some supplies. You can always buy more pens and toilet paper, right? Cool! See ya!” He disappeared.

“Annoying,” Ford finished.

Fidds laughed, and Ford joined him. Nikola was right. There's only one of us...but I sure hope he and the others find a Fiddleford, too.

Preston won, of course.

Gordo and Roman clapped hard for Stanley, squinting around like Hey, you better clap for my friend up there, buddy. D'Andre and Reggie clapped for him, too, and even Grauntie Mabel popped out of the crowd, waving a pig calendar like a pom-pom and cheering exuberantly. (He wondered briefly where the calendar came from, but reminded himself it was Grauntie Mabel, so it was practically normal.)

Unfortunately, all Preston had to do was glare at the crowd, and people clapped for him, too, like they were scared. Plus his two cronies shed bribes like cat hair.

Stanley kept his face perfectly straight as Ria lowered the crown onto Preston's head. Preston stepped to to the front of the stage and raised his arms.

“Thank you, Josephina,” he said to Ria. “Thank you everyone! There will be an after–”
With perfect timing, tiny rock from Roman’s sling shot pinged the tip of Preston’s crown right as Preston opened his mouth. A rain of hairy black spiders poured from the crown and covered his face.

Preston screamed.

Stan held up Gordo’s phone and snapped a picture. “See ya, sucker!” he said, jumping off the stage and racing for the door, his partners-in-crime right behind him.

“SPIDERS! SPIDERS IN MY HAIR!” Preston shrieked.

“It is okay, the are just rubber!” he heard Ria say. Then she gave a little scream as she discovered one of the actual spiders they’d put in with the fake ones. He made a mental note to apologize.

They made it outside, but he could practically feel Grauntie Mabel’s red-hot fury even from there. He was pretty sure she wouldn’t do anything super-bad, but it was definitely time to lay low.


“You sure?” Gordo asked.

On cue, Mabel’s voice growled, “STAAAANLLEEEEEEY!” The sound echoed ominously around the clearing.

Gord and Roman looked at each other.

“See ya, dude!”

The two of them took off, Gordo’s fat legs waddling as fast as he could. Stanley raced around the Shack, slipping slightly on the dewy grass, and used the trash can to jump and grab the rain gutter. He hauled himself up with the strength of a 12-year-old in seriously deep caca.

“STANLEY PINES YOU GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW AND APOLOGIZE!” Mabel shouted, over the sound of Preston threatening to sue.

“Maybe I’d better spend the night up here,” he muttered, climbing higher up the roof.

He figured there’d be a good place to hide behind the “Shack” sign, so he climbed up to it. That's when he heard the voices.

He poked his head over the peak of the roof.

Ford and Fiddlenerd were sitting on the ledge, leaning against an icebox, talking and pointing at the sky.

“Hey nerds, what up?” Stan asked, sliding down the roof tiles like a surfer.

Ford turned. “Stanley! What're you doing up here?”

He plopped down next to him. “Hiding from the Grauntie. Long story. You might need to bring me some food and, like, cable, 'cuz it could be awhile.”

“Cable?” Fiddleford repeated incredulously. “Cheeze and crackers, Stanley, what did you do?”

“Plausible deniability!” Stan chirped.
Ford rolled his eyes. “That's what he says when it's really, really bad and he wants to keep us out of trouble by not knowing about it,” he explained.

Fiddleford gave a spurry little laugh. “That is both mighty thoughtful and deeply disturbing.”

“Hey wait – what about Seandra?” Stan asked suddenly. “Did you get to dance with her?”

Ford and Fiddleford answered in perfect sync: “Plausible deniability.”

The three of them looked at each other and laughed.

With the party – and their Grauntie – still raging downstairs, they decided to wait out the evening on the roof. Ford broke out another round of Pit Colas (Diet Pit, for Fiddleford), and they passed the time teaching Stanley the names and histories of the constellations. After a while Stanley started making up his own. The Spider of Satisfying Revenge was his favorite.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS I STUFFED FIDDLEFORD IN THE CLOSET I'M NOT SORRY

...i am a little sorry BUT NOT SORRY ENOUGH!!!

Short comes out tomorrow!
Later, the same night as the party, Stanley takes a little walk to town.

“Psst! PSSSST! Hey! Carla! Hey, Carla, heeeey!”

The back window opened and Carla peaked out. “Stanley? What're you doing out here?”

He grinned. “Finally! I had to check like, twelve houses before I found this one. I thought that one old guy was gonna stab me with his walker.”

Carla leaned on the window sill, grinning at him. There was a small rosebush under the window that framed her like a picture in a book. “You adorable nutbar,” she said with a giggle. “Don't you have a party to go to?”

“Oh, sure, no, it was fun. I brought you this.” He held up a plastic red cup. She took it and peered down at it.

“Yay...an empty cup.”

Stan looked at it in dismay. “Aw, dang it. I swear it was full of punch a minute ago.”

“Maybe climbing the fence had something to do with it,” she said, pointing at the picket fence that surrounded the back yard. One of the slats was stained Kool-Aid pink in the moonlight.

“Um, oops.”

“Did you actually come all this way just to bring me punch?”

Stanley grinned widely and puffed out his chest. “It's okay, you can say it. I'm the most totally kissable boyfriend ever.”

She laughed. “You're the ‘most totally’, alright. I am so keeping this cup. Now get out of here,” she said, reaching out to give him a light shove. “If Trevor's parents get home and see you I'll be in serious trouble!”

“Doesn't that make this more exciting?”

“You are such a dork,” she said, grinning as she pulled back and closed the window. When he stayed put, wiggling his eyebrows up and down and grinning at her, she stuck out her tongue and closed the blinds.

He climbed back over the fence and strolled down the street. So what if Mabel grounded him for a hundred years? He'd embarrassed Preston and romanced his girlfriend all in the same night.

He headed back for the Shack, whistling.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one's so short, guys! I didn't think there was anything more to add to this. (Next week's short will be longer.) Hope you enjoyed the Starla fluff!
Grauntie Mabel was driving the pick-up today. There was a bunch of stuff in the bed of the truck, all covered with a tarp and strapped down with fraying rope. She’d stuffed Ford and Stan into the back seat and headed to town.

Ford got up on his knees and twisted around, peering suspiciously at the canvas. “Uh, Grauntie Mabel? What’s under the tarp?” If this was anything like that gumball fiasco...

Grauntie Mabel glanced back at him and grinned. “It’s only the best surprise in the history of the town!”

That was not reassuring.

Stanley had had similar concerns, but she’d pacified him with a bag full of a local specialty: toffee peanuts. They’d somehow never discovered these before and Stan was currently stuffing them into his mouth at an alarming rate.

“You might wanna slow down there, Stan,” Ford said.

Stan looked up at him, an expression of pure bliss in his eyes. “Mff mm mmpnfmm,” he said, spewing caramelized sugar bits.

“Riiight.”

Ford jerked sideways as the car hit a pothole. When he grabbed the car door to lift himself back up, he came face-to-face with a cow.

“YAH!” he jerked back and knocked into Stanley. The two of them looked around. Everywhere they looked, they saw covered wagons pulled by shaggy mules, women in calico dresses, and small flocks of rabid geese chasing dogs and tiny children through the streets.

Stan swallowed his candy. “Did we just time travel?” he asked wonderingly.

“Even better!”

Grauntie Mabel hit the brakes, put the car in park and leaped out the door. She ran to the side of the truck, followed by the twins, and gave one of the fraying cords a yank. The ropes came undone and the canvas inflated like a loaf of bread rising in an oven. In mere seconds, the truck had morphed into a covered wagon, complete with wooden wheels that latched over the wheels of the truck. The bed of the wagon was loaded with old-timey supplies, including several wooden barrels, sacks of sugar and flour, a small clay oven, and a huge amount of undyed yarn.

“Um,” Ford said.

Stan nodded. “Uh.”

Grauntie Mabel grinned and spread her hands, like she herself had given the town an old-fashioned makeover. “Welcome,” she announced, “to Pioneer day!”

A passing mule promptly stole Stan’s peanuts.
It almost looked like they really had traveled back in time. Every building in sight had a “Ye Olde” banner strung over it, and several of them even had fake wooden fronts, so that the street looked like it had been lifted from a textbook on the Gold Rush. A stage had been set up at the end of the street, made of dark, polished wood decorated with colorful old-timey party banners. Even the people looked like they’d been pulled straight from the 1800s: there were kids with raccoon hats and high-waisted pants, women in pastel-colored bonnets, and several men old-style tuxedos, including Make-Pizza-Not-War Guy, who had also donned a top hat and a fake beard. The whole town even looked sepia-colored, like an old photograph –

“Dirty glass, we got dirty glass.” Two men walked past them, holding a huge sheet of glass stained light brown with dirt.

“Well this is disconcerting,” Ford said.

Grauntie Mabel was actually wiggling with excitement. “It's Pioneer Day!” she squealed. “Every year this town goes all-out to celebrate the day Gravity Falls was founded!”

Thompson Gables walked by, decked out in authentic cowboy clothing – the shirt, the wide-brimmed Stetson hat, the jeans worn so long they had acquired a brownish sheen. Even the spurred leather boots caked with actual horse pie. “Welcome to 1863!” he called.


“But he's in costume!” Ford objected. “Without the turkey baster!”

Mabel grinned. “He's a cosplay nut.”

Ford looked puzzled. “Is that like from Brazil, or...?”

“Forget that, I want a cowboy costume!” Stan shouted. “Gotcha covered!” She ran around to the covered wagon and started pulling out hats, ponchos, eyepatches, suspenders, and size-eight cowboy boots. She dumped it on their heads and they went down under the sheer volume of it. “Getcher gear on right! No nephews of mine are paradin’ around like a coupla high-fallutin city-slickers!”

By the time their heads popped up, Grauntie Mabel had somehow decked herself out in a wide-hipped calico dress with a matching bonnet and a live chicken tucked under one arm.

“Leave the extra stuff in the wagon,” she told them. “It's part of the Pioneer Day Parade, and they'll make great props. And now – TO VICTORY, TINY CHICKEN!”

She raised the chicken high above her head and went zooming down the street at high speed.

“Is it just me,” Ford said, “or does she challenge the definition of 'sane' on a regular basis?”

“Who cares?” Stan plopped a ten-gallon hat on Ford's head. “Here, Sixer! Get dressed and let's go explore!”

Ford chose a brown poncho patterned with blue and yellow geometric designs, while Stan found a leather cowboy vest and an empty holster he strapped to his belt. They grabbed a couple of kid-sized hats and headed down the street.
Several booths had been lined up on both sides of the road, leading from a Carpentry Contest at one end to the big pine stage at the other. They walked past the candle-dipping booth, the Meats 'n' Beans booth, and Ye Olde Pig Trough, which was basically where the Meat booth dumped all their leavings.

Stanley walked straight past the Pan Fer Gold booth.

Ford grabbed his arm. “Whoa, hey, Stanley. You feeling okay? That was actual gold back there.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “It's fake, Sixer.”

He blinked. “You can tell?”

“Sure. It's got the same sheen to it that Party Crown had. And like anyone would ever get real gold nugget and put them out here for free.”

“Oh.”

“Hey – what is that?” He pointed.

Just past the Pan Fer Gold booth, a guy dressed like a reverend was delivering vows to another guy with a woodpecker on his arm. A few people stood around or sat on bales of hay, watching the ceremony.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” said the reverend.

The woodpecker stabbed the guy's hand with its beak.

The groom beamed. “I do!”

Stan looked equal parts disturbed and intrigued. “What is that all about?”

“Oh yeah I read about this...” Ford reached into his jacket and took out the journal, opening it to the page about the town's history. “In Gravity Falls it used to be legal to marry woodpeckers.”

The groom overheard them. “Oh it's still legal,” he assured them. He began stroking the bird, an obsessive gleam in his eye. “Very legal.”

The twins slowly backed away.

Suddenly an announcer's voice rang out through the street. “Come, one and all, for the opening ceremony!”

“Grunkle Mabel, you coming?” Stanley shouted. She was currently at the Candle Dipping booth, lifting twelve sets of candles out of the wax.

“Behold!” she shouted. “Ms. Mystery's Amazing Candle-Dipping Technique!”

“Uh, ma'am, you're hogging all the candle trays,” the booth lady said.

“Exactly! I can make thirty-six candles at once!”

Stan and Ford looked at each other, shrugged, and headed towards the stage.

“Here ye, here ye!” the Sheriff shouted from the stage. A bunch of people were already starting to gather around the platform, where Preston and Pacifica Northwest sat with their butler next to a
statue of the town founder. “Ye Old Commencement Ceremony is about to commence!”

“Woo-hoo!” Johnson cheered, waving a telescope around like a baton. He flung it up into the air. It twirled, fell on the Sheriff’s head, and bounced back into Johnson’s hand. The crowd ooohed and clapped.

Suddenly a guy a few feet from Stanley took off running, a pink handbag clutched under his arm.

An old woman gasped. “Oh no – police, my purse!”

Johnson was looking through the telescope. “Haha, dude, check it out,” he said to the Sheriff. “Crazy Chu's pickin' her nose!”

“No way, let me see, let me see!”

At the back of the stage, Preston stood up. He paused, allowing the butler to dust off his shoulders with a tiny brush, then walked to the microphone.

“Howdy everyone,” he said grandly. “You all know me, of course: Preston H. Northwest, great-great-grandson of town founder, Nathaniel Northwest.” He placed one foot on a small rock, striking the exact same pose as the statue. “I'm also very rich.”

Mrs. Northwest, who was checking her nails, snapped her fingers. The butler started applauding. The audience followed suite.

Preston flourished his hand gracefully. “Now, if you think you've got the Pioneer Spirit, we invite you to join us onstage to celebrate the Northwest's contribution to history.”

Beside him, Stan gasped. “Audience participation!”

Ford frowned. “I dunno, Stan. Didn't you say Preston was your mortal enemy?” He turned, but the spot beside him was empty. His eyes snapped back to the stage.

Stanley was clambering up the stage steps, his face shining with excitement.

“Our first newcomer is...” Preston turned, and his face went darker than a coal miner's future.

“Oh, boy,” Ford muttered under his breath. Stan always did love the spotlight, but Preston didn't look like he would share.

“Howdy, horses and hillbillies!” Stan shouted, spreading his arms. “Let's get this party started!”

Before Preston could say a word, his mother spoke up, currently checking her earrings in the butler's large silver buttons. “Now, dear, remember to be kind to the little people,” she said, turning slightly so her diamond studs twinkled as they caught the light.

Preston gave a tight little smile. “Of course, Mother,” he said, and turned to the crowd. The winning smile was back on his face, but his eyes looked full of poison.

Ford realized he was holding his breath.

“Everyone,” said Preston, “I'd like you to meet Stanley Pines, from town eyesore The Mystery Shack, here to give us a little history lesson on Gravity Falls.” He patted Stan's back, too hard, so Stan stumbled a little.

“Hey!” Stan snapped.
“I'm sure everyone here knows the story, but as many of you know, Stanley here has a wonderful way with words! Go ahead, Stanley, tell us all about how Gravity Falls was founded by my great-grandfather, Nathaniel Northwest.”

Stan pulled away. “How should I know? He came, he founded, the end. Now how 'bout those old-timey peanuts, huh? They're covered in actual toffee! Now that is history in the making, people!”

“Woo-hoo!” someone shouted from the back. “I'm puttin' peanuts on my pizza!”

But most of the audience had stopped cheering when Stanley said he didn't know. By the time Stanley was done talking, the whole crowd was staring at him blankly, like he'd just announced that legwarmers were the new Vogue.

“Now, now, everyone – let's not act so hostile!” Preston said, putting a hand on Stanley's shoulder. From anyone else, it would look like a gesture of support, but it made Ford's stomach turn. “After all, this is Stanley Pines' first summer in Gravity Falls! He wouldn't know that Pioneer Day is for serious people only, and we already have one village idiot.”

As if on cue, Crazy Chu ran straight past the stage, Mabel's chicken stuffed in her coveralls and flapping madly to escape.

“I GOT ME A FREE MEAL!” she hooted, darting out of sight.

Preston gave Stan a shove. “Let us know when you've gotten serious about our town's most important holiday. You're welcome to come back to the stage anytime!” He smiled a blinding white smile. “Now then – let's talk more about me!”

Ford hurried through the crowd and reached the bottom of the stairs just as Stanley came down. Stan's whole face and ears were bright red and his shoulders were hunched.

“You okay?” Ford asked, putting a hand on his brother's back.

“I need some old-timey toffee peanuts,” Stan muttered.

Ford nodded and pushed his brother gently. “Let's get out of here,” he said, and they walked away. He looked back over his shoulder.

Thompson Gable was kneeling on the stage, holding up his camera. The Northwests had posed in front of the Northwest statue, Preston's pet fox sitting obediently at his side. They looked rich, happy, and disgustingly perfect.

Boyish Dan was setting up his work station at the opposite end of the street. He'd been practicing his whittling all year, and now was the time to put it to the test.

His name was already written on one of the seven tables set up in a row. Behind the tables were several piles of lumber, with planks ranging in size from the length of a house to the length of his hand. He set down his tools and went over to the nearest pile. He chose a plank about ten feet long. He lifted it – and nearly dropped it.

“Mrs. Pines?” he asked, stunned.

She looked up from between two pieces of redwood. “Oh hi, Boyish Dan! Fancy meeting you here!”
She popped out of the wood pile like a jack-in-the-box, covered with glitter and wood shavings. “I take it you've entered the Carpentry Contest? How's that going?”

“Good,” he said, and started hauling the wood back to his table. He looked back in surprise when he felt some of the weight lessen. Ms. Pines had lifted the plank onto her shoulder and was peeking over it nervously.

“You can't help the contestants, it's against the rules!” he said gruffly.

“Oh, don't mind me!”

She ducked nervously as a mob of angry Pioneer people ran past, carrying torches and shovels. He guessed that his boss had done something new to annoy the local townsfolk, and was helping him mostly to avoid getting caught.

Boyish Dan resisted rolling his eyes. It wasn't manly.

The two of them went back to his table, and he began sawing the wood in half.

“What're you making?” she asked eagerly.

He grunted. “Miniature log cabin.”

“Ohoo, that's so festive!”

He grunted again and pointed with his thumb. “My uncles are making an actual log cabin.”

She looked. His uncles were working off to one side of the Carpentry Contest area. They had chopped down a tree and were cutting it up like rapid beavers. They already had half of the logs stacked in a pyramid on one side of the Carpentry area. The other contestants were all sitting at their tables, stacks of popsicle sticks and glue bottles abandoned in front of them, watching the Corduroys with awe.

Dan wasn't watching. He knew perfectly well that they'd do a manly job of building a manly cabin. He wasn't up to their skill level yet, but what he could do was make a boyish cabin that would look as close as possible to the real-life thing.

Grauntie Mabel grinned and sat down next to him. “Hey! Bet I could make some totally fashion-forward furniture to go in your log house!”

“Log cabin. And you can't help the contestants!” he repeated.

“Sure, sure, but your uncles are working as a team,” she pointed out. “Why couldn't you have a team? I could be your assistant!”

He squinted at her, thinking.

Finally he shoved the piece of wood he'd just cut in her direction. “Sand this,” he grunted.

She smiled and swiped sandpaper from the next person's table. “Are we going to stain it afterwards?” she asked, rubbing the wood.

“Sand with the grain. And yes.”

“Let's stain it pink!”

“No.”
“How about purple?”

“No.”

“Plaid?”

“No!” Then he paused. “Yes,” he decided, and she squealed with delight.

Ford and Stanley sat on the steps of the Nathaniel Northwest statue (the actual one in the town square). They’d gotten a fresh bag of toffee peanuts. Stan was biting them just hard enough to crack the caramel shell, sucking the candy part off, and then popping the peanut into his mouth. Ford watched him. He couldn’t see his brother’s face under the rim of his hat, but that was how Stan ate candy whenever he got sad, and Ford wasn’t sure what to do.

Stan picked up a peanut. Then, instead of eating it, he dropped it back in the bag. “Ford,” he asked slowly, “do you think I’m...”

“What?”

He crunched the bag in his fist. “Never mind.”

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Ford started, but Stanley cut him off.

“No, forget it, I said never mind!”

He stood up, grabbed his hat, and threw it as far as he could. The wind carried right back and it crashed into his face.

“Ugh!”

“Forget it, I said never mind!”

He stood up, grabbed his hat, and threw it as far as he could. The wind carried right back and it crashed into his face.

“Hey, don't be like that,” Ford started, but Stanley cut him off.

“No, forget it, I said never mind!”

He stood up, grabbed his hat, and threw it as far as he could. The wind carried right back and it crashed into his face.

“Ugh!”

“C’mon, Stanley, don't take it out on the hat,” Ford said, trying to crack a smile. Maybe they could turn the whole thing into a joke.

Stanley grabbed the hat off his face. “It's not funny, Ford,” he snapped, practically reading his mind. “I didn't care that he won that stupid crown because I still had the last laugh. But then I got up in front of all those people and he made it seem like...”

Like I was an idiot.

Neither of them said it. The silence grew very loud.

Stan sat back down and jammed the hat back on his head. “If I ever try that again, just punch me,” he muttered. “Preston's a class-A jerk.”

Ford hated seeing his brother like this. His hands balled into fists. “Ugh, Preston,” he growled. He'd never understood why Stanley liked to hit things until this moment. He felt like flatting Preston’s pointy, upturned nose.

He stood and turned, glaring at the grime-crusted statue of Nathaniel. “Why does he think that being related to the town founder means he gets to treat everyone like garbage? Someone needs to take him down a peg!” Suddenly a thought popped into his brain. “Wait a minute! I think I've read something about Preston's great-great grandfather before!”

He whipped out the journal and sat down, turning the pages quickly.
“Of course!” he exclaimed. “Oh, this is perfect, look –” He held it out so Stanley could see it. His brother took the other end of the book as Ford began to read. “In my investigations –”

“Dude,” Stanley said. “Don't do the voice.”

Ford cleared his throat sheepishly and kept reading. “In my investigations, I recently made a discovery. Nathaniel Northwest may not be the founder of Gravity Falls! I believe the proof of this secret is buried somewhere in the enclosed document. If only I could crack the code...”

There was a folded piece of paper taped securely to the page, yellowed and brittle with age. Ford carefully peeled the document away and held it up, setting the journal aside. Stanley leaned in as he unfolded it.

It was stained with brown smudges and a spatter of reddish-brown ink at the top, but the writing was clear enough. There was a huge triangular design in the middle, filled with writing and five alchemic symbols placed evenly around the inside of the pyramid. Strange writings and symbols surrounded the central design – arrows, squiggly lines that looked like waves, dotted and solid lines. A small red stamp filled the lower left corner.

“What do you think?” Ford whispered.

Stanley grabbed his arm. “Wait, wait, so this author guy thinks that the Northwests didn't actually found the town?”

“Yeah! Oh, man, if this cover-up is true, it means Preston's whole family is a fraud! This could be a major conspiracy.” He stood up, holding the old parchment carefully. “I gotta investigate this!”

“Wait.” Stanley stood up, too. “I'm coming with you. Conspiracies are serious, right? Breaking codes and reading books and everything?”

“Oh, yeah, definitely.”

“Well, if I help you crack this code, then no one can say I'm not serious ever again.”

“Yeah!” Ford held up his hand. “Mystery Twins?”

“I thought you hated that.”

“I'm starting to accept it.”

They high-sixed. Stan grabbed his bag of toffee peanuts and they ran off, laughing and cheering.

Sheriff Velazquez peered around the statue. He always knew that spying on people would pay off.

He flicked on his walkie-talkie and pressed the silver button on the back. It simultaneously encrypted his call and put him on the direct line to a certain underground security room run by the FBI.

“This is Sheriff Velazquez,” he said quietly. “We've got a Code Sepia.”

He heard a sputter that meant someone had just spat out their coffee. An angry male voice came on the line. “What? And what are you doing about it?”

“I'm following them right now.”
“Find them and stop them,” the voice ordered. “There's no room for error.”

“I understand. Velazquez out.”

He turned. His partner-in-cop had snuck up beside him, and from the wide-eyed look on his face, it looked like he'd overheard the whole thing. They both knew what Code Sepia meant.

Velazquez looked at him seriously. “Deputy Johnson, maintaining this cover-up is the mission we've been training for our entire careers. Are you ready?”

Johnson slid a pair of dark glasses onto both of their faces.

“Born that way.”

They turned, shoulders back, brows furrowed, staring seriously in the direction the Pines twins had run. They were headed for the library. The trail was hot. There was no time to lose.

Velazquez smiled. “Duuude, we look so cool!”

The library was a one-story, cross-shaped building with a steepled roof and stained glass windows. Teepees had been set up to the left of the library, and Stanley could see other kids messing around inside them, pretending to cook stuff over a “fire” made of rock piles, and painting bears on the sides with strawberry juice.

Stan glanced at them. It looked kind of fun...but they had important work to do!

He followed his brother into the library, dodging a couple of covered wagons on the way in. Crazy Chu sat by the fire – no, no, hearth, in old-timey language it was called a hearth – reading to a bunch of little toddlers. With her faded coveralls and stained cotton sweater, she fit right in with Pioneer Day.

She had a book in her lap. “Back in the olden days, pioneers drew sustenance from telling stories around the fire,” she said. “So let's eat the books, children! Go ahead, eat the books!” She promptly tore part of the cover off with her teeth and the toddlers ran away screaming. Stanley laughed under his breath.

“Over here,” Ford said, leading them to an area where the bookshelves were stuffed with old movie reels. “I doubt any newspapers will have survived for a hundred years, but important documents are always preserved on microfilm.”

“Micro-what?”

Ford ran a finger along the edge of the shelf, brushing the dust off the labels. “Microfilm. Kind of like a really old slide show. A-ha!” He pulled out a small flat cylinder that looked exactly the same as all the other cylinders. He carried it over to a small table, where a weird-looking camera-like thing was pointed at a white sheet hanging on the wall.

Ford seemed to know what he was doing. He popped the cylinder into the machine just like it was just a regular DVD. Stan watched him press buttons until the projector lit up and a picture appeared on the screen.

*Man, my brother is so cool.*
“Hmm...” Ford frowned. The picture on the screen definitely looked all secret-y, with weird little symbols that looked like fish and coins flying around, labeled in another language.

“Is that Latin?” Stan asked. Ford was always looking at stuff in Latin.

“Nah, but close.” He clicked something and the projector switched to the next slide.

Stanley opened his bag of toffee peanuts and popped a few in his mouth. “Hey, it's like we're watching a movie! Want some?” He offered the bag to his brother.

“No eating in the library,” Ford said absently, but he grabbed one from the bag without looking and ate it. “If we're going to solve this code, we've got to at least figure out what kind of symbols it's using. Norse, Syrian, Nahuatl. Something.”

“How can I help?”

“Be right back.” Ford headed around a bookshelf and came back, a minute later, loaded with books. He dropped them on the table with a heavy thunk. “Here, we should've started with these,” he said. “Let's try and find symbols that look like the ones in the map. Then we can find the microfilm on the town's history that most closely corresponds to symbols and look for clues.”


Ford put the paper on the table for him to see and then started pacing around. He always did that when he got excited.

“If we can find the code to cracking this map, we'll be able to put Preston in his place,” Ford said.

“Yeah!” Stan grinned. “Plus it'll prove I can be smart when I want to be. I'm serious.” He jammed a few more toffee peanuts and pulled the book closer, staring at a picture of cave art where a guy was goring a mammoth with a stick. “Seerrriioouuuussss.”

Ford flipped through all of the other books while Stan was still working on the first one, but nothing matched the map. Ford started trying random microfilms in frustration.

“It's not Egyptian,” he muttered, staring at a slide full of heiro-cliffs. “It's not Numerology...”

Actually Stanley did think two of the symbols on that slide matched – the thing that looked like two half-circles with a line through it, and the thing that was like a cursive M, which was upside-down in red on the map. But Ford flipped the slide before Stan could say anything.

“Of course!” Ford shouted (in a stage whisper, because library neeerrrrrrrd). “The triangle is the alchemist symbol for flame!”

He held up the map. The huge triangle design in the middle did look kinda like the alchemy symbol for fire.

“Lighting the parchment on fire will reveal the secret message!”

Stanley nodded. “It's so obvious!”

Luckily, it being Pioneer Day, the librarians had put out lots of candles to give it an old-timey feel. Stanley gave Ford the lighter he'd won from the biker dude, and Ford went to grab a candle and light it. Stanley grabbed the map in excitement. A real-life mystery and he was going to help solve it! This
was so cool!

“Alright!” Ford said, coming back with a lit candle in his hand. “Let's just light this sucker up and – Stanley!”

“What?”

It actually took him a second to realize it: the map had somehow gotten from his hand to his head, in the shape of a paper hat. He groaned.

“Aw, man, I'm sorry, I just did something stupid again...”

He went to take the hat off.

“Wait, wait.” Ford held the candle closer, peering at the hat. “I can't believe it... You folded it into a map!”

“I did?”

Ford took off the hat and pointed. The way Stanley had folded it, some of the weird symbols at the edges of the paper actually lined up to make arrows and diagrams. And the arrows were pointing to a house-shaped building with pillars all along the bottom, marked with a big black X.

Stanley stared at it. “Whoa.”

Ford set down the candle. “And I was gonna burn it.” He shook his head. “Good thinking, Stan. C'mon – we gotta head over to the history museum!”

Stan opened his mouth, but before he could answer, a voice caught his ear. They turned.

Sheriff Velazquez and Deputy Johnson were standing in front of the welcome desk. They looked weirdly different, and it took Stanley a minute to figure out why: they were both wearing black pants and bulky black tuxedo jackets, like they'd put them on over their regular uniforms. And they were wearing black tinted shades, even though they were inside.

“We're looking for two kids who might be...reading,” Velazquez said confidentially, but his booming voice carried well.

Johnson wasn't so discreet. “We're huntin’ 'em down for secret reasons!” he said, practically tap-dancing with excitement.

Ford and Stan immediately ducked under the table. Stan had been in trouble so many times it was practically a reflex.

The cops began searching the library. Johnson immediately knocked a set of books of the shelf.

“Hey!” Ford whispered angrily, looking at the dropped books.

“Can it, Sixer, let's get out of here!” Stan hissed. “And let's ditch the hats. They make us too easy to spot.”

They stuffed their hats behind a bookshelf and walked calmly and casually out the door. The second they were out of sight, they made a break for it.
The Gravity Falls Museum of History was just down the street, made of white marble and red brick bleached to a pale tan by the sun. Two owls on pedestals sat in front of the building, bracketing either side of the marble steps. Two pairs of columns stood on either side of the doors, and the pediment was carved with swirly designs that centered on an equilateral triangle. Exactly like the one at the center of the map.

“We're definitely in the right place,” Ford said.

Stanley grinned. “You realize what this means, don't you?” Stan said, his voice low with excitement. “We're gonna hafta break in.”

The museum was open. They walked in and the museum curator, wearing a pink dress with a frilly white apron, greeted them with a smile.

“Here are your free Pioneer Day passes,” she said, handing them one sticker each, which they stuck on their shirts. “And here are your balloons – blue and pink.”

Stanley gripped his balloon intensely. “We're in.”

Ford took out the map and started walking through the exhibits. He knew they were in the right place, but he didn't know where to look for the next clue. He gave each exhibit a quick glance – with his mental and visual acuity, it was all he needed to determine the relevance of a given display.

“What're we gonna do next?” Stan asked, taking Ford's balloon so he could hold the map better. “Steal Thomas Jefferson's ribcage?”

“Ew, no.” He passed a large stuffed bison and a display of Frontier Romance, where a ruggedly bearded pioneer was hauling an angry woman slung over one shoulder. It looked almost exactly like the one on Viking Romance. He looked back at the map, studying it carefully. “According to the map, the next clue about the real town founder should be right...here!”

He looked up. There was an abstract, triangular stone sculpture hung on the wall.

“Stanley!” he called.

His brother had been tying their balloons to the bison's horns. He scrambled off and walked up next to Ford. He stared near-sighted at the map, then the sculpture.

“So...am I missing something? ’Cuz that just looks like a hunk of rock to me.”

It looked utterly abstract to Ford as well, and it didn't help that the finer details had been eroded by time. “It's gotta be the next clue. We just need to figure out what it is.”

They stood looking at it for a minute. Then Stan, of course, got bored and went to sit on a nearby bench. He started muttering to himself, thinking out loud. Ford thought about tuning it out, but given how Stanley had figured out the map, he didn't want to miss any other clues Stanley might find.

“Hey painting, be less stupid,” Stan said behind him.

Ford suppressed a snort. Yes, that's the clue that'll lead us to –

Stanley gasped. “It worked!”

“What?”

Ford turned. Stan had flipped over on the bench and was staring at the sculpture upside-down. Ford
hurried over and flipped upside down next to him. He echoed Stanley's gasp.

“It's not abstract, it's upside down!” he realized. The sculpture showed a beautiful angel reading a book and pointing to the back of the museum.

“I saw that statue in the cemetery!” Stanley said.

“Then that's our next stop. Come on!”

They stood up, striking dramatic adventurer poses – and then immediately all the blood rushed from their heads. They stumbled around for a minute, grabbing at each other for balance and groaning.

Velazquez and Johnson strode into the museum, their shades glinting, the cord of an earpiece spiraled behind Velasquez' ear. (It wasn't actually attached to anything. They'd tried to hook it up to the walkie-talkie, but the end of the cord spontaneously combusted, so they just tucked it into the Sheriff's jacket.)

Sue, welcoming lady, greeted them with a tentative smile. “Welcome to the Gravity Falls Museum. Would you like a blue or pink balloon?”

Velazquez straightened his shoulders importantly. “We don't have time for –”

“Blue, please!” Johnson interrupted. Velazquez elbowed him and he grunted. “Hey, man, you want a balloon, then get one!”

Velazquez opened his mouth to retort – he only liked red balloons – but his walkie talkie buzzed.

“Officer Velazquez,” said the voice.

They hustled to the side of the lobby and pressed themselves against the wall.

“Velazquez here.”

“Have the targets been apprehended?”

Velazquez tried not to sweat. “Negative. But we're close! I promise, those kids'll never get past us.”

Suddenly the Pines twins ran straight past the officers and out the door.

“Hey!” Velazquez shouted. He and Johnson tore after them. Johnson's legs were longer so he was in front of the Sheriff when his balloon caught in the door. He was yanked to a halt and promptly fell backwards on the Sheriff.

“Hey!”

“Ugh! Get off me!”

Velazquez tried to get free, jabbing Johnson in the gut. He grunted and retaliated by kicking his heel into the Sheriff's leg. In seconds they were fighting and accidentally rolled straight down the hard stone steps, landing in a heap in front of the museum.

They got to their feet, breathing heavily and checking each other for bruises. Velazquez had a real shiner starting in his left eye and his tuxedo jacket was torn at the sleeves and collar. Johnson didn't look much better: there was a nasty cut down the left side of his face where it had slammed into the
edge of a step, and there were grass stains all over his clothes, with clumps of dirt sticking to his knees.

Velazquez stepped so close their noses almost touched. He jabbed a finger in the Deputy's chest. “Johnson...you look awesome.”

Johnson grinned. “So do you. We look like we just got taken down by a a couple a couple of kung-fu champions!”

“You mean we took them down.”

“And there were twenty of them! With nunchucks!”

“Bet that cut'll turn into an awesome scar!”

“Yeah! We're gonna look like seriously hard-core secret agents!”

Velazquez clapped a hand over Johnson's mouth. “Dude! Emphasis on 'secret agents'!”

They looked around. They were starting to draw a crowd, so they quickly scurried over to the owl statues in front of the museum. They each crouched behind one. At least the Gravity Falls citizens were generally used to their odd behavior, so this actually looked fairly normal. The crowd started to disperse.

Velazquez put two fingers to his ear as if turning on his earpiece. “I didn't see which way they went, did you? Ckkk.” He made a noise like static to end the call.

Johnson peered over the owl. “Negative. Ckkk.”

The Sheriff was starting to get nervous. “How are we supposed to find them now?” he moaned, forgetting the fake earpiece. “There are actual FBI agents who are gonna demand an actual explanation...”

Johnson was wondering the same thing. Then he shifted position and something crunched under his foot. He looked down.

He put two fingers to his ear. “Johnson to Velazquez,” he said, a slow smile spreading over his face. “I think I know how we're going to find them. Ckkk.”

With Mabel's help sanding and staining the wood, Boyish Dan had finished his miniature log cabin with hours to spare before dusk. He covered it carefully with a tarp, using small wooden poles to prop it up so the fabric wouldn't touch the wood as it dried.

Mabel peered over his shoulder. “You should make matching furniture,” she told him.

He grunted. “A real man doesn't need furniture! He sleeps on the hard ground!”

“Uh-huh. Well maybe a real man wants to take care of his family's back pain, so he'd at least get them a bed.”

He pondered this.

“King-size bed,” he finally decided.
“With bears in the headboard?”

“Bears, wolves, and ti—”

“COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT!” Mabel shouted. Then she laughed and shoved him (which was like shoving a bounder). “Yikes! Little muscle there, eh?” She grinned at him and gathered up the buckets they’d used to make the staining fluid. Dan had insisted on making his own, and apparently rusty iron nails, diesel oil, and vinegar could all be used as ingredients. Even her cooking wasn’t as crazy, and that was saying something. She tried to breathe through her mouth.

“We might need that,” Dan said, nodding at the cans.

“Your judges might need to breathe,” she retorted. “I’ll just carry them back to my car until we need it again. The fumes are gonna make the other contestants pass out.”

On cue, the nearest kid promptly face-planted into his popsicle clock tower, flattening it into a pancake. Dan nodded reluctantly.

She set off, humming to herself. She was getting grouchy because she’d worked so hard today – no wonder Dan had big buff muscles! She probably would too if she sawed wood all the time.

But singing always kept her mind off unpleasant things, like bad smells, triangles, doing taxes. Mary Poppins had it right: singing was definitely the cure-all for a case of the crabapples!

She walked past a building and heard the Woodpecker Guy arguing.

“For the last time, we are not going south for the winter!” he barked. “Our home is here!”

There was a rattling noise.

“You always say that!”

Mabel shook her head. Now there was a guy in serious need of some music therapy.

“Lugging around half-empty buckets, doodly-doo,” she sang softly. “Breathing through my mouth, arms are gonna fall off...”

SLAM!

Mabel realized a split-second too late that Woodpecker Guy had come out of his house. He turned just in time for them to slam together, spilling the hand-mixed stain all over each other and the nearest pedestrians.

“My suit!” he cried.

“My skirt!” she bawled.

“MY OUTFIT!”

They turned. Thomspon was covered from head to foot in red and green staining juice. Everything, from his ten-gallon hat to his hand-sewn boots, was dripping with the dye. Mabel hadn’t realized there was so much of it left. He looked like a very angry Christmas tree.

“Aw, Thompson,” Mabel said, and she genuinely felt sorry for the guy. He loved dressing up for stuff.
He held up his hand, his face hidden under the brim of his hat. When he raised his head, she almost took a step back: his eyes were as hard as flint.

“You have besmirched the shirt,” he said quietly. His tone was so utterly arresting that several passers-by actually stopped to watch.

“Well, ‘besmirched’ is a rather strong word –”

“Besmirched,” he repeated. “And my wardrobe must be avenged. I challenge you to a duel, right here, at dusk. Right before the Northwest Parade.”

She looked around nervously. The crowd was looking back and forth between Thompson and Mabel, enthralled.

“Uh, a duel?” Mabel repeated nervously. “But that's so...not a team sport! We should play a team sport. Like soccer. Or rugby! Or even better – how about making some decorative candles?”

She pulled two decorative candles from under her fez, dangling them by their wicks. They were covered in glitter and twirled gently like miniature disco balls.

Thompson narrowed his eyes. “I will not be denied. Come at dusk. Prepare yourself, Mabel Pines, for a devastating defeat.”

He turned and strode purposefully down the street. Soggy as he was, he walked so confidently that he actually looked almost cool. Mabel, and the crowd, watched him go in silence, until he turned the corner and disappeared.

“...Huh,” said Mabel. “I thought for sure he'd stick his foot in a bucket of burger grease or someth–”

“DANGNABBIT, THOMPSON!” Crazy Chu's voice screeched. “I TOLD YOU TO WATCH THE BUCKET!”

“Yup, there it is.”

The cemetery looked as un-creepy as Stanley remembered it. It had well-groomed grass, one or two flower bushes, and tombstones set up in orderly rows. A lot of the tombstones were small, but the bigger ones all had sculptures of angels or cutesy little cherubs flying around the epitaphs. In broad daylight, with sparrows chirping and singing, the place was disappointingly cheerful.

The statue of the angel was pretty easy to find – it was one of the biggest tombstones there. She stood on a pedestal, life-size, her stone wings held stiffly behind her. She had a book in her right and and she was pointing straight out to the left with her other, like a girly angel version of Ford and his journal.

The real Ford stood in front of the angel in the exact same pose. He even pointed with his arm, trying to sight along his hand to figure out what she was pointing at.

“I don't think that's gonna work, brobro,” Stan said.

“Mmm.” Ford tucked the journal back in his jacket and looked around, shading his eyes. “That statue must be pointing to the next clue...”

Stan thought it would be a good idea to get up on the angel's pedestal in case he could spot the clue from there. Then he tried to sight along the angel's arm like Ford had done, but she was just pointing
at the cliffs around the valley. Then he saw how her index finger stuck out, and he got a great idea.

“Aw, gross, she's picking my nose!” he shouted.

Ford turned.

“Ugh, Stanley! That's so gross!”

“Exactly!” Stanley laughed and accidentally jammed his face into the finger. “Ack!” He was sure he'd just heard his skull crack –

A rumbling sound traveled up the soles of Stan's feet. They looked over. The heavy cement plate that had rested in front of the angel was slowly moving back, revealing a dark, cold passage into the earth, exactly where the coffin would've been.

“Wow, a secret passage way!” Ford exclaimed.

“Even better! It's a clue!”

Stan tried to hop down from the pedestal, but the angel's finger snagged him. He winced, carefully de-fingering his nose before jumping off and following his brother to the dark creepy stairs.


Ford took out his UFO keychain and turned on the flashlight. It lit the corridor with a spooky blue glow.

The quiet was creepy, so Stan took out another bag of toffee peanuts and started munching.

“Man, this is one crazy conspiracy, huh?” he said, looking around at the walls. They'd been carved roughly, right out of the bedrock. There were even little bits of fossilized animal in them. “Bet whoever made this got sealed in here. Bet they're down at the bottom of this thing right now, all zombified and ready to add the next trespassers to their horde of Undead...” He stuck his arms out in front of him and growled like a zombie.

Ford glanced nervously over his shoulder. “Cut it out, Stanley, it's creepy!”

Stan threw away his bag and slung an arm over his brother's shoulder. “Hey, don't worry, bro. I got your back!”

The stairs ended and the ground leveled out, but it was still pretty uneven ground and they had to watch their step. Stan could tell his zombie talk had scared Ford more than he was letting on, because Ford kept his free hand stuffed in his jacket.

“You know I was kidding about the zombies, right?” Stan said. “I mean, we'd probably have smelled them by now if there were any. It's not like there's any windows, and there's just one way out.”

“Yeah...” Ford definitely looked paler than normal. “Just...watch out for booby traps, okay?”

Stan sniggered. “You said 'traps'.

The second the words were out of his mouth, Stan stepped on something and felt it click. He looked down. There was a circular button with a triangle carved into the floor under his foot.

Something whizzed past their faces and struck the opposite wall – a bright yellow dart with red
feathers.

He whipped around. Holes were opening in the walls all around them. More darts shot out like a messed-up game of Angry Birds.

“Tranquilizer darts!” Ford shouted.

“Duck!”

Stan forced his brother's head down and they narrowly avoided the first volley, but the holes were already filled with the next round. He grabbed Ford's hand and ran, the keychain swinging wildly, making it hard to see the next attack. Stan jumped just in time over the next set and Ford followed his lead, running as fast as they could.

Suddenly Stan tripped on a rock and they went down, falling exactly where the corridor aimed down like a chute. They fell face-first, screaming –

And then something smacked into Stan's face and they slid to a stop.

For a second they lay there, stunned. Then Stanley started spitting. He'd smacked right into a thick cobweb coated with dust, and it stuck to his eyes and nose and even his teeth.

“Aw, gross!” he said, pulling it out of his mouth. “Hey, on second thought, I wonder if that counted as flossing for today...”

“Stanley,” Ford said, looking past him. There was a look of awe and growing excitement on his face. “Stanley – look!”

He turned.

They were in a pretty spacious cavern, the size of the Gift Shop and the den put together. It smelled like dust, old paper, and rusty metal. And it was loaded with stuff, like an underground museum. There was a double-bladed battle ax, a telescope, old papers, an old flag, a movie camera, old papers, a lantern, a blanket, and three or four treasure chests literally overflowing with old papers, all stuffed together at random. They walked through the cavern, rubbernecking at all the old-timey wonders.

“It's like a treasure trove of historic-y secret-y things,” Stan said. He went over to a big metal box and picked up the files on top. They were marked “Top Secret”, which naturally meant that Stan had to open them.

“Whoa! Hey Sixer! Abe Lincoln had a whole extra hand under his hat! And –” he stared at the next one. “Ben Franklin was a woman? Wow, she was as grizzly as Grauntie Mabel!”

“Jackpot!” Ford shone the UFO light on a folder propped up on an old-timey desk. The file was titled “The Northwest Cover-Up”, with an official-looking seal and the words “Top Secret” stamped at the bottom.

“Now we'll find out who the real town founder was!”

They crowded around the file and Ford picked it up, passing the flashlight to Stan so he could hold it better. They shared an excited glance and Ford opened the file.

“Let it be here recorded,” Ford read, “that 'Nathaniel Northwest...the fabled founder of Gravity falls was, in fact, a fraud!' As well as a...'waste-shoveling village idiot?...'”
Stan laughed. “Oh, bad news for Preston!”

“Wait'll the papers hear about this!” Ford added eagerly. “All this cover-up stuff? We're gonna crack open a conspiracy of monumental proportions! And Seandra'll finally date me,” he whispered really quiet.

Stanley was practically vibrating with excitement. “Our names are gonna be in the paper? There will be actual proof that we did this?! After this, nobody's ever gonna call me st–”

“'The true founder of Gravity Falls',” Ford read, “'was Sir Lord Quentin Trembley III Esquire.'”

Stan blinked, then frowned. “Who's Quentin Trembley?”

“That's none of your business!”

They whipped around and flinched, a bright light flashing in their faces.

Sheriff Velazquez and Deputy Johnson stood blocking the exit. Their dark suits helped them match almost perfectly against the shadows of the cavern, and the flashlight the Sheriff was holding turned their glasses into twin panes of blank white light. The twins shrank back, pressing against each other's shoulders.

Johnson pointed at them with a stern finger. “You have the right to remain silent!” he declared. “Anything you say...can and...will...” He paused, panting, and promptly belly-flopped on the floor. His backside was covered in red-tufted needles.

The Sheriff looked apologetic. “He got hit with quite a few of those darts.”

It took a while for Johnson to wake up. During which Stanley had plenty of time to notice the actual human skeleton stuffed in the corner, its bones grayish-brown, its empty sockets following him wherever he went. Were the cops going to just seal them down here? Would they become a zombie horde of two? Would he never taste another toffee peanut ever again?

He grabbed the corner of Ford's jacket.

By the time Johnson was back on his feet, the Sheriff had taken the Northwest file from Ford.

“I hate to do this, but Quentin Trembley's a matter of national security,” he told them.

“Yeah,” Johnson added. “He's Top-Sequin...Sequel...hoo boy.” He propped himself up, resting his hands on his knees. “I think I might be colorblind now.”

“What do you mean, 'National Security'?” Ford asked.

Stan nodded. “And who is Quentin Trembley, anyway?”

“See for yourself.” Velazquez took a movie reel out of his tuxedo jacket and popped it in the old movie camera in the corner, setting it up so it pointed at the drop-down screen.

“Exactly how many old-timey movies are there?” Stan muttered.

“Shh,” Ford whispered.

Stan had to admit he was pretty curious. Maybe Quentin Trembley was a spy for the Revolution, and
he'd been banished to Oregon because he knew too much for them to kill him...maybe he was a Native American warrior who'd been one of the first people to yell “Get off my lawn, ya lousy settlers!”...maybe he was a scout like Lewis and Clark, building a treehouse at the top of a redwood and chucking squirrels at whoever bothered him...the possibilities were endless!

The movie started. It counted down: 3...2...1...

Stan's face fell. “Aw, it's black and white!”

“Stanley!” Ford hissed.

Stanley kind of tuned out when a guy in a suit come on the screen – until it showed a picture of Quentine Trembley himself. The guy had a really long nose, it was practically Fiddleford-worthy, and a haircut that looked like a pair of wings sprouting from the sides of his head. Stanley caught the end of the narrator's sentence:

“...the Eighth-and-a-half President of the United States.”

“President?” the twins said together.


The movie continued: “After winning the 1837 election in a landslide” – they showed an actual landslide – “Quentin Trembley quickly gained a reputation as America's silliest president. He waged war on pancakes, appointed six babies to the Supreme Court, and issued the ‘Depants-ipation Proclamation.’

“Didn't Lincoln do that?” Stan asked. Ford jabbed him with an elbow.

“His State of the Union Speech was even worse,” said the narrator, and a recording of Trembley's voice started up:

“The only thing we have to fear is gigantic, man-eating spiders!”

The narrator continued: “He was kicked out of office and escaped to an uncharted valley he named 'Gravity Falls', after plummeting into it at high speed.”

It showed a picture of Trembley sitting backwards on a horse's rump as it jumped off a cliff. Stanley snorted.

The suit-guy came back on the screen. This time Stan paid close attention. “Trembley's shameful term was erased from history, and officially replaced with William Henry Harrison as president, and local nobody Nathaniel Hawthorne as founder of Gravity Falls. The whereabouts of President Trembley's body are unknown.”

“Until now.”

As the film clicked off, Sheriff Velazquez gestured to a huge shape shoved against one wall. Stanley gasped.

The shape was actually a giant cube of yellowish stuff, and completely see-through. Trembley himself was trapped inside.

“Whoa,” Stanley breathed.

“What is that? Like amber or something?” Ford asked.
Stanley's mouth watered. “No way, that's peanut brittle!”

“Seriously?”

Stan tapped his nose. “Hey, man, the schnozz don't lie.”

Velazquez shook his head. “Fool thought he could live forever by encasing himself in the stuff,” the Sheriff explained, shaking his head. “Smooth move, Mr. President. Finding the president's body was our special mission. And now, thanks to you, it's complete.”

Johnson grinned. “Who knew all we had to do was follow a little kid's trail of candy wrappers!” He held up a fistful of empty Toffee Peanut bags.

Stanley groaned and smacked his forehead. He did not want to know what Ford's “Look” was right now.

The Sheriff's face darkened. His tone, when he next spoke, was dark and ominous. “Now that you know the truth...we can't let you go around talking about it.”

Ford shrank back. “D-does that mean –”

“Are you going to kill us?!” Stan threw an arm in front of Ford.

“Oh NO!” Johnson shrieked.

The Sheriff raised his hands. “Johnson. Chill. And calm down, you two, geez.” He took off his shades and waved them casually, like he could clear away the tension. “We're just dressed like FBI guys, okay? No, listen, we're just gonna escort you and all this stuff back to Washington.” He pointed to the twins. “You ain't comin' back, by the way.”

“You've gotta be kidding!” Stan shouted.

They weren't kidding.

Less than thirty minutes later, the Gravity Falls Goobers had stuffed the twins in a huge wooden crate, along with Trembley's delicious peanut brittle tomb. Judging from the vibrations around the crate, Stan figured they were in some kind of train bound for Washington, D.C. (That, and Johnson had told them, “We're putting you on a train to Washington, D.C.,” which was kind of a good hint.)

Stanley stared at the wall of the crate like he could burn a whole through it. He'd been shouting nonstop for the past five minutes. His throat was sore, his head hurt, and he was discovering a hatred for all things wooden and crate-like.

“Those jerks...I bet they're yucking it up right now. Taking selfies of their dumb indoor shades and – and – making friendship bracelets!”

“Smooth, Stanley.” Ford was walking slowly around the crate, peering up and down the walls for a lock or a splinter or something they could use to escape.

Stanley kicked the wall and stubbed his toe. It hurt, which made him mad, so he kicked it again for good measure. Then he head-butted it.

“Would you stop that?” Ford asked.
Stanley turned and slid down the wall, sitting on the floor. “Ugh. I can't believe I left a trail of candy wrappers. How stupid could I get?”

“Hey.” Ford came over and sat down next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Don't beat yourself up. Figuratively or literally.”

“I'm too stupid to even know what that means.” Stan dropped his head to his knees. “Preston had me pegged all along. I really am the village idiot.”

Ford's hand rubbed his back in small circles. Stanley made his Blank Face and tried very hard not to cry. Were they really never going home? They'd never see Grauntie Mabel or Boyish Dan or Ria or...

Crack.

He looked up. Ford was smiling a little and holding out a piece of peanut brittle. He'd broken it off of Trembley's tomb.

“Eat a little,” he said, pressing it into Stanley's hand. “You love peanut-flavored candy.”

Stanley looked at it for a minute, then put a little piece in his mouth and chewed. It was pretty old, but it still tasted good. Kind of like sugar with a little hint of mustard. He swallowed.

Ford's smile widened encouragingly. “See? This isn't all bad.” He reached for another piece.

Crack. C-C-Cricacreeaaaak...

Ford jumped back and Stanley scrambled to his feet. Cracks were shooting across the surface of the peanut brittle. The whole thing was shaking and rattling. Chunks of brittle shot out in all directions. Stanley grabbed Ford and pulled his twin behind him just as the whole thing shattered in a cloud of sugary dust.

When the dust cleared, Quentin himself stood in front of them, the crumbly bits of his peanut brittle casing piled around his feet. Stanley half-expected him to keel over, since even he knew you couldn't breathe without air, but the guy looked straight at them and opened his mouth and spoke:

“IT IS I, QUENTIN TREMBLEY!” he announced.

Then he promptly ripped off his pants.

“You're alive!” Ford exclaimed. “But how – ?”

“Peanut brittle!” Stanley picked up a chunk of it like it was made of solid gold. “It really does have life-sustaining properties! That's – that's brilliant!”

“And so are you, dear boy!” Quentin told him, smiling over his old-timey spectacles. “For following my clues and freeing me from my delicious tomb!”

“He's right,” Ford added, punching him lightly in the arm. “Making maps into hats, sitting upside down – you're the one who solved the mystery, Stanley! You solve the code that serious cops couldn't crack in a hundred years!”

Stan grinned so hard his cheeks hurt. “Yeah?”

“Yeah!”
“By JEFFERSON!” Trembley exclaimed. “We seem to be trapped in some kind of crate-shaped box!”

“It's a crate, Mr. President,” Stanley told him.

“Good thing I have the President's Key, which can open any lock in America!” He whipped a key out of his jacket and held it up. It looked like it was solid bronze with a little arrow-shaped sign on the handle.

Trembley walked confidently to one side of the box and placed the key against the wood. *Thunk.* He tried a different spot. *Thunk.* Again. *Thunk, thunk...thunk thunk thunk.*

“I don't think that's gonna work,” Ford said.

The President glared at the crate. “Wood! My age-old enemy. In order to get out of here, this is going to take the silliest plan EVER CONCEIVED!”

“I think I know someone who can help with that,” Ford said, giving Stanley a gentle push.

Stanley felt like he was tingling from his toes to the top of his head. They were counting on *him* to get out of here!

“Hmm...” He looked carefully around the crate. “Well, since there's not a door here...let's make one!” He pulled back his fist. “HYAAAAH!”

“Stanley, wait –”

*Crunch.*

Stanley yelped and pulled back his hand. He wiggled his fingers. Not broken, but definitely as bruised as his ego.

“Excellent! I shall try the new door!” Trembley started hitting the wood with the key again.

“Give me that!”

Stanley snatched the key and rammed it at the wall. It stuck between two boards. Stanley rammed it in harder.

“I'm not sure that's going to work, either,” Ford said doubtfully.

He glanced back and grinned. “You'll see! Mr. President, help me push this key into the wood!”

Trembley knelt down and started shoving. He about as spindly as Ford, but since he was a grown-up he still had more muscle. He grunted with effort. “Almost...almost there...good, keep pushing...!”

Finally the key was in so far that only the flat little handle was showing.

“Okay,” Stan said. “Now back up!”

Stanley raised his foot, aimed carefully, and kicked the key as hard as he could. It shattered the wood, splinters flying as the plank broke in half.

The wall began to shudder. Stanley backed up – and the crate promptly collapsed around them.

“YES!” Trembley shouted. “WE HAVE DEFEATED THE ENEMY!”
It looked like they were in the middle of some kind of storage room. Loose bits of luggage were scattered or stacked at random around the walls. No sign of the Agent Coulson wannabes or anybody else.

Ford was grinning excitedly. “I get it! You used the key as a lever and the wood as a fulcrum!”

“Let’s get out of here!” Stan grabbed his brother’s hand and ran to the door.

The Sheriff and the Deputy were sitting in the hallway, some crumpled-up soda cans in a pile on the floor. Velazquez had big bruise on his cheek and he was gesturing with his broken sunglasses.

“I told you these things make it impossible to see inside!” he said, annoyed.

“Oh come on, you saw just fine with them in the cave! We need ’em to look like secret agents. Otherwise we just look like beat-up funeral directors!”

Stanley gestured for the others to be quiet and started walking very quietly out of the storage room. Ford and Trembley followed. The President made exaggerated tip-toeing motions – and promptly stepped on a can.

The cops looked up. “Hey!”

“RUN!”

They raced to the back of the train. There was an emergency hatch on the ceiling of the car last car. Trembley climbed the ladder underneath it and started trying to jam his key into the metal.

“Give me that!” Ford said, snatching it out of his hand. He pushed open the hatch and the three of them quickly climbed onto the roof, the officers right behind them. The forest whizzed past on either side. They ran towards the head of the train.

A train car loaded with logs forced them to stop – no way they could climb over those without falling off. They turned, the wind whipping Stan's hair into his eyes. The officers closed in.

“There is...no...escape!” the Sheriff panted. “Oh, man, I knew I should've done those aerobics classes.”

Johnson nodded. “I told you, man, we can just share my membership.”

“Sheriff Velazquez!” Dipper called. “Do you really want to lock us up in a government facility somewhere?”

“We've got no choice!” Velazquez said. “Our orders come from the very top.”

“Wait,” Ford said quickly, turning to Quentin. “Did you ever sign an official resignation?”

“NO SIR!” Trembley shouted. “I ATE A SALAMANDER AND THEN JUMPED OUT THE WINDOW!”

Stanley was fully prepared to gag, but Ford looked like this was the best news ever.

“Then, technically, you're still legally the President of the United States!” He turned back to the officers, smiling confidently. “You have to answer to this guy now.”

They stared. “What?”
Trembley straightened importantly. “As President of these several United States,” he declared, “I hereby order you to forget any of this ever happened! Oh and go on a delightful vacation,” he added – right before a train light beamed him in the head. “OW! MYESSS!”

“Vacation?” Velazquez repeated. He looked at his partner, growing excitement on his face. “What's the one place you've always wanted to visit? One...two...”

“Coast-to-Coast Coasters, the World’s Biggest Roller Coasters!”

They'd taken the next train back to the Falls, where the officers were so excited they immediately ran into the nearest store, bought the cheapest clothes they could find, and jumped onto the next train. Ford, Stan, and Trembley waved them off.

Ford couldn't believe all that had happened in the space of a few hours. They had not only discovered a conspiracy, they'd cracked it wide open and almost got sent to Area 51 or something. He wished it didn't have to stay a secret. It really would've been cool to get their names in the paper, but he wasn't sure the FBI would still do what Trembley said. Ford wanted to make sure they could stay in Gravity Falls, and that meant keeping today's secrets to themselves.

Stanley peered after the train, shading his eyes. “So...if there's no cops, does that mean there's no rules?”

Ford raised an eyebrow. “You know there's a President standing right here, right?”

Trembley knelt down and put his hand on Stan shoulder. “You've done a great service to your country, Stanley. As thanks I'd like to make you an official U.S. Congressman!” He pulled a thin black circle from his vest, popped it out into a top hat, and handed it over.

Stanley jammed it on his head, his eyes already gleaming with power. “I'm legalizing everything!” he declared.

Trembley turned to Ford. “And Falafel –”

“Um, what?”

“You, dear boy, are on your way to unlocking the mysteries of this great land! So I'd like you to have...my President's key.”

He held it out, and Ford took it. The end was a little bent from Stanley's kick, but the teeth of the key were still in good shape.

The three of them headed into town, hoping they could at least catch the end of Pioneer Day. Stanley insisted he had to get more Toffee Peanuts before they ran out, and after working so hard, he definitely deserved it. Trembley started telling them a story about how he'd fought a beaver to the almost-death over a piece of butterscotch.

They'd made it three blocks into town when they noticed a bunch of people running past them, headed for Main Street.

“Hey, what's going on?” Stan called.

“They're dueling!” a little kid shouted.

“Who?”
“Thompson Gables and that Pines Lady! Hurry up or you'll miss it!”

Ford glanced at Stan and they took off, Trembley running after them as they sprinted for the Town Center.

There was a huge crowd lined up all along the street, some of them probably there for the Pioneer Parade. People oohed and ahhed and Ford heard loud cracking sounds like gunshots. He started to panic. What sort of duel was this?

“They wouldn't use real bullets, would they?!” he said shrilly.

“Outta the way!” Stan started punching people in the back of their knees, forcing his way through the crowd.

“Watch it, kid!”

They heard a crack.

“There goes another one!”

“Oooh, did you see that? It went everywhere!”

“OUTTA MY WAY!” Stan bellowed.

They finally reached the front of the crowd to find –

Ford did a double-take. “They're...bowling?!”

Main Street had been turned into a giant outdoor bowling alley. Extra planks of wood from the Carpentry Contest had been used to set up two lanes in the middle of the road. At one end of the lanes, a squat little kid with pigtails stood ready to collect the fallen pins. At the other, Grauntie Mabel and Thompson (now dressed in his regular wrinkled-up outfit) were holding bowling balls, staring at the pins with a look of intense concentration on their faces. Alexander Anker was there with his camera man, narrating the duel. A gum-popping blonde was keeping score on a blackboard, watching eagerly with her chalk poised to write the next score.

Mabel stepped forward and literally hurled the ball at the pins. It sailed through the air, not touching the ground.

CRACK.

It flew so hard into the little white pins it cracked the first one and snapped the head of the second. The rest of the pins keeled over to avoid decapitation.

“Nice arm!” Stanley commented.

“They're tied!” the blonde announced shrilly. “They're totally tied and this is the last round! C'mon, Thompson, get 'em! Get em!”

“Thomp-son! Thomp-son! Thomps-on!”

Apparently Thompson was so unused to being cheered for that he didn't know how to react. He turned so fast to stare at the crowd that he dropped the bowling ball. It rolled a few feet towards the pins and then careened to the side, landing in the street gutter.

“Ooooooooh!” the crowd called.
“C’mon Thompson! Hit those pins!” Stanley shouted.

“Shouldn't we be cheering for Grauntie Mabel?”

“She is a skirt-wearing conman who can sew twenty sweaters a day and make fudge-flavored cookies shaped like Ronald Reagan's head,” Stanley said. “He is a news writer who supplements his income selling toothpicks door to door and thinks it's still cool to wear socks with sandals.”

“YOU CAN DO IT, THOMPSON!” Ford screamed.

Thompson's second swing was even wilder than the first, but at least he was aiming in the right direction. His bowling ball bounced, rolled, and smacked into the side of the pins, sending all but two of them flying off the back of the lane.

“He won!” the blonde lady screeched, so excited her gum fell out of her mouth. She pointed to the board with shaking pink-nailed fingers. “HE WON, HE WON, THOMPSON WON!”

The crowd pressed in around them, carrying Stan, Ford, and Trembley forward. They quickly found their way to Grauntie Mabel while people crowded around Thompson, asking for selfies and bowling strategies and offering tips to get those sweat stains out of his clothes.

Mabel looked down. “Kids!” she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “I didn't think you'd make it! Where've you been all day?”

“Cracking a century-old coverup on the real town founder of Gravity Falls,” Stan said instantly.

“Stanley!” Ford gasped.

“Yeah!” Mabel frowned down at them. “Shouldn't you have had supervision doing stuff like that?”

“It's okay, we had an actual President with us!” Stanley gestured to Trembley. But he was standing a few yards away, fighting off a woodpecker who insisted on picking at his hair.

“I told you, I don't need another haircut!” Trembley was saying.

Woodpecker guy came running up. “Stay away from my wuvy-duvy!” he shouted, brandishing a fistful of radishes. They proceeded to chase each other down the street.

Mabel, predictably, looked unfazed by this. She shrugged. “Oh, well, as long as there was an adult. But did you see the duel? Did you see how I lost?” She was practically bouncing on her heels.

Stanley squinted at her. “And it makes sense to be happy about that...why?”

“Because a certain somebody had to win! Look!” She pointed. Thompson had been dragged over to the meat booth, where he and a bunch of other townsfolk were taking turns basting the meat with his microphone turkey baster. Thompson actually looked pretty happy.

“Speaking of food, I'm starving!” Stanley said. “Can we eat toffee peanuts for dinner, Grauntie Mabel?”

She shrugged again. “I don't see why not.”

“YES! Be right back!” He dashed off for the candy booth.

“How did you get in a duel with Thompson in the first place?” Ford asked, as they walked to the side of the road. “And how did they make bowling alleys?” He gestured to the street, where The
Dirty Glass Guys were already working to dismantle the bowling alleys to make way for the Pioneer Parade.

Mabel waved her hand. “Oh, that? Boyish Dan did it, but that was nothin'. You should see the cabin I helped him make earlier.”

“Boyish Dan?”

“Yeah – hey, looks like he won the Carpentry Contest!” She pointed to the end of the street, where the Carpentry Contest was still set up. Each table had a small carved object in the middle. An actual one-room logged cabin stood to one side. A lot of people had left the duel once it was over and hurried to the contest for the announcement of the winner.

Boyish Dan was very easy to spot, as he was sitting on two of his Uncle's shoulders, while a third crowned Boyish Dan with his own creation: a miniature, plaid-patterned log cabin.

“BEHOLD!” announced the uncle. “This year's Carpentry King: MANLY DAN!”

“YEEEEAAAH!” Dan shouted, raising both fists in the air.

The crowd cheered and started chanting, “Man-ly Dan! Man-ly Dan!”

“Wow,” Ford said. “The plaid is...actually not a surprise,”

“He even included a little plaid-patterned bed with a matching vanity,” Mabel said. “Perfect for the frontier wife who still needs her beauty sleep. They talked about keeping it to crown next year's Carpentry King.” She sniffled, wiping a tear from her eye. “It's so beautiful.”

Stanley, still wearing his top hat, convinced the Toffee lady that he was a Congressman collecting the standard Toffee Peanut Tax. (He was pretty sure she just went along with it because it was Pioneer Day. Nobody else would believe he was a real Congressman, so he was making the most of it while he could.)

He'd just loaded up his arms when he turned around and ran smack into Ford. The bags spilled around them on the sidewalk.

“Oh, sorry – here...” Ford bent to pick them up, and the Northwest file peeked out of his jacket.

“Hey, I forgot about that!” Stan said suddenly, grabbing for the file.

“Stanley, wait –”

“Hang on a sec! I gotta go find that Anker guy –”

“Stanley. Wait.” Ford grabbed Stan's vest to make him stop. “Look, I know Trembley ordered the police to forget, but a conspiracy this big means they weren't the only ones in on it. If we publish this, the government might notice. And they might really take us away this time.”

“Yeah, but...if Trembley...” Stan trailed off. His brother was right – he usually was. And he really didn't want to leave Gravity Falls.

He looked down at the folder.

“But...it's proof,” he said, and he didn't know what he was talking about because he wasn't talking about the town founder.
Ford groaned. “I know. This would get me on Seandra's date-worthy radar for sure.”

Stanley could see the thought was killing Ford. If Ford was giving up date-worthy material, then it must be really important. He wished it wasn't making Ford so miserable, though. He reached out to pat his brother's shoulder –

“Excuse you, loser,” Preston said, walking right between them so that Stanley's arm smacked back against his chest. “Town royalty coming through.” He crushed the Toffee Peanut bags under his custom-made leather boots.

“Hey!” Stan barked.

“That's for horses, and you're not at their level yet,” Preston said, turning with a sneer. “Now, if you'll excuse me, the Pioneer Parade is about to start and I have somewhere important to be.” He laughed and walked away.

Stan looked at the peanuts. He met Ford's eyes. Then, as one, they ran after Preston, who had gotten in the back of his family's limo.

“HEY PRESTON!” Ford shouted.

The limo stopped and the back window rolled down. Preston was sitting in the back with his mother, both of them checking their teeth in small handheld mirrors.

“Mm, Preston, did you make friends with the riff raff?” Pacifica asked distractedly.

Ford shoved the file through the window. “Nathanial Northwest didn't found Gravity Falls and you're whole family's a sham.”

“Deal with it!” Stan added.

Preston looked down at the file as the limo pulled away. They caught a glimpse of the horrified look on his face.

“What?! Mom!” he yelped, as the limo window rolled back up.

“Aw yeeees.” Stan made two fists and pulled them slowly towards his waist, savoring the victory. “Revenge is underrated, that felt awesome!”

“Better than toffee peanuts?”

“Shhh! I'm having a moment!”

The Pioneer Day Parade (led by Preston, of course) took place just before dusk. Unfortunately, Stan didn't get to savor the look of barely controlled horror on his face, because Grauntie Mabel's truck was one of the floats and they didn't want to miss hogging the crowd's attention. He and Ford sat in the back of her truck. The coolest part was that people threw candy at the parade floats instead of confetti, and Stan made a game of trying to catch the candy in his mouth. Ford kept score of how many times he caught them.

It was in the middle of a spectacular candy-mouth save, when Stanley had literally dangled upside down from the bed of the truck to score a toffee peanut, that he realized Ford had fallen asleep. He pulled himself back up.

Mabel was driving the truck, of course, so it was just him and Ford in the back. Ford was sitting on a
big bag of flour, all slumped over, his head smushed at a funny angle against the side of the truck.

Stan rolled his eyes. Clearly Ford needed to work on his sugar intake. Stanley had eaten half his body weight in candy and he was still going strong!

He went and grabbed an armful of Pioneer-y clothes and stuffed them under Ford's head like a pillow, then took off his glasses. He wasn't sure where to put them so they'd be safe, so he folded them and hooked them over the front of his own shirt.

“Guess I can't make any more crazy saves like this, huh?” he muttered to himself. He looked around. There were a couple of barrels stuffed with clothes. He emptied them out and put the barrels on the edge of the truck's bed. That way, if any candy came their way, he'd catch it in the barrels. Then he went to sit next to Ford.

“Crazy day, huh, Ford?” he said, talking quietly so he wouldn't wake his brother. “The library wasn't even that boring. Who knew they had pictures there? And the museum was pretty cool, too, although I still think we should've stolen a ribcage or something...”

He reached up and patted a pocket in his vest. He'd nicked something from that underground cavern when nobody was looking and tucked it away. Yep – still there. He'd give it to Ford later. He was gonna love it.

He leaned back, rested his head against Ford's, and slowly fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Ford comforting Stanley in the train was one of my favorite parts!

Also, how’d you guys like the B story with Grauntie Mabel? I figured she'd be REALLY into Pioneer Day, so she probably wouldn't act the same as a cranky Grunkle Stan, but she might still get into trouble with her high-sugar shenanigans. And with Thompson being a closet Otaku, he'd be the perfect guy to do cosplay – and then things just rolled from there. Anyway I hope you liked it!
“...and that's why I'm banned from the Bighorn County Rodeo!”

“You've sure lived a colorful life,” Fiddleford commented, adjusting his backpack.

*That's one way to put it,* Ford thought.

Grauntie Mabel had taken them out hiking – they'd started going on a semi-regular basis ever since the opening day of Fishing Season, and Ford found that the hiking strengthened his muscles and made it easier to keep up with Stanley. His shoulders had gotten stronger, too, so the heavy backpacks full of food she made them wear didn't bother him nearly as much as when they'd first started doing it.

That said, Grauntie Mabel had an annoying habit of telling long, uncomfortable personal stories. He wished he could hang back with Stanley and Carla, but they were doing their “romantic whispering” thing and Mabel always roped him back up front to give them space.

Suddenly Ford noticed that Fiddleford was no longer with them. He'd stopped walking a few steps back.

“Something wrong?” Ford asked him.

“Yeah...” Fiddleford frowned, scanning the path they'd been walking. There was nothing on it but the shadows of the trees. “Where are Stanley and Carla?”

“Where *are* we?”

Stanley pushed through a small bush. “Just – just a little farther and then we'll get to that Romance Rock thing!”

“You said that five minutes ago.” Carla stopped walking and put a hand on her hip. “Face it. We're lost.”

Stanley looked around, feigning surprise. “We *are*? Huh! Well, don't worry, babe.” He puffed out his chest. “I've got a sense of direction like a compass with GPS!”

Carla narrowed her eyes. “You don't seem upset about this at all,” she said slowly. “Stanley, did you get us lost *on purpose*?”

“Who, me?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Aw, c'moon! You gotta admit, this is a great romantic spot.” He swept his arms wide, like Mabel when she was introducing a new exhibit at the Shack. The redwoods made a dented little circle, sort of like a heart if you squinted hard enough, and there were some little yellow flowers growing low in the ground at their feet.
“Welllll...”

He grinned. He had her hooked. “Right? And look –” He pulled something out of his pocket and set it on the ground. He'd gotten Fiddlenerd to make him a portable radio (in exchange for calling him “Fiddleford” for one whole hour). Stanley pulled up the antennae and tuned the dial. He flipped it to a Golden Oldies channel and a Beetles song came on.

Carla gasped, grinning. “Oh, I love this song!”

Stanley smiled back and held out his hand. “Well then, my lady – shall we dance?”

“Staaaaanleeeey!”

“Caaarllaaaaa!”

Ford paused to take a drink of water from his canteen. The other two followed suite. They'd been shouting for a while now as they walked back down the trail. They'd almost gotten back to the trailhead near the Bait Shop, but there was still no sign of either one of them.

Mabel was starting to look worried. “D'you think they got hurt and can't answer?”

Ford shrugged. “Eh, Stanley's probably been two feet behind us this whole time, ducking out of sight and laughing when we didn't spot him.”

Fiddleford capped his canteen, looking doubtful. “I dunno, Ford...it's been a few hours. I'm starting to get worried. When do you think it would be a good time to call the park rangers?” he asked Mabel.

“Ah, maybe we shouldn't concern them just yet,” she said nervously. Ford suppressed an eye roll. That was probably code for I might have accidentally covered the Park Ranger's car in frosting again as a totally harmless prank but she's probably not over it.

Ford glanced at the sun. “Well, we should probably pick a time when it would be wise to call the ranger. If he really wandered off and got lost, we could go back and forth on the trail and still not find him.”

“Didn't he have his compass with him?” Fiddleford asked.

Ford shrugged. “Sure, but that doesn't mean it'll help much. He could head too far south or too far east or whatever and miss a landmark through the trees. Not to mention there's tons of stuff in the forest...” He said it and realized it at the same time: even if Stanley wasn't lost, there were tons of dangerous animals in the forest, natural or not. What if Stanley had started this as a prank...but now was in serious danger?

_Thump. Thump. Thump._

Carla froze mid-step, the smile slipping from her face.

Stanley nearly stepped on her feet but caught himself in time. “What's wrong?”

“You feel that?” she asked, turning around.
Stanley switched off the radio and they stood perfectly still, listening. For a minute there was nothing but silence. Then the thumping came again, louder and closer...coming from all around them. A thunderous roar shook the air, vibrating up through the soles of their feet. Birds screamed and took flight from the trees. Carla yelped and grabbed Stanley's arm.

“Wh-what is that?” she whispered.

“Uh…” A bear, a pack of wolves, a tree giant with a temper tantrum... None of the possibilities were good. He moved closer to Carla.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

It was almost nighttime, and there was still no sign of either Stanley or Carla. The three of them had gathered at the picnic tables by the Bait Shop, which was just about to close. Mabel came out of the shop, having borrowed their phone.

“The ranger said she'd meet us here in twenty minutes,” she told them, looking rather pale.

“I should go in and call my dad,” Fiddleford said. “I told him I'd be back by now, I don't want him getting worried.”

“Good idea,” Mabel said faintly, as he went in to use the phone. “Stanford, don't you have twin ESP or something? Can't you at least tell if Stanley's safe?”

“No, we don't have that,” Ford said, scanning the trees, the strain evident in his voice. No way Stanley would keep up a prank for this long. He was starting to wish they did have ESP. What if Stanley was well and truly lost...or maybe hurt...or even hunted...?

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

Ford jumped. “Grauntie Mabel, did you feel – ?”

She grabbed his shoulder and jerked him behind her. “Get behind me.”

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

They started backing towards the Bait Shop. Ford and Mabel stared toward the forest, their eyes huge. Ford whipped out his notebook, but his hands shaking. What if – what if got Stanley was now coming for them – ?

A huge hulking shadow emerged between the trees, growing larger and larger, and suddenly it broke into the clearing –

Stanley stood on Chutzpaur's right shoulder, grabbing his horn for balance and, apparently, to steer him.

“ONWARD, MIGHTY MANOTAURS!” he shouted.

“RAAAAGH!” shouted the other manotaurs.

Ford’s jaw dropped.
Chutzpaur came out of the forest first, holding the front left pole of what was obviously a palanquin. They'd converted the Party Wagon into a vehicle fit for a forest princess, garnished with drapes of fluffy green moss threaded through with wildflowers. Three more manotaurs held the other legs of the palanquin, and Carla sat in the middle, wearing a crown of fresh green pine needles with little yellow flowers peeking out between the leaves.

“What the...”

Mabel gasped, suddenly filled with glee. “I didn't know there was an army of rogue football players living in the forest!” She whipped out her camera and started taking picture after picture.

Stanley spotted them and pointed Chutzpaur in their direction. “There, O Manly Manotaurs! HYAH!”

“RAAAAAGH!” the manotaurs called back, charging towards them.

They reached Ford and Mabel, came to a sharp stop, and lowered the palanquin to the ground. Carla stepped out daintily, taking the hand of a larger manotaur with skin like rough granite.

“Thank you, Pituitaur,” she said daintily, and the manotaur actually blushed.

Ford gaped.

Stanley climbed down Chutzpaur's back and jumped onto the ground next to Carla. He turned and saluted them. “Many thanks, Manly Manotaurs! Don’t forget those tips on flirting I showed you!”

“And keep practicing your sewing!” Carla called as they hustled away. “Nobody wants to go out with a guy that smells like dead animal kilt!”

Mabel looked thrilled. “I have got to put together a football team! We can totally beat the Squirrels now and they shall never dominate the forest again!”

Fiddleford chose that moment to come back out. He saw Stanley and Carla and his whole face lit up.

“You're back!” he shouted, and hurried over to give them both a light hug. “We were so worried! What on earth happened?”

“Let's see.” Carla held up her fingers and ticked them off. “Stanley got us lost on purpose, the manotaurs surrounded us, I taught them to sew, we learned a valuable lesson about priorities, and Stanley convinced them to give us a ride back home.”

Ford looked dumbfounded. “You taught them to sew.”

Stanley shrugged. “I mean, doing the pain hole thing was fun and all, but having a girlfriend sure beats living in a smelly cave all the time. Ow!” He glared up at Mabel, who had just smacked him on the head with a rolled-up park map. “What was that for?!”

“For getting lost and making me worry,” she scolded. “Stanley, I do not care how many hot feral football players you befriend – wow that's a lotta F's – but getting lost can be seriously dangerous, and if you do that again I'll phone your mother and get all your embarrassing baby pictures sent over and I will show them all to Carla.”

He gasped. “You wouldn't.”

“Every. Last. One.”
“Okay, okay! Geez!”

She huffed. “I gotta go tell the park ranger not to come. You guys stay right here until I come back.”

“I really am glad you guys got back safe,” Fiddleford said.

Ford was practically sputtering. “But – you mean you did the painhole? They let you become a man? The multibear?!”

Stanley raised an eyebrow. “Dude, chill.”

“Yeah, it really wasn't a big deal,” Carla said. “They got surprisingly into the whole 'sewing' thing. I mean really – what girl would want to date a guy who smells like dead animal?”

“You, apparently,” Ford said.

“Har, har, Poindexter.”

Mabel came out of the Bait Shop. “Okay, troops! Time to head on home. You guys wanna stop by Greasy's Diner for some diner dinner food?”

“YEAH!”

“Excellent!” She pointed dramatically to the parking lot, where she'd parked Ria's car. “To the parking lot, my minions! CHARGE!!!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Because I can totally see Stanley breezing through the mansformation.

Chutzpaur: Now climb the mountain!

Stanley: Too easy!

Chutzpaur: Now jump the gorge!

Stanley: GERONIMOOOO!

Chutzpaur: Now get tattoos!

Stanley: CHUTZPAUR YOU ARE NOW MY BROTHER
“There she is, Stanley...the cheapest fair money can rent! I spared every expense!”

The clearing in front of the Mystery Shack was filling up with newly-erected games and booths. There were booths for corndogs, weird-looking stuffed animals, sodas, Puffy Chip bags three feet long, Mystery Shack snow globes, an ice cream truck, and a really skinny yellow booth Mabel was going to use for her Fortune-Telling act. There were tons of games and rides, too – Test Your Strength, a Ferris Wheel, and a Tunnel of Love and Corndogs. (Stanley was already planning to hide in the tunnel and yell out “THAT'S SO CORNY!” every time a couple tried to kiss.)

Ford was supposed to be testing out the Skytram. From somewhere above them, Stan heard a snap and then a prolonged scream rapidly getting closer. The Skytram crashed into the ground next to Stan and Mabel, with a very shell-shocked Ford still inside.

“I think the Skytram is broken,” he said shakily. “Also most of my bones.”

“Haha! This guy!” Mabel laughed, as Ford climbed out. “Alright, alright. I got a job for you two. I printed up a bunch of fake safety inspection certificates. Go slap one on anything that looks like a lawsuit.”

“Grauntie Mabel, is that legal?” Ford asked. She grinned. “When there's no cops around –”

“Anything is legal!” Stan finished, and they laughed.

“You kids have fun! And don't do anything I wouldn't do!” she said, winking as she walked away.

“You heard the lady!” Stan said cheerfully. He tossed the certificates in the nearest trash can and grabbed Ford's hand. “C'mon! I wanna go rig the strength tester so nobody but me can win!”

Ria was putting the finishing touches of paint on the side of the booth when Mabel came over.

“How's it looking, Ria?” Mabel asked.

“Almost ready to go, Mrs. Pines.” Ria sat back, wiping her face. It was a small booth – Mabel hadn't been able to get a tent on such short notice – but Ria had done a truly marvelous job painting it. Indigo waves swirled against the lavender background, spiraling in hypnotic patterns around clusters of glittering gems.

“Woooow, it looks amazing!” Mabel gushed. “I never knew you were this talented! I can't believe I have you stuffing random taxidermy monsters together. We'll have to think of a way to make money off of this...hey, did you bring the bag?”

Ria held up a large Off The Shelf shopping bag.

“Excellent! I'm not only going to look like a real psychic, but I've been people-watching since I first learned how to conceal myself in a heap of dead foliage. No one can predict the future more
“Yeah,” said Ria. “Except for, perhaps, some kind of futuristic time traveler.”

The flag on top of the booth promptly fell off and whacked Mabel in the head. She yelped and rubbed the spot. “Perfect...looks like the screw came loose. Again. Hey, tape it on there, would you, Ria? I can’t find my red screwdriver anywhere.”

Ria grinned. “Maybe some magical creature or paranormal entity took it.”

“You’ve been spending just a tad too much time with those kids.”

Ten yards away, a bald, rather portly man in goggles and a one-piece sweatsuit stood hidden behind the Port-A-Potties. Holding the red screwdriver in his free hand, he brought his watch to his mouth and spoke into its glowing screen.

“The mission is proceeding as planned. Over.”

He used the screwdriver to tighten a gear on the side of the watch. With each twist, his whole sweatsuit flickered, showing a window into various landscapes: the forest, the lake at night, and finally the Port-A-Potties directly behind him.

Now camouflaged as effectively as a chameleon, the man glanced around furtively, then moved off towards the fair. With the rather disturbing exception of his head, the suit rendered him nearly invisible, blending in perfectly with his surroundings.

And if anyone did see him, they would just assume he was a ghost.

“It's twelve o' clock!” Grauntie Mabel's gravelly voice rang out over the fair, three times as loud as normal thanks to her trusty megaphone. “The Pines Prophecy Booth is now open!”

A horrible squealing noise sounded over the megaphone, making Ford – and everyone – wince and clutch their ears.

“Step right up for your fortune!” she continued. “Hurry and get the secrets to avoid an untimely demise! I'm talkin' to you, Flip-Flops! You wanna die tripping on your own two feet? Then get over here!”

Ford tuned it out. He'd heard his mother give the same “seer” spiel to hundreds of customers over the years. By now he was thoroughly convinced that being psychic meant making stuff up for a living. Besides, he had more important things to think about.

Like his date with Seandra.

He was standing with her at the Corn Dog booth. They were so close he could smell her cherry lipgloss. She wore a denim jacket over a shirt covered with sunflowers, and a pair of jeans with her notebook sticking out of the back pocket.

Ford grinned as the vendor handed him his corn dog. It was shaped like a question mark, right down to the separate dot at the bottom.

“How do they get them in this shape?” he asked. “It's unnatural.”
“But Ford,” she said, holding it up to the Delicious sign. “They're so...delicious?”

They laughed.

Some of the mustard fell off her corndog and splattered on her sleeve. “Aw, boo! I'll be right back.”

“I'll be right here!” He laughed awkwardly for a minute and then whispered, “I love you.”

“Look at you two!”

Ford turned. Stanley was walking up to him, a huge grin on his face and two cones of cotton candy in each hand.

“I didn't know you had it in you, Sixer!” Stanley said, nudging him with an elbow. “You're on your way to bein' serious boyfriend material. Like me!”

“Tch, c'moooon,” Ford said, playing it cool. “It's no big deal...”

“Uh, yeah it is!”

“Yeah okay it is!” Ford gestured excitedly with his corn dog. “Isn't this amazing?! I just dove in! I said, 'Hey, you wanna hang out at the fair?' And you know what she said?”

“I'm guessing...yes?”

“She said 'Yeah, I guess so!'” Ford punched his brother lightly on the arm. “It totally worked! All your advice about just going for it? It's finally paying off!”

“When are you gonna learn, Sixer? When it comes to women, I'm always right about everything! Hey...” he paused, sniffing. “Do you smell ego and hairspray?”

A shadow fell over the twins.

Aaron Anker stood in front of them, wearing his usual Varsity jacket with the padded shoulders and a condescending sneer on his mouth. “Hey. Either of you dorks see Seandra around?”

“Who wants to know?” Ford demanded.

Aaron grabbed a chunk of Stan's cotton candy.

“Hey!” Stan jerked it away, glaring as Aaron popped it into his mouth.

“Yeah, I got this pair of super-tight jeans,” Aaron said with studied nonchalance, putting one foot on the nearest wooden crate. “Thought she might wanna check 'em out.”

“Yeah you know I think I saw her in the bottomless pit,” Ford said, grinning with clenched teeth. “You should really go jump in there.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes. “Maybe I will, smart guy,” he said. He walked away, kneeling Ford's arm as he passed.

Stan was still glaring after him. “He is such a jerk.”

Ford winced. “Yeah, but he's a jerk with tight pants and a reporter-worthy camera. I need to keep
him away from Seandra at all costs.”

“Don't worry, brother,” Stan said, wrapping an arm around Ford’s shoulder. “Whatever happens I'll be right there, supporting you every step of the OH MY GOSH A GOAT!”

Stan was so excited he actually dropped his candy, pointing with both hands to a poster taped up to a pole. It read: WIN A GOAT!

Stanley took off like a rocket, running so fast he bounced off of random people like the ball in a pachinko machine. He smacked into a fisherman guy (who dropped his sandwich), the “Get It” Girl (who dropped her soda) and a random little kid who promptly ate dirt.

Ford rolled his eyes. Leave it to Stan to get distracted by random goats. Unlike Ford, whose intellectual prowess allowed him to focus keenly for hours at a time on the things that really mattered, like –

“Hey Ford.”

“Hey, Seandra!” Ford said, his voice about three notes too shrill. “Glad you're back!”

He sniffed. She’d changed her lipgloss from cherry to grape soda, his favorite.

Stanley ran straight to the goat booth. It was pretty obvious where to go because there was a giant wooden pen filled with goats and hay and goaty things with a big sign on the top that said WIN A GOAT.

Two farmer guys stood in the middle of the booth on a wide wooden platform. One of them, with brown hair and no eyebrows, held a bucket and threw goat feed in random directions. The other wore a beat-up sunhat and stood yelling at the crowd.

“If’n you can guess the critter’s weight, you can take the critter home!” Sunhat shouted.

Stanley ran up to the booth so fast he couldn't stop and nearly jackknifed over the low wooden pen. He couldn't believe his luck. A whole booth full of living lawnmowers who could play serious parkour! It was like the ultimate chore-doing machine!

He scanned the booth. There were five or six goats, one chewing on the bucket guy's pants, one gnawing another goat's horn, but most of them looked pretty bored. Except for one little buckling that was too small to jump over the wall of the pen – so it was rapidly chewing its way through instead.

Stan's eyes shone. Yes! A fellow miscreant!

Suddenly he heard the most annoying laugh in the universe. He turned.

Preston was walking past with his cronies, GQ1 and GQ2. Preston smiled, his upper lip curled in a sneer.

“Oh, look, Simon found his real twin,” he said, and his cronies guffawed.

“Preston,” Stanley growled. He whipped around and shouted up to Sunhat. “Hey you! What do I gotta do to get the goat?” He pointed to the jail breaker, who had now made a hole big enough to stick his head through.
Sunhat grunted. “Oh, you mean Fifteen Poundy. How much you guessin' he weighs?”

Stan stared at him. “Um. Fifteen pounds?”

Sunhat look boggled. “Are you some kinda witch?”

Bucket picked up the goat and handed it to Stanley. The goat looked up at him and bleated.

“You'll be needin' these,” Bucket said, holding out a knife and fork.

Stan glared at him.

Bucket shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Stanley wrapped one arm under the goat and used the other to support its legs. The goat bleated again and pressed its small warm nose under Stan's chin.

He laughed. “Everything is different now!”

Ford and Seandra walked through the fair.

“Whoa!” she said suddenly, pointing. “Check it out!”

Ford looked. It was that booth he'd seen earlier from the Skytram, the one with the creepy-looking purple plushies set up in a row on top. The plushies were bug-eyed monsters that looked disturbingly like something his Grauntie Mabel would put in the Museum: purple bear bear bodies, yellow duck feet and beaks, and eyes that stared at the world like they'd eaten way too much Smile Dip. To win one, you had to knock over a pyramid of bottles with a baseball.

They headed over.

Seandra smiled. “I don't know if it's a duck or a panda, but I want one.”

“My great-aunt taught me the secret to these games,” Ford said. “You aim for the carnie's head, and take the prize when he's unconscious.”

She laughed. “Nice.”

Fluttery happy things happened in his stomach when she laughed. He hoped he wasn't blushing.

He took a ticket out of his jacket and handed it to the vendor. “One ball, please.”

The vendor took the ticket and dropped a baseball into Ford's hand. “You on'y get one chance.”

He glanced at Seandra. She gave him a thumbs up.

*Okay, how does Stanley do it? He waves his arm in circles to warm up his shoulder...*

Ford warmed up his arm. “And a-one, and a-two, and a–” He threw it, grunting with effort. The ball shot towards the bottles, hit the table they were on instead, and ricocheted straight toward Seandra's face.

*SMACK!*

“OW! My eye!” She hunched over, her right eye already turning a nasty shade of purple.
Ford panicked. “Omigosh! Omigosh Seandra, are you okay?”

“Ugh...does it look swollen?” She turned to face him. Her right eye was so puffed she couldn't even open it. As Ford watched, it was turning an even darker shade of purple, and the skin around it was mottled with red.

“E-everything's gonna be fine,” Ford said shrilly. “Don't worry, I'll – I'll go get some ice!”

He sprinted straight for the Mystery Shack – there was a cooler out front where Grauntie Mabel stored overpriced sodas. He reached and pulled out a 5-pound bag of ice. It was too big to carry easily, but he had to make sure he had plenty of ice and could give her more as it melted.

He slung it in front of him, lacing his hands underneath it, and hurried back to the fair. He glanced left and right.

“Where is she, where is she,” he muttered urgently.

There! Still standing by the PanDucks, holding one hand over her eye. He broke into a run.

“UMPH!”

He ran smack into another guy and the ice broke open, scattering ice cubes across the grass.

“Hey! Watch where you're going!” Ford shouted, scrambling to pick up the ice.

The guy's sweatsuit was speckled with melting ice drops. He ignored Ford, grabbed something off the ground, and ran off.

Ford struggled to get all the ice back in the bag. He couldn't do anything about the hole, but he heaved himself to his feet, trying to grab as much of the bag as he could in his arms. The cubes were already melting. He had to hurry. He went straight for the plushie booth, chunks of ice already spilling out behind him.

He stopped short.

“Alright, just ease your eyeball into my freezee cone.”

Aaron Anker was standing right there next to Seandra, holding a purple freezee cone to Seandra's face. And she was leaning into it, sighing with relief, her good eye focused on Aaron's face.


Aaron grinned, showing his perfect white teeth. “Yeah, I was just here at the right place at the right time.”

Ford hugged the leaking ice bag to his chest, staring at them anxiously. What was he supposed to do? He couldn't go over there now, with ice cubes covered in grass! Not when Aaron had just given her an icepack that was both colorful and delicious!

Aaron fiddled with the zipper on his jacket. “Y'know, I've been meaning to ask you... We've been spending a lot of time together, and...I was wondering if, maybe...you wanted to go out with me?”

Ford bit his lip and squeezed the bag tighter. The ice cubes squeaked in protest.

Seandra thought about it. “Yeah, I guess so,” she shrugged.
Aaron pumped a fist. “Sweet!”

Ford's jaw dropped. His brain froze. There was a noise like someone popping a heart-shaped balloon and, as if on cue, all his ice cubes went pouring over his shoes, soaking into his socks.

His brother's voice suddenly sounded from Ford's right.

“Look, Ford!” he said, walking up to him. “I won a pet goat! His name is Gompers. I call him that because he's a Great Chomper. Gomper!”

Ford felt a tugging that he knew must be the goat nibbling at his empty bag of hearts. Er...empty bag of ice. Same difference...

“Everything is different now,” he whispered hollowly.

“Hey, what're you looking at?” Stan asked.

Mutely, Ford pointed.

They watched as Aaron Anker took Seandra's hand and they headed straight for the Tunnel of Love and Corn dogs. They hopped into the first open seat, and Seandra leaned ever so slightly onto Aaron's shoulder. Aaron put his arm behind the her, his fingertips just brushing the end of her ponytail, as the two of them entered the tunnel of corny love.

Stan lowered Gompers to the ground.

“...Oh.”

Ford spent the rest of the day in a broken-heart-induced haze. At some point he remembered Stan trying to get him to eat by poking cotton candy at his face, but Ford hadn't been interested. He was too busy lying on the ramp of the Slopey Toss, pretending he was an inanimate object immune to emotional trauma.

Stan had passed the time by giving Ford a cotton candy beard. Gompers had promptly licked it off. Ford was vaguely aware that the two of them were still close by. Stan had gotten an assortment of fair food and was trying out what foods Gompers would eat. Everything, by the sound of it.

Make-Pizza-Not-War Guy came up to him, looking back and forth between Ford and the bean bags. “Uh, are you gonna move?” he asked.

Ford groaned.

Make-Pizza-Not-War Guy sighed and trudged away.

Stanley held Gompers over Ford's face. “Paging Private Gompers! We got a boy here with a broken heart. Send backup and a hot lady nurse, over!” He laughed, but stopped when Ford kept staring blankly upward. “C'mon, Sixer. These are the jokes.”

“Stanley, do you ever wish you could go back and undo just one mistake?” Ford asked.

“Dude, don’t beat yourself up over it. Other people will do that for you.”

Ford sat up, frustration rising in his chest. “I mean, Seandra only went out with Aaron because he had the ice, and she only needed ice because of the baseball, and I would've had the ice if it wasn't
The same guy from earlier was standing over by the Ferris Wheel. He was turned away, but Ford definitely recognized that stupid gray sweatsuit.

“Hey you! Tool Belt!” Ford shouted angrily. “You ruined my life!”

The guy turned. He had a fat pear-shaped face and goggles that matched his sweatsuit. Something about him was oddly familiar, but Ford was too angry to wonder what it was.

The guy jumped. “Hauh?”

“Don’t ‘hauh’ me, I’ve seen you before!” Ford said, stalking over. Stanley trailed close behind, Gompers tucked under one arm. “What's your deal, are you following us around?” he demanded.

“And why are you bald?” Stan asked. “What's up with that?”

The guy swiveled his head like a very pudgy owl. “Uh – my position has been compromised! Assuming Stealth Mode...” He reached for his watch and turned a dial. Immediately, his whole suit flickered into garish color, so he looked like the “No Channel” screen on a TV. Then other images took their place – a foggy lake, weird melting pillars, and an arcade at dusk, like a slideshow was being projected onto his suit. The guy was starting to sweat. “Color match...initiating color match...c’mon, dang it!” He took out a red screwdriver and started working on the watch.

“Dude, you're your own home movie theater!” Stan said.

Gears were turning in Ford's head. There were no lights being projected at the guy's clothes, so that ruled out the idea that his watch was sending a wireless signal to a projecting device. And even though his arms had been held in front of his body, the pictures that had appeared didn't look curved over his arms. Like the technology to do it had been programmed to compensate for the specific curves and contours of his limbs. And if he wasn't using projectors, that meant the watch was sending signals straight to the suit itself. Which meant that the suit had to contain millions of tiny little cameras and screens, probably designed to show exactly the same scenery that the guy was standing in front of. A suit that could blend with its surroundings – assuming that was what it had been designed to do, which was the only thing that made sense – Ford had never even heard of such technology.

All this raced through Ford's brain in a split second, but he quickly reached the only logical conclusion.

“You're from the future,” he said slowly, staring at the suit with awe. What Fiddleford wouldn't give to take a look at that!


He threw a white square of cloth at Stanley's face.

“You missed,” Ford said.

“And this is a baby wipe,” Stan added, peeling it off.

The guy groaned and sat down on the hay bale behind him. “Alright, you've cornered me. I'm...a time traveler.”

“Then, do you have, like...a time machine, or something?” Ford asked.
The guy looked at him. “That's...kinda how it works.”

Ford opened his mouth to defensively. After all, there were lots of ways to travel through time – wormholes, rifts in spacetime, maybe even magic. Then something caught his eye.

The Ferris wheel was still running. In the fading twilight, its lightbulbs had been turned on, casting a clean, pearly glow over the fair. Aaron and Seandra were sitting in one of the seats, with Aaron's arm wrapped around Seandra's shoulders, looking wordlessly into each other's eyes. Ford watched them until the wheel moved them up and out of sight.

_Time machine._

“Can I borrow it?” he blurted, his eyes still on the wheel.

Stan had his doubts.

The guy in front of them was sweaty, weirdly dressed, and had mistaken a baby wipe for a memory wipe. Time traveller? Maybe not. Jogger who'd run too hard and was now in a delusional fantasy world brought on by dehydration? Probably.

But Ford was obviously desperate.

“C'mon! Can't I use your time machine just _once_?” Ford asked.

“Out of the question!” Crazy Jogger said, sweeping his arms for emphasis. He grabbed a small yellow tape measure from his pants pocket. “You know this is sensitive, extremely complicated time equipment!”

He demonstrated by pulling out the tape measure. It was marked like a ruler.

“So, it's a tape measure,” Stan said flatly.

“You shut your time mouth!” Crazy Jogger barked.

Even Ford was starting to doubt him at this point. “Is this making any sense to you?” he muttered to Stan.

“I think he's just crazy,” Stan whispered back.

“Oh, you don't believe me?”

Crazy Jogger yanked out the tape, then let it go. He vanished in a blinding blue flash.

Stan and Ford glanced at each other, but before they could say a thing, there was another flash and the guy was back – dressed from head to toe in something straight out of the Middle Ages. Brown tunic, puffy sleeves, feathered hat, the works.

“Guess where I was?” he said, his hands on his hips.

“Whoa,” Ford said, just as Stanley shouted, “Neat-O!” Maybe this guy wasn't crazy after all.

“That's right!” Not-So-Crazy Guy said. “Fifteen years ago, there was a costume store right here! One second...” He pulled the tape again and the medieval clothes vanished. He was back in his sweatsuit, which was dotted with tiny fires. The guy yelped. “Aw, heck! Pat – pat-down!”
“So, who are you again?” Stanley asked.

“Blendin Blandin,” Blendin said proudly, holding out a gray and green ID card. “Time Anomaly Removal Crew year Twenty-Smyevendy-Twelve. My mission is to stop a series of time anomalies that are supposed to happen at this very location,” he explained, putting the card away. “But – but I don't see any anomalies! I don't know if it's some kind of paradox, or if I'm just really tired...”

He sat back down, putting his pudgy round cheek in his hand.

Stan and Ford shared a Look.

“You know, you sound like you could use a break,” Ford said sympathetically.

“Definitely, definitely,” Stan put in. He held up two tickets. “Might we recommend one of the various attractions of the Mystery Fair?”

The time traveler frowned thoughtfully. Suddenly he jumped to his feet. “You know what? What the heck! I'm worth it! But I got my eye on you!” He took Stan's tickets and backed away, making weird I'm-watching-you groaning noises.

Stanley grinned at Ford. He loved gullible time travelers.

They snuck after Blendin as he headed to the Rusty Barrel Rodeo, a game that was exactly like the Teacup Ride at Disney World, but with a 25% chance of tetanus. Ria was the ride's attendant.

“One, please,” Blendin said, putting his tickets in the barrel.

“I'm sorry, sir, you will have to remove your tool belt,” Ria said politely. “One of your tools might accidentally fly off and fix something.”

They watched Blendin remove it and put it on the Personal Items barrel. “Guard it with your life,” Blendin said seriously.

Stan looked at Ford, grinning ear to ear. Score!

They darted over and nabbed it while Blendin was in the middle of his spinny ride.

Since there was no good place to work in secret at the Fair, the two of them – and Gompers – ran straight back to the Mystery Shack and hurried to the den, where they gathered around the table.

Ford set the time tape down carefully, staring at it with a look of reverence on his face.

“There it is, Stanley,” he whispered. “Our ticket to any moment in history.”

“Let's go prank call Thomas Jefferson and tell him Hamilton stole his underwear!”

“What? No, and no. We gotta be smart about this. All that paradox stuff kinda freaked me out.”

Stan suppressed an eye roll. His bro-bro was definitely a “color-in-the-lines” kind of kid. (Haha, “kid”.)

Ford glanced at his hands. “All I'm gonna do is go back and fix my one mistake. If I don't miss that baseball throw, I won't hit Seandra in the eye, and Aaron won't comfort her, and they won't start going out.”

“I'm coming, too!” Stan said. “I wanna relive the thirty-fifth best moment of my life: winning Gompers!”
Gompers bleated.

Ford picked up the time machine. He pulled out the ribbon, looking carefully at the little markings. Stan leaned in. It was kinda hard to read, but it looked kinda like it had really tiny writing for hours, days, weeks, months, even whole centuries.

“Cool,” Stan said.

Ford pulled it out until he found “6 Hours”. He took a deep breath.

“See you later,” Ford told Gompers.

“See you earlier,” Stan corrected. “Hyuck hyuck hyuck!”

Ford let the tape go and they high-sixed. In a flash of bluish light, they disappeared.

Ford looked down. His jacket was on fire. He yelped and swatted it with his sleeve. “Ow, hot hot hot!”

Stan quickly helped him pat it out. There was a little burn mark, but otherwise he was fine.

“Phew. I thought we might disintegrate,” he muttered.

Stan froze. “You – what?!”

“Nothing! Come on!” He ran for the front door, Stanley right behind him. He reached for the knob, opened it slowly, and...

“It's twelve o' clock!” Grauntie Mabel's gravelly voice rang out over the fair, three times as loud as normal thanks to her trusty megaphone. “The Pines Prophecy Booth is now open!”

They quickly covered their ears, just in time for the megaphone to squeal.

It was noon again, the fair just getting into full swing, the booths swarming with townsfolk. The air was heavy with the smell of fried batter and pretzel grease.

Ford grinned at Stanley. “Do-over?”

“Do-over!”

He watched his brother run straight for the “WIN A GOAT” booth.

The hat farmer called, “If'n you can–”

“Fifteen pounds!” Stan said, grabbing Gompers. “And yes, I am a witch.” He hurried away. Ford left as well. Somehow, a pet goat seemed to suit Stanley perfectly.

Back to business. He remembered he and Seandra had met up around the Karnival Keychain booth. He hurried to catch up.

“Hey, Seandra,” he panted.

“There you are,” she said. She looked as perfect as she had that morning, all denim and sunflowers and cherry lip gloss. “Hey, what happened to your jacket?”
“Oh, uh, nothing. Hey what's that?” He pointed quickly at the plushie booth.

She looked. “Whoa, check it out!”

They headed over. She smiled enchantingly at the plushie nightmares. “I don't know if it's a duck or a panda, but I want one.”

Ford handed a ticket to the vendor guy. “One ball, please.”

The vender took it and dropped a baseball into Ford's hand. “You only get one chance.”

“That's what you think,” he said very quietly.

He glanced at Seandra. She gave him a thumbs up.

“One panduck, coming right up,” he said. He could do this, definitely. He would not mess this up.

He pulled back his arm and threw it, grunting with effort. The ball hit dead-center of the pyramid bottle, knocking every single one of them off the table.

“Yes!”

and then it hit the back of the booth and boomeranged right back at Seandra's face.

“OW! My eye!” She hunched over, cupping her hands over her eye. It was already turning a nasty shade of purple.

Ford choked. “What?!”

“Ugh...does it look swollen?” She turned to face him. He winced. Her eye was as badly puffed as before, maybe worse, like she was holding a plum to her face. The skin around it was an angry red.

Ford looked back at the bottles. But he'd thrown it properly that time! And hit the bottles! And won the panduck!

“That's so weird...”

“Oh, hey, Aaron.”

Ford's head snapped up. Aaron was alright right there, wearing his perfect shoulder-padded varsity jacket, holding a freezee to Seandra's swollen eye.

“So anyway, we've been hanging out a lot,” he was saying.

Numb with shock, Ford watched the exact same thing happen the exact same way. He couldn't believe it. No way could Seandra end up with a two-dimensional self-centered jerk like Seandra!

He had to find Stan.

His brother was sitting on the Test Your Strength game, feeding Gompers a corndog.

“Sixer!” Stan called, waving his arm. “Guess what? Gompers ate a hole in someone's pants!”

Ford stared past him, watching Seandra and the walking hair gel commercial get on the Tunnel of Love.

“The exact same thing happened twice,” he growled. “Even though I won the game!”
“Maybe it's a time curse,” Stan suggested. “Want me to get Gompers to eat his pants?”

“Yes. But hold that thought.” He started pacing. “Why wasn't Aaron's confession avoided? I did everything right and it still got messed up! Is it possible that the forces of time naturally conspire to prevent any new outcome?”

“Dude. You see conspiracies everywhere. You thought the Froot Hoops were a secret message from Einstein's ghost once.”

“It was, there was just no way to prove it.” He stopped pacing. “Alright, I just need to try again. Third time's the charm!”

Stan nodded. “How hard can it be?”

Ford took out the time machine from his jacket pocket and pulled the tape out. Stan put his hand on it, smiling, and Ford let the tape snap back. He thought he heard someone shouting close by – something that sounded like “Burn the Witch!” – but then the light flashed around them and it was gone.

Oh, the glorious, glorious pranks.

Stan pulled them all. He trained Gompers to eat people's pants on command. He had the goat sit real quiet in a line of plushies and then poked his tail when a little girl reached for him. He hid in the Tunnel of Love and when people tried to kiss he stuck Gobbers in the way (which was no easy feat, but worth every second). He even took a cardboard cut-out of a clown, cut the head off, and just when someone walked by he'd pop up Gompers' head and yell “DEMON CLOWN!”

It was quite a satisfying day, which Ford seemed to determined to relive it as many times as humanly possible. Stan was good with that.

On the next time-travel trip, Stan decided to try the Ferris Wheel – mostly because the sign said “No Kids”, which was absolutely a challenge to break two rules at once. He hid Gompers under his shirt, walked casually behind a very square-shaped fisherman standing in line, and dove straight for the next empty carriage. He took out Gompers and slammed the guardrail down so fast the whole thing started swinging back and forth. He laughed and kicked his legs to make it swing harder.

The wheel ground into motion. He could feel the rough vibrations of the gears through his butt and the soles of his shoes. The air whipped against his face as they rose higher and higher, until the people looked like tiny action dolls.

The carriage paused at the top of the wheel. Stan grinned, imagining himself reaching down with a huge hand to mess with the tiny people, like an all-powerful Ferris King.

“YEEAAHH!” Stan screamed. “I'm mad with power!”

Gompers bleated in agreement.

With a jerk, the carriage started its descent. Stan had to admit that this part was pretty boring. He was mostly just staring at the rusty spokes of the wheel and the backs of people's heads.

Finally, they reached the bottom. Stan tried to push the guard rail away and hop out.

It wouldn't move.
He frowned and pushed harder. It groaned and grated like it had rusted shut.

The wheel started up again.

“Hey!” Stan shouted. “I’m stuck, here! C’mon!”

The booth guy kept his head down, and Stan's carriage rose, lifting him into the air.

Stan watched the ground anxiously. The people got smaller and smaller. They reached the top, and again the carriage stalled, so Stanley had time to figure out the exact distance between him and the ground. Enough for him to land and go squish. He gripped the cold metal bar and tried not to move.

Gompers, who had been sitting calmly the whole time, suddenly jumped up and bleated in his ear. Stan yelled and jerked. The bar tore through the rust on one side of its hinges and he pitched forward, almost parallel to the ground as the carriage rocked wildly in midair.

He screamed and scrambled, back, grabbing Gompers with one hand and yanking the bar back in place as hard as he could. It was just hanging on by a single screw on his left side. If it popped out – if the bar fell off –

His heart thumped in his stomach. His elbows and knees felt like cold jelly. Burning acid climbed up his throat, trapping screams in his chest.

The carriage jerked again as the wheel started up. Stan turned paper-white and pressed against the seat, trying to become two-dimensional. He squeezed Gompers to his chest so hard the little goat bleated in protest.

It took a hundred years for the carriage to reach the ground. Every gust of wind, every tiny dandelion seed made the carriage sway ominously, as if it was just dying to tilt and let Stanley slide out like an overcooked noodle. A bird landed on the side and Stan watched it from the corner of his eye, his jaw clenched shut, and when it took off again he felt the chill of imminent death.

The ground was so close. His limbs felt like they were locked in place. He held his breath.

The carriage brushed the grass and Stanley shoved the bar away, slid under it, and collapsed to his knees.

“Hey, kid, I got a wheel to run here!” the wheel guy barked.

“You-you-you-YOU!” Stan shouted, but it came out in a high-pitched squeak. “Your Ferris Wheel SUCKS!”

He grabbed the goat, who'd been chewing on the footrest of the carriage, and bolted out of there as fast as he could.

He ran into Ford right behind the PanDuck booth.

“Oh, Stanley, there you are,” Ford said, looking over his shoulder, a look of deep frustration on his face. “Listen, can we go back again? I – hey…” He got a better look at Stan's face. “You look like you just ate Mabel's glitter casserole. What happened?”

“Go back in time,” Stan babbled. “Check. Let's do it.”

“Okay, but –”

“No time for buts!” Stan made a grab for the tape measure.
“Okay, okay! Sheesh.” Ford pulled the tape out, checked it, and let it go. Stan grabbed his hand and they disappeared in a blue-white flash.

It took a few more time travel trips for Stan to really calm down. Luckily Ford was off in his own romantic wasteland, so he didn't really notice. Stan didn't want to seem like a wimp in front of his brother.

Plus, pranks on the ground were more fun. Less risk of plummeting to your death.

Gompers was now fully bleat-trained and Stan was working on potty-training him, too. Every time the goat took a dump in the middle of the road, Stan would reward him with another corn dog. It loved those things, batter, stick, and all – definitely Stan's kind of goat. The best part was, with time travel, Stan could steal as many as he wanted without getting caught. Only Grauntie Mabel would be able to figure out how much he'd eaten. (Sometimes he wondered if she really was psychic.)

Of course, the whole reason they kept time-traveling so much in the first place was because Ford kept failing at girls.

After the last baseball debacle, in which the baseball had ricocheted off of nine people's faces and smashed a popcorn machine, Ford and Stan were once again kicking back by the Slopey Toss. Stan lay on the grass on his back, holding Gompers up on his feet and messing with his little front legs. (Maybe if he sharpened the hooves, he could train Gompers to be a killer Goat of Death.) Ford was close by, drawing complicated equations on the glass of a serve-it-yourself popcorn machine.

Ford scribbled more numbers, muttering to himself. “Adjusting for the wind speed, carry the cotton candy...”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Face it, Sixer, you're obviously fated to have a bad day at the fair. Just like I'm fated to prank people mercilessly and get away with it!” He held up Gompers, who bleated. “Look at his creepy little eyes!” Stan cooed.

Ford ignored him. Stan flopped down and rolled on the grass, rolling and rolling until he was directly behind the popcorn machine.

“It's like there's one variable missing,” Ford said.

Stan popped up. “What's a variable?”

Ford stared at him. “That's IT!” he shouted suddenly. “I figured out a way to win the toss, not hit Seandra, and stop Seandra and Aaron from going out!”

“Awesome! I'm gonna go win Gompers again!”

Gompers head-butted him.

“That's my goat!” Stan said proudly.

Ford grabbed his arm. “No no no, you can't leave, I need you for my plan!”

Stan frowned. “But...what about Gompers?”

“It'll just take a few minutes.” He pulled out the tape and yanked it, before Stanley could say another word.
Stan was used to it now, so as soon as light faded he opened his eyes and stepped away. Ford quickly explained the plan.

“– but we have to hurry, I only sent us back with a few minutes to spare,” he said.

“Can't you just explain it and *then* go back?” Stan asked, slightly annoyed.

“Just get into position. You have to hit the ball at exactly the right angle and speed or it won't work.”

“Fine, fine,” Stan said. “I'll go get the bat. Where do I wait?”

“There.” He pointed.

Stan followed his gaze and his stomach lurched. Ford was pointing to the roof of the Shack.

“Uh, Ford...”

“Just wait for my signal. It'll only take a few minutes and then you can go get Gompers.” Without waiting for a reply, Ford dashed into the crowd.

Stan stared up at the roof. Seemed like just a few days ago he'd jumped on a trash can and pulled himself up by the rain gutter...because, duh, it was just a few days ago. Now the roof had somehow morphed into a brownish-pink Everest with tiles slicker than a wet snake.

“Oh boy,” he muttered.

He went into the house and got his bat. Maybe if he just concentrated on the ball he'd be fine. Like hitting a home run. Those always felt good, right? Nothing to be afraid of but missing the ball and getting a red-stitched punch to the teeth.

Sure.

He got the bat. He went outside. He looked at the trashcan.

“We are now enemies,” he told it, and promptly jumped on top and stomped on the lid, in case it got any ideas about knocking him over.

He threw the bat on the roof, grabbed the rain gutter and scrambled up, walking awkwardly along the wall with his feet until he got one foot high enough to hook on the roof. He rolled up to the roof and crawled a few feet higher. He leaned back, grabbed the bat, and stood up.

The ground tilted and whirled sickeningly. Stan felt himself tilting forward.

He bent his knees, trying to crouch so he wouldn't slide right off.

“Oh, man...”

*This time,* Ford thought confidently. *This time, it'll work.*

“One ball, please,” he said, and the vendor handed it to him.

He tested the wind. He noted the position of the panducks, the exact angle of the roof of the panduck
tent, how hard the wind was blowing the tiny flag on the tent's top. He factored in the variables and calculated.

"Are you gonna go, man?" Seandra asked.

He nodded. "And a-one, and a-two and a..." He threw the ball as hard as he could – straight up.

Seandra's shoulders fell. "Aw, dude, you missed."

He grinned. "Did I?"

The ball, nudged by the force of the wind, hit the flag, rolled down the side of the tent, bounced away to hit the weathervane of the Shack, which altered the ball's trajectory so that it flew straight at the roof, where Stanley hit the ball with a powerful THWACK, sending it straight back, knocking the ice off of Aaron's freezee –

He dove aside, along with Seandra, as the ball shot straight into the booth, knocked down the bottles and fell harmlessly to the floor, its kinetic energy finally expended.

Ford jumped to his feet. "YES! Finally!"

The vendor, unfazed, took a plushie from the roof and handed it to Seandra. "Your stuffed creature of indeterminate species, miss."

"Whoa, Ford, that was awesome!" Seandra said, smiling.

He smiled back, giddy with victory. He did it! He won! Now all that was left was –

"There you are, Seandra," Aaron said, walking up to them.

"Hi, Aaron!"

Aaron squirmed a little. "So, so I was wondering –"

"Look what Ford got for me," she said, holding up the plushie. "Is it not the most creepily adorable thing ever?"

Aaron flinched, staring into its psychotic eyes. "Whatever, can't even tell what species it is," he muttered. "It's stupid." He hunched his shoulders and hurried away.

She raised an eyebrow, a touch of disdain on her face. "What's his deal?" she asked, turning back to Ford. "Glad I came to the fair with the right guy."

Ford was smiling so hard he thought his cheeks might crack. The universe, now in perfect sync, let someone score on the Test-Your-Strength game. The automatic voice shouted, "WE HAVE A WINNER!"

Seandra decided to check out some of the other games, and then she wanted to do the Tunnel of Love.

"Mr. Pookie can be our chaperone," she said, holding up the panduck.

Ford was so happy he would've agreed to anything.

They squeezed in the narrow, corn-dog shaped cart. She really did put the plushie between them, but to be fair there was nowhere else for it to go. Its huge white eyes seemed to glow in the dark, which
reminded Seandra of this one story she'd read about a haunted roller coaster that filled up with dead people every night at 11:02 PM, exactly. They talked about it the whole ride. Ford was sure that his mouth was forming words and complete sentences, because Seandra nodded and talked like he'd said something intelligent. But honestly he wasn't sure his brain was working at full capacity, except to memorize every word she said and every tiny gesture she made so he could analyze them in great detail later on.

The ride ended way too soon and they hopped out, wobbling a little because the seats were so small they'd lost some circulation to their legs.

“Oh hey – funnel cake!” Seandra said. “Let's go get some, I'm starved.”

He sighed. Was she in any way not perfect?

Suddenly a weird whining noise reached his ears, and he paused. He stuck his finger in one ear and checked it. Where was it coming from?

The sound got louder and he turned. Stanley was running up to him, shouting and waving his arms.

“AAAAAAAAAH!” he said.

“Stanley, what—”

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

“Stan—”

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

“I'll just wait till you're done.”


Ford looked at him. “Um, what?”

“Preston took Gompers before I could!” Stan repeated, at a more reasonable rate of speech. “He took Gompers, Sixer!”

Ford's face fell. He knew how much Stan liked that goat. “Aw, Stanley, I'm sorry.”

Stan took a deep breath. “It's okay. We just have to go back and do things differently.” He grabbed the time machine from Ford's jacket.

“Hey!” Ford swiped it back. “Stanley, look. I did the math. In any other timeline, Seandra ends up going out with Aaron. I can't mess this day up again!”

“But if we don't go then I'll lose Gompers forever!”

Stanley launched himself at Ford, knocking them both to the ground. Ford grunted and tried to kick Stanley off, rolling around on the floor of the Tunnel. Stanley climbed over Ford but he shoved him away, straining to keep the time machine out of reach.

Suddenly Stan froze. Ford followed his gaze and his stomach dropped. The tape had gotten caught in a corn dog cart and it was drawing the tape out longer and longer and then it suddenly snapped back
and –

FLASH.

Wherever they'd traveled to, there was no more Tunnel booth. The two of them dropped from midair and landed in the middle of a wide dirt path.

“Uuuhhn,” Ford groaned, getting up. Geez, Stanley hadn't even been trying to hurt him and he still ached all over.

Stan stumbled to his feet, rubbing one arm. “When are we?” he asked, looking around.

“You mean when are we,” Ford corrected.

“I said that.”

“Oh. Right.”

It was definitely Gravity Falls – they could see the same bluish cliffs and mountains in the distance. But Ford wasn’t even sure they were in the same exact place. Instead of a clearing, there was a huge forest populated birches, aspens, and pine trees, the ground around them thick with grasses and autumn leaves. There were still a few redwoods, but they looked very young, poking timidly into the canopy. Ford and Stan were standing on a wide beaten path cutting through the forest.

“Hey, do you hear that?” Stan asked.

Ford listened. The ground started to rumble. Pebbles on the ground popped like grease on a skillet. They turned. A huge herd of bisons thundered towards them, heads low, bulky shoulders bearing down, hooves churning.

“BISON!”

“RUN!”

Stan grabbed Ford and they ran, sprinting as hard as they could down the path. The bison were right behind them now. Any second, Ford would feel their hot breath at his back an instant before he was trampled –

Suddenly there was nothing under his feet. They'd run straight off a cliff.

“AAAAAAAAAH!” they screamed, falling through the air.


There was a blur of tan and they punched straight through a canvas roof. Ford landed face-first in a big sack of flour.

“Oooww, that is not as soft as it looks,” he groaned. He sat up slowly, touching his nose. It felt like he'd broken it, but it only seemed sprained. They must not have fallen as far as he'd thought.

He looked over. Stan was sitting up, white-faced and definitely shaken. The time machine was still clutched in his hand.

They looked around.
It was a covered wagon! By sheer luck they'd landed inside a covered wagon instead of the hard rocky ground. It looked like they hadn't even damaged the wagon's supplies, which was great because it meant they wouldn't significantly alter the future of...of the family crowded at the back of the wagon, all of whom were staring at them with wide brown eyes.

“Wh-where are we?” Stan asked, standing up. “The seventies?”

Ford stuffed his hands in his pockets and scowled. “You set us back a hundred and fifty years, knucklehead! It's Pioneer Times!”

“Oh yeah!”

Outside the wagon, someone shouted. “Be on the lookout for mountain lions, travelers!”

“Dysentery!” called someone else. “Who wants dysentery?”

“Forge ahead, mighty oxen!” said their wagon's driver. “For a new life awaits us on this...Oregon Trail.”

Stan put his hands on his hips. “Huh.”

“By Trembley!”

They turned. The driver had glanced back in the wagon and spotted them.

“Fertilia!” he said. “It seems you have given birth to two more children!”

The mother at the back of the wagon did not looked shocked. There were six children gathered around her already, and her stomach was huge with the next one. “It appears I have,” she said. “More little hands to render the tallow.”

“My Grauntie can show you how to make twenty-six candles at once,” Stan offered.

“Shh! Stanley!” Ford hissed. “We can't start messing with the past!”

Stan glared at him. “Says the guy who messed with the past all day and cost me my goat? I'll mess with whatever I want! Look – a fake rubber spider!” He took it out of his pocket and showed it to the kids, pulling on its legs to make them stretch. The kids looked riveted. “And here – fire in a box!” He pulled out the cigarette lighter with the weird design and clicked it on, off, on, off. The kids' eyes grew big as quarters.

Ford snatched it, but Stan just went straight past him and up to Fertilia. “Hey, lady, guess what's in Sutter's Mill in California? Solid gold nuggets! Up top!” He raised his hand and she tapped it tentatively. “That's called a high six! Teach it to your friends!”

Ford grabbed the time machine out of Stan's hand. “Gimme that! I'm gonna set the timeline right!”

“Hey!”

Ford yanked out the tape and snapped it just as Stanley made a grab for it. His brother knocked him backwards as the white light flashed around them.

Instantly the world was jungly, reddish, and their immediate surroundings contained a very large Tyrannosaurus Rex. For a split second Ford was too shocked to move or think. Then the T-Rex saw them and roared so loud Ford's teeth rattled. He screamed and grabbed for the time machine but Stanley had it and –
Stan hit the button right before they were dino-chow. The light flashed.

They were still screaming when the re-appeared. Ford peeked through his fingers.

“Oh, no, we broke everything!”

They were in some kind of futuristic city, but the buildings around them were all half-demolished. Their steel skeletons had been laid open and broken walls blocked the streets. Fires flickered through shattered windows. Smoke clogged the air, so everything smelled like rotten shoelaces. The city was tinted the same eel-green color as the sky.

Two people ran past them, wearing high-tech gray suits and very little hair.

“Run, run! Take cover!” one shouted.

“It's coming!”

A huge baby floated out from behind a snapped-off skyscraper. It was fat and pale with bright red hourglass design on its brow. Its eyes glowed red. It zapped the nearest building, instantly turning it to dust.

“HA HA HA HA,” the baby laughed, in a voice deeper than Darth Vader's.

Stan looked intrigued. “This future seems neat.”

Ford grabbed the machine and began frantically pressing buttons. Stan took hold of it just as the white light flashed.

They reappeared back in their normal Gravity Falls, on the same day that Fishing Season opened.

Stan immediately snatched the machine. “I'M COMING, GOMPERS!” he shouted, racing away.

“Hey!” Ford chased after him. He felt something fall out of his jacket and he didn't care – he had to get to that time machine before Stan did something crazy!

“I seen it! I seen it again!” Crazy Chu yelled, a second before Ford grabbed Stan's shoulder.

FLASH!

“But enough about me,” Grauntie Mabel was saying. It was the day she'd unveiled the wax figures. “Behold...me!”

Stan tore off, running right behind the audience. Ford tripped on an electric cord and kept running. He reached out for the machine.

FLASH!

“HROOAAARR!”

They were back to that day when the gnomes had attacked them, pinning them against the Mystery Shack with nowhere to go. Ford barely gave their past selves a second glance. He raced after Stanley, breathing too hard to yell out. They ran straight through the bushes, which snagged at his clothes and fingers, and Ford gathered up his strength and lunged –

FLASH!
“I think it's getting hotter!” Stan shouted – which was really bad, because they'd somehow landed in Gravity Falls right in the middle of winter. Snow was falling everywhere and it was already three feet thick on the ground. If the time machine was that hot in this weather, it had to be really bad!

Stan stopped running and Ford crashed into his shoulder, grabbing him for balance.

“Geez, Stanley, what did you do?!” he demanded.

“I don't know!” The machine was sparking and crackling with blue lightning. Stan tossed it from hand to hand. “Ow, hot, hot hot HOT!”

The time machine enveloped them with lightning and –

FLASH!

Ford was afraid to open his eyes to find themselves stuck with the Tyrannosaurus Rex. Then he realized his eyes already were open.

“Where are we?” came Stanley's voice next to him.

Ford looked around, trying to see something, anything, that would give him a clue. “There's nothing but inky blackness for miles,” he said anxiously. “Stanley, don't you see? We've transported to the end of time!”

“AAH!”

“AAAAAH!”

“AAH!”

“AAAAAH!”

“AAH! Wait, why does it smell so bad in here?”

A sudden blade of light stung Ford's eyes. Stan was opening the door to...oh, gross, they'd been stuck in a Port-A-Potty.

They stumbled out, holding their noses, their eyes watering. That had been almost as bad as the dinosaur.

“Look, we're back in the present!” Stan said, pointing. The fair was still going strong. It looked like it was just after 12 o' clock, with lots of people walking around, dumping their greasy pretzel wrappers on the grass, and overpaying for cheap carnival rides.

Ford scanned the crowd. “But which present?”

That's when he spotted her – a perfect vision in a sunflower shirt, holding the creepy purple PanDuck.

“This is the best present ever!” Seandra said, beaming at the plushie monster.

“YES!” Ford shouted.

Preston walked past, dragging a squealing Gompers behind him on a tight leash.

“NO!” Stan shouted. He made another grab for the time machine. “GIMME THAT THING!”
Ford leaped away and ran around the Port-A-Potty.

“STANFORD GIVE IT BACK!”

Ford ran around the Port-A-Potty, with Stanley right behind him. There was no way he was going to outrun his brother, so he zipped around a corner and climbed as fast as he could to the top of the unit. Stanley actually did another circle around it before he realized what had happened.

“Hey!” Stan put his hands on the Port-A-Potty and raised a foot like he was going to climb it. Then he seemed to hesitate.

“Look, Stanley, it's over, okay? Give it up!” Ford barked. “I've worked too hard to lose this!”

“But what about Gompers?” Stan begged. “I won't ask you for anything else ever again!”

“You said that for the last hot dog!” he snapped. “I'm not gonna let Seandra end up with Aaron!”

“But...Gompers...” Stanley stared up at him, his mouth all twisted up, his brown eyes huge and pleading.

Ford set his jaw. Stanley always pulled that face, and like a comet drawn too close to the earth's gravitational pull, Ford always fell for it. Not anymore.

After a few seconds, Stan dropped his gaze. “Fine,” he muttered. “I don't care.”

He turned and walked back towards the Shack, but ran face-first into the totem pole. Ford winced, but then Stan backed up and ran right into it again, like he didn't even register that it was there. Then he backed up and walked into it again. And again.

Great. “You're not guilt-tripping me, Stanley. Not this time.”

Stan continued to bang his head into the totem pole. Ford could even hear him muttering stuff under his breath, like “goat” and “Ferris wheel” and “hot dog”.

Ford's stomach was starting to feel weird. He grunted with exasperation. “C'mon, Stanley! I know you, you're gonna forget about this in a day. Here –” He held up the time machine. “Look! I'll prove it!”

He pulled the tape and jumped forward in time to that evening.

The fair had been mostly packed up. Only a few dim lights glowed from the dismantled Ferris wheel. There were a couple of booths left, some spilled slushies on the grass, and no people – except Stanley, who was still walking repeatedly into the pole.

That was new. Not the headbanging – sometimes Stanley did that just for fun – but he'd never kept doing something for longer than an hour. Even work on the Stan-O-War.

“Oookay... A week, then.” Ford pulled the tape and jumped forward a week.

The clearing was empty. Ford fell through the air with no more Port-A-Potty underneath him. He landed painfully, rubbing his gluteus maximus. And when he looked up, there was Stanley, still banging away.

Ford's stomach was starting to hurt.
“A month – he'll be better in a month.”

He yanked the tape. Time flashed past.

Stanley looked awful. He wasn't even walking into the totem pole anymore, just banging his head into it. His skin, hair, and clothes were crusted with dirt. A small vine climbed up his arm and dandelions were sprouting out of his collar. A snail, several beetles, and a field mouse crawled around his hair. A hawk swooped down to nab the field mouse and Ford jumped back, startled, but Stan didn't even flinch. It was like he'd spent all month outside and developed his own ecosystem.

Ria walked up, leading a group of tourists. “And here we see Sorrowful Stanley, the boy who went crazy after his dream was shattered by some heartless jerk. Oh, hey, Ford!” She waved at him.

Ford looked down at the tape measure. He felt like he was going to throw up. Why did Stanley always have to be so selfish? For once, why couldn't he let Ford have what he wanted? Seandra was way better than some smelly old goat!

But...

It was almost like he could feel Nikola's eyes in the back of his head, peering at him from the forest. He remembered their last conversation.

“But Stanley –”

“Is your brother.”

He pulled out the tape, stared at miserably, then let it go.

In a single flash he was back at the day of the fair, standing next to Seandra and staring at that plushie Linnaean nightmare.

“I don't know if it's a duck or a pig,” she was saying, “but I want one.”

He turned to her. He had to at least try to mitigate the impending failure.

“Seandra, I just want to say that sometimes, people make mistakes. And when they do, you should forgive them. And also that tight pants are overrated,” he added.

She looked at him. “Dude. You lost me.”

“I know,” he mumbled. He looked up at the booth guy. “One ball, please.”

The man handed him the baseball. “You only get once chance,” he told him.

Seandra gave him a thumbs-up.

Ford held back a sigh. He didn't even bother aiming, since he knew exactly where the ball would go. “And a-one and a-two and a...”

He threw it.

It bounced off of the table holding the bottles, ricocheted, and right on cue Seandra cried out: “Ow, my eye!”

Aaron, of course, was there instantly, freeze in hand. “Hey, Seandra, are you okay?” he asked, putting his hand on her shoulder. He started to guide her away. “You know, this is the perfect time
for me to ask you something…”

Ford watched them go and sighed deeply. “It is done.”

“YAAAAH!”

Stanley plowed into him and knocked them both to the ground. He squeezed Ford so tightly he couldn't even breathe.

“THANK YOU!” Stan shouted. “THANK YOU THANK YOU A MILLION TIMES FOREVER!” He somehow rolled to his feet, still holding Ford, and hoisted him in the air.

“Can't breathe,” Ford gasped.

Stan put him down and Gompers started chewing his jacket. “He's saying 'thank you' too! Aren't you, ya hairy animal?”

Gompers bleated.

Ford pushed them both away, a half-smile on his face. “Yeah, yeah, whatever, Stanley. It's no big deal. Besides, there's no way Aaron can date Seandra all summer, right?”

The time machine had fallen out of his jacket when Stanley had tackled him. Ford bent down, picked it up –

And Blendin immediately snatched it out of his hand.

“YOU TWO!” he shouted. “Do you have any idea how many rules you just broke?!” he demanded. Ford instantly backed up next to Stan, who immediately picked up Gompers and pointed it at him. But just as quickly, Blendin seemed to run out of steam. He started to sweat. “I mean, I'm asking – I wasn't there with you – it was probably a lot, right?”

Suddenly there were two bright flashes of light. A pair of seriously ripped future guys appeared on either side of Blendin. They wore dark gray and black armor with neon green gloves and futuristic blasters holstered at their waists. One had a bowl cut and the other had a dramatic scar cutting across his left eye.

Bowl Cut snatched the time machine.


Blendin yelped. “The Time Paradox Avoidance Enforcement Squadron!”

“That's right,” said Bowl Cut. On closer inspection, he had a name tag reading 'Lolph'. “And our phones have been ringing off the hook. There's settlers in the 1800s who invented the high-five and renamed it the high-six. And cigarette lighters littered through eight centuries!”

The Scar Guy – Dundgren – narrowed his eyes. “You are under arrest for violations of the Time Traveler's Code of Conduct.”

They seized his arms.

Blendin blanched. “I-it was those kids!” he protested, pointing right at Ford. “And their leader, Gompers!”

“That's a goat, Blendin.”
“I-I'll get you back for this!” Blendin shouted, as they started dragging him away. “I'll go back in time and make sure your parents never meeeeeeet!”

Ford and Stanley stood there, waiting.

Ford looked down. “Welp, we're still here.”

“I guess he forgot to go back,” Stan said.

Grauntie Mabel leaned forward, peering intently at the teenager's calloused hand. Her drapey purple outfit was so very deeply purple that it cast a lavender glow over the teen's Pug Rock shirt and leather vest.

“...yes, yes, this petal-shaped wrinkle tells me much.” She leaned back, her palm pressed to her forehead, closing her eyes dramatically. “Your wife...will be beautiful.”

He pumped his fist. “Yes!”

Suddenly three men walked by, the middle one in an oversized onesie, the outer two wearing futuristic cyborg gear. She gasped.

“The circus cyborgs! YOU'LL NEVER TAKE WADDLES ALIVE!” She jumped out of her booth and ran for the house, purple shawl flying behind her. “I'm coming for you, Waddles!”

The teenager called after her. “Wait – but will she love me?!”

Ford bit into his purple freezee. He'd bought one for himself and one for Stan (who had wanted to steal them, but Ford pointed out they couldn't go back in time anymore and they might get caught).

Grauntie Mabel flew past them, shedding rhinestones and her shawl as she ran straight for the Shack.

“Where d'you think she's off to?” Stan asked.

Ford shrugged. “Maybe she's going to look for more...” He stopped short. “Hey! The time anomalies!”

“What?”

“When he first showed up, didn't Blendin say he was looking for time anomalies?” Ford asked. “I think we were the ones who caused them.”

“But...he came before we did anything, so...” Stan groaned, grabbing his head with one hand. “My brain hurts.”

“Might just be brain freeze,” Ford pointed out.

Suddenly the sound of utterly perfect laughter reached his ears and he looked up. He grimaced.

“Ugh, I gotta look at this all summer?”

Aaron and Seandra were standing by the Ferris Wheel. Aaron was holding a caramel-covered apple up to Seandra's mouth. They were standing so close Aaron could probably smell her cherry
chapstick.

“Go on, it's good,” Aaron urged her, and she leaned forward to bite into the apple.

Ford had a vivid image of Aaron being transported back in time to just the right moment for a certain Tyrannosaurus to eat his face off.

Stan looked back and forth between them. “Don't worry, Sixer, I'm on it.” He put Gompers down, pointed him towards Aaron, and then leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “Do it.”

The goat looked up, ran straight for Aaron, and chomped the butt of his jeans.

“GYAAAH!” Aaron shrieked, jumping away and holding his butt cheek. “Omigawd it bit me on the butt!”

Ford and Stan burst out laughing, as did most of the people around them. Seandra clapped her hands over her mouth and bent double, trying and failing to smother her laughter. Aaron quickly scuttled away, still holding his butt cheek like it was going to fall off any second.

Gompers trotted back, a triangle of denim dangling from his mouth.


Chapter End Notes

Poor Stanley on the Ferris Wheel! Mabel did say she bought the cheapest fair she could.

I had fun coming up with exactly how to make Stanley afraid of heights. I hope everyone enjoyed it! What evil plans do I have for the twins in the future? ONLY TIME WILL TELL!! MUHAHAHA!
“Hey Ford? You seen my toffee peanuts?”

Ford looked up. Stanley had wriggled halfway under his bed and his butt stuck up in the air. He snorted and covered his mouth.

“What're you doing?” he asked, still grinning.

Stanley wiggled back out and sat on his heels, hands on his hips, looking around the room. “I don't get it. I hid them where nobody would ever think to look and yet they're gone. You think they turned invisible?”

“Weirder things have happened,” Ford said. He put down the book he’d been reading and hopped off the bed. “You sure you put them under there?”

“Positive. I had this huge Jumbo bag and I put 'em right under my bed on the pillow end.”

Ford got down to take a look, but it was too dark to really see anything. He took out his UFO keychain and clicked it on. “Oooh...okay, I know who took your peanuts.”

“Gnomes? Giant bats?”

“How would giant bats – no, just look.”

Stanley wriggled back under the bed with him, and Ford pointed to a mark in the dust. “Goat prints.”

Stanley groaned and they both scooched back out. “Stupid goat. I just fed him yesterday, too!”

“Don't goats need to be fed more often than that?”

“Puh-lease, the thing's a living lawnmower. Plus he always eats out of Waddle's bowl and you know Mabel refills that four times a day. Gomper's is gonna weigh one hundred pounds any day now.” He stood up and straightened his shoulders. “Welp! Better head to town and get some more. This time I'm gonna hide 'em in a better place.”

“HEY!”

Ford jumped and banged his knee on the table in the den.

Stanley came running into the room, an open – and empty – bag of Toffee Peanuts in his hand. “You ate my peanuts!”

“Um, no.”

“Well somebody did!” Stanley shook the bag at him. “Lookit lookit lookit! Bag! No peanuts! Stan is not happy!”

Ford caught the bag and pointed to the corner, where it had obviously been ripped open. “Teeth
marks,” he said, pointing. “Pretty sure whoever did that ate some of the plastic.”

Stanley screwed up his face in concentration. “So...manotaurs?”

“What? No, a goat.”

“Oh come on!” Stanley grabbed the bag back and balled it up. “I hid this thing on top of the fridge! Gompers can only reach the counter!”

“Youeeaaah,” Ford said slowly. “But you know goats can climb and jump, right?”

“Oh, geez!”

Ford lay halfway under the porch, shining a bright flashlight down into the recesses of the house. He was pretty sure a two-headed squirrel had scurried down there. Which wouldn't have been all that interesting, except he could've sworn it was breathing fire and he wanted to capture it and study it. Now that he was down here, though, he noticed there was this weird vibration in the ground, very faint, almost imperceptible. Could there be something else down here? Maybe a whole colony of fire-breathing squir–

“STANFORD!”

“OW!”

He rubbed his head. He'd startled so badly he'd slammed his skull into the wood. He squirmed out from under the porch, wincing.

Stanley burst out of the front door, spotted him, and squatted down. “Hey, you're all dirty!”

“I was investigating under the house,” Ford said grumpily.

“What, you found those Mole People who eat the trash?”

“No, I – did you say Mole People?”

“Not important! Look!” Stanley whipped out a wad of plastic from behind his back and dropped them on the porch. It looked like the remains of no less than five bags of toffee peanuts.

Ford sighed. “Do I even need to say it?”

“No, I caught the goat red-hoofed myself!” Stanley scowled at the bags. “That goat's eating me out of house and home, I don't know how it's got an appetite that big, and all it eats is sugar and candy!”

“Now you know how I feel,” Grauntie Mabel said absently, walking past into the house.

“I'm gettin' desperate here, Ford,” Stanley said, and he did look a little wild-eyed. “I mean I hid my stash in the rafters of the attic. I don't even know how it could get up there without using my rope-and-pulley system, but it did and now my days of hiding candy from Grauntie Mabel to eat late at night when she's not watching are in serious jeopardy?”

“You know I can hear you, right?” called Grauntie Mabel.

They ignored her. Ford hmmm’d, pursing his lips with and tapping his chin. Then he snapped his fingers. “I got it! I know one place he probably won't be able to get to.”
“When you say 'probably'...”

“Like 99% certain.”

“Works for me!”

Stanley went to town and got more toffee peanuts. (Ford wasn’t sure how he could afford to buy so many, and there was no way he was stealing them because there were too many to hide in his clothes. But he decided he might not want to know.) They spent an hour getting Gompers to wander deep into the forest by leaving a trail of toffee peanuts in a large U-shape. That way, it could find its way back and still leave enough time for Stan and Ford to hide the candy without the goat spotting where they hid it. Then they quickly formed a three-person chain (they got Ria to help) and hid the toffee peanuts in the one place they were sure Gompers couldn’t reach. They finished hiding the peanuts exactly two minutes before Gompers returned - with a large mutant pine cone on its head.

Ford stared at it. “But where did it get...we've got to try this again!”

“Oh no you don't,” Stanley said, grabbing the back of his shirt. “We are not using my candy for one of your science-y danger experiments.”

Ford scoffed. “I don't see how anything that gives out silver bows can be dangerous.”

“You haven't met the Santa that comes to the mall,” Ria said with a shudder. “All I can say is, do not feed the elves.”

The one down side to their plan was that actually getting to the candy would prove a challenge: there was no way to sneak it from its hiding place without getting spotted by Grauntie Mabel during the day. Luckily, Gompers often slept curled up with Waddles, so that night Stanley tempted the goat to stay downstairs using a chunk of Mabel's “Healthy Salad Cake”. Then the two of them went upstairs, brushed their teeth, and hid in their beds, waiting for everyone to fall asleep.

“Dude,” Stanley whispered, smothering a giggle. “This is gonna be so great. We're gonna stuff ourselves silly on toffee peanuts and totally get away with it!”

“I get peanuts too!”

“Sure! Like, five of them.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Hey man, nobody loves toffee peanuts like me. I don't share them with anybody!”

Ford smothered a laugh in his pillow. “You get so crazy over something as silly as candy,” he snorted.

“Says the guy who wanted to charge face-first into the woods over silver bows.”

“For science!”

Stanley chucked a pillow at him and they burst into a fit of giggles.

They waited so long for Grauntie Mabel to go to bed that they ended up falling asleep themselves. When Ford woke up, it was almost dawn. The room was still dark, but there was a faint touch of misty blue in the sky, the precursor to the rising sun. Ford never got up this early. He briefly
wondered what had woken up him. Then he realized now was the perfect time to get the candy – no way would their Grauntie be up yet – and he opened his mouth to call out to Stanley.

_Clomp, clomp._

He paused. Was Gompers awake?

After a minute, he decided it might’ve just been a branch tapping the house. He got out of bed, snuck across the room, and shook his brother's shoulder.

“Stanley!” he whispered. “Toffee peanuts! Let's go!”

“Whuzzamit,” Stanley slurred, rolling over. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. “Sixer?”

“Toffee peanuts, Stanley!” Ford whispered again. He whipped the covers off his brother. “C’mon! Let's –”

_Clomp, clomp._

The sound was louder and right over their heads. They looked up at the ceiling. Then down at each other.

Stanley listened hard. “There's...there's no way...”

_Clomp, clomp_, came the sound again. And then there was the highly distinctive sound of a goat chewing.

Stanley leaped out of bed, glaring at the roof. “Are you kidding me?! Are you friggin' kidding me right now?! _IS NOTHING SACRED?!_”

Suddenly they heard Mabel's voice from outside: “Aw, sweet, there's a goat on my roof! Quick, kids, make some new signs! We're gonna make a killing on this one!”

Chapter End Notes

_I told you he's really good. He figured out who's been eating my toffee peanuts!"

"All signs pointed to the goat."
**Fight Fighters**

Chapter Notes

GUYS THIS IS IT THIS IS IT, THE LAST EPISODE FOR SEASON ONE!!!

Thank you to those of you who left kudos and to the person who bookmarked the series. It's nice to see that. Writing this is hard work, and I really appreciate it when people take the time to do a kudos, comment, or bookmark. Thank you <3

BTW when Season 2 starts it will keep on with the regular schedule – meaning the first episode will be posted next week! Man I am psyched! I have BIG PLANS!!!

Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It's official,” Stanley said. “This is my favorite place in Gravity Falls!”

Ford rolled his eyes. “Stanley. We just got here.”

The two of them had finally persuaded Ria to take them to the Arcade. On the outside, the place looked like a pale gray building with random neon signs advertising hours of mindless entertainment and disclaimers for possible thumb dislocation. On the inside, it was pretty much the same, plus the games.

Grauntie Mabel had insisted on going with them, because “If I have to explain the Rock-That-Looks-Like-A-Face-Rock ONE MORE TIME I'm going to tie his nose hairs to a ticked-off camel and shout 'GO!'”

Their potentially homicidal Grauntie was eyeing the nearest arcade game with a mix of confusion and interest. “How do these game-things even work?”

Stanley grinned. “You push the button until you die and then you put in another quarter and push the button until you die and then you –”

“I give, I give!” Mabel shouted, covering her ears.

“Here,” Ria said, leading their Grauntie to a nearby video game. It had a quarter slot, a video screen, and exactly zero buttons. “You can play this while I give the twins a tour.”

Grauntie Mabel put in a quarter. The screen lit up and an automated voice shouted, “YOU WIN!”

“WOO-HOO!” Mabel cheered, throwing up her arms.

The screen immediately changed to: INSERT QUARTER HERE.

“I can do that!” she said excitedly. She started digging in her pocket for a quarter.

They left Mabel to her new hobby and Ria walked around, giving them the tour. There was a game with frogs, a game with ghosts, and a game with a weird triangular green thing with little twiggy
arms and legs. Most of the games were pretty different from the ones back in Jersey, but the basic principles were always the same: run, jump, hit, game over.

It was the middle of the day, but it still wasn't very full. There were a couple of teenagers Ford didn't know playing on a game towards the front, and Crazy Chu was doing a rather frantic jig on the broken Ho-Down Hero. That was about it.

“You don't seem too excited about the arcade,” Ford said to Ria. She'd been totally polite about showing them the games, but she wasn't all pink-cheeked like she usually got when she nerded out over Mystery Shack merchandise.

She shrugged. “My abuelito loves these games,” she explained. “I'm the only one who can ever beat him, so he's made me play many times. It is not as exciting when you have achieved the high score of every game. Twice.”

Stan's jaw dropped. “Master,” he murmured, bowing. “Teach me the way of the forward-circle-back kick.”

She laughed and led him over to the nearest game, something called Smash-It Sam. Ford wandered off, debating whether or not it was worth it to spend a few quarters on a game. Maybe he should save his money...there was this awesome telescope in Science Madness Magazine, and he really wanted –

Suddenly he jumped. He'd wandered to the back of the Arcade where there were a bunch of out-of-order games – but one of them was still active, and it was being played by the most perfect girl alive.

“Seandra!”

“Oh, hey, Ford.” Seandra looked up from a video game and smiled. Ford's stomach disappeared and came back with a gallon of butterflies. “Check it out. I played this game for hours when I was little. Didn't think they'd still have it hooked up.”

He looked. Fight Fighters looked like your basic 2-player game, with a bare-chested blond dude in an eyepatch fighting a guy in a red jumpsuit and wedge-shaped hair.

Seandra jabbed a thumb at it. “I set it up for one-player, but you wanna try it with me?”

“Of course!” he said instantly. He dug in his pocket for a quarter and popped it in.

“FIGHTERS READY!” the game shouted. “FIGHT!”

“Okay so just do what I do,” Seandra said. Ford watched her toggle a few buttons and flick a lever. Her character, Dr. Karate, executed an absolutely perfect backflip triple-punch. It knocked Ford's character in the head and he went down instantly.

The game cheered. “K.O.!”

“Hey!” Ford laughed. “You said to watch you!”

“I am not your opponent,” Seandra said solemnly. “The opponent...is the game.”

Ford grinned mischievously. “Alright, zen master, prepare to be destroyed!”

He popped in another quarter and worked the buttons furiously. In no time he was as good as she was. The only hard part was that he had to keep his eyes on the screen and not Seandra. One time
he'd gotten distracted by her grape-flavored chapstick and his character got smacked clear off the screen.

“Dude, you totally rule at this!” Seandra said, after he'd beat her three times in a row. “Here – I lost, next round's on me.” She popped in a quarter.

The blond character, Rumble McSkirmish, appeared on the screen. His one eye was glaring and his neck muscles bulged.

“DR KARATE!” he shouted. “YOU KILLED MY FATHER AGAIN!”

“HHNNGHHHHH!!!!!”

Rumble's eye popped with rage. “YOU TAKE THAT BAAACKKKK!!!!!”

The game started. “FIGHT!”

Ford creamed Seandra's character in three seconds flat, an all-time record.

Rumble held up a peace sign. “WINNERS DON’T LOSE!”


“You take that back!” Ford mimicked, and they laughed.

Alright, alright,” she said. “Time to restore my honor.”

“You know, Ria said she's got the highest score on all these games,” Ford said.

Seandra nodded. “Figures. Highest player on this thing's RIAJ, it's gotta be her. She's like, a legend.”

She popped in the quarter and the game started up, with an exact repeat of the introduction. Ford was tempted to do his impersonation of Inigo Montoya, but he resisted. (His voice always cracked on the last word, which kinda ruined the effect.)

“I'ma punch the ref,” Seandra said.

Ford grinned. “Let's gang up on him!”

They made their characters punch and spin-kick the middle of the screen, so it looked like they were hitting the referee. The referee didn't react at all, since he was part of the background, but he had a look on his face like, Ugh, these guys again. Ford snickered.

A shadow suddenly darkened the screen.

“Seandraaa, what up, babe.”

Ford's head jerked up. Aaron had appeared and had one arm already crawling around Seandra's shoulders.

“Just putting up some flyers,” he said casually, waving a thick stack of glossy flyers. “I'm doing a 2-minute special on the Gravity Falls News this Friday at 6:30.”

Seandra nodded. “Cool.”

Ford looked at the flyers. There was a picture of Aaron's obnoxiously rugged face filling most of the
Aaron's face looked abnormally peach-colored and his lips were bright pink.

“Are you wearing...makeup?” he asked, pointing to the poster.

Aaron rolled his eyes. “I know it's hard to believe, champ, but some people are just naturally gorgeous. Case in point,” he said, and to his credit he gestured to Seandra, who blushed.

“What're you doing here, anyway?” Aaron asked, narrowing his eyes at Ford.

Seandra gestured. “Ford was just showing me this great game –”

“Oh yeah, sweet, sweet,” he said, stepping between them. He had his back to Seandra and he was glaring down at Ford so she couldn't see. “How's about you sit this one out, okay kid?”

Ford glared back. “We just started this round.”

He stepped back, hands up like he was so innocent. “Hey, easy, kid, geez! I'm just trying to spend a little time with my girlfriend.”

“It'll just be one round,” Seandra promised.

Ford stepped back reluctantly. The game started up and Aaron crouched, focusing intently.

“So hey,” Seandra started, “I'm going upstate to do some research at the Oregon Historical Society, so I won't be around –”

“Oh, great, great.”

Aaron's character unleashed a lightning ball throw and the whole screen lit up with bright orange pixels. They laughed and Seandra refocused on the game, giggling as she tried to beat him. Aaron leaned casually against the machine, one hand on the controls, one arm wrapped around Seandra. He glanced back at Ford and smirked.

Ford gritted his teeth.

“OPPONENT SIGHTED,” said the game. “FIGHT!”

Ford sat at the den table with Ria, Grauntie Mabel, and Stanley. They were each working on sewing a quilt (except Gompers, who was chewing on Stan's chair leg). Grauntie Mabel had insisted that the twins learn how to sew, so they could help Ria create more “Taxidermy Attractions” for the Museum.

Stanley stabbed his finger again. “Ow!”

Ria looked up. Grauntie Mabel's quilt was spilling out of her lap and down onto the floor. Ria's quilt, though smaller, was exquisitely decorated with perfect miniature scenes of the entire town. “You need to move the needle more slowly,” she said. “It's not a sword.”

“Ugh!” Stan stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked it, frustrated. “Why is it that Ford and I work on the Stan O' War all day, every day, with callouses all over our palms – but this stupid needle finds the one place I've still got baby skin?!"

Ford laughed.
His and Stan's quilts weren't real quilts, exactly. Mabel had taken them to the fabric store and they'd picked out two midnight-blue blankets, and she'd bought a lot of swatches of extra cloth based on what they wanted to make. They'd draw their designs on the fabric in chalk. Stanley wanted to make the Stan O' War, sailing through an ocean full of mermaids, pirates, and sunken treasure. He was trying to race through making it because he wanted to admire the finished product.

Ford, on the other hand, was taking his time, stitching constellations around the border of his blanket. He wasn't sure what he wanted to put in the middle yet.

Grauntie Mabel noticed Stanley squinting at his half-sewn sail. “You need a magnifying glass or something?”

“No way!”

“Ford needs glasses, and you two are twins,” Ria said.

Stan jumped to his feet, holding up his hands. “Oh, no-no-no! And look like a nerd? Nu-uh!”

Ford grinned mischievously and tapped his glasses. “Maybe you should try mine on,” he said slyly. “We could figure out if you see better with them or not.”

Stan immediately dove for the door, but Grauntie Mabel caught him around the waist and body-slammed him to the carpet.

“Ow!”

“Nowhere to run, ya little nugget!” she said gleefully.

Just as Ford started to hop out of his chair, a low vibration ran through the whole house. The four of them looked up.

“Are we having an earthquake?” Stanley asked.

“It could just be Steve snoring,” Ford said.

Ria looked confused. “Who's Steve?”

Suddenly the roaring stopped. “Seandraaa!” called a voice. “Seandra! C'mon out girl! Come on down!”

Ford groaned. “Great. It's Aaron.”

“Aaron?” Grauntie Mabel asked, sitting up. (Stanley gasped dramatically, as if he'd been suffocating under her weight and old-lady funk.) “Isn't he that jerk who always makes goo-goo eyes at Seandra?”

“He said I could be a model – for plus sizes only,” Ria said unhappily. “I mean, I know that I am beautiful, but...plus size only?”

Stanley growled. “Should I sic Gompers on him again?”

Gompers looked up from chewing the chair leg and started chewing Stan's jeans instead.

He laughed. “Yeah! Bite those pants!”

Ford straightened his glasses. “I'll handle it,” he said, and marched out the door.
“Ooooooh!” said the group.

He heard Stan snicker. “Conflict!”

Aaron, being a jerky twerp, had posed like a GQ wannabe on his moped, angled back over the handlebars as he slicked back his hair with one hand.

“Outta the way, twerp,” Aaron said, checking his reflection in a compact mirror. “I'm waiting for Seandra.”

Ford folded his arms. “You realize she's not here, right?”

He snorted. “Yes.” A pause. “...What?”

“She went on a trip to the Oregon Historical Society,” he said. Under his breath, he added, “Maybe if you listened to her for once, you'd know that.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes. “What was that?”

“I just said she's not here.”

“No, no, and no.” Aaron pushed away from the moped and went right up to Ford. Ford stepped back on instinct. He'd never quite realized how big Aaron was up close.

Aaron stuck a finger in his face. “You wanna get into it, huh? Let's get into it, kid. You think I don't know what's been going on, huh? It's obvious you've got a thing for my girlfriend, don't you?” He advanced on Ford, who tried to back away. Aaron jabbed him in the chest. “Don't you?”

“W-what? No!” Ford held up his hands, heat rushing to his face. “C-c'mon, man.”

Aaron snorted. “Yeah, right. I bet she's just love to go out with some twerp who wears the exact same clothes every day.”

“I – it – identical clothes,” Ford sputtered. He backed into a trashcan and pressed against it like he was trying to phase right through it.

“Hey, here's an idea.” Aaron took his cell phone out of his Varsity jacket. “Why don't I call her up right now and ask her if she wants to go on a date with you?”

Ford choked. “Hey – no, don't, y-you don't have to –”

“Ugh, no, please, man!” Aaron mimicked. “What're you gonna do about it, huh? Huh?”

He waved the phone in the air and pressed the call button.

Ford's guts turned to liquid.

“What, what?” Aaron taunted.

Seandra's voice came on.

“Hello?”

Ford shot up so fast he caught Aaron by surprise and knocked the phone from his hand. The phone flew ten feet and landed so hard it cracked almost in half, exposing its green silicon innards.
Ford stared at it, his face numb. He'd never actually hit anybody before!

“My phone!” Aaron yelled. He rounded on Ford.

“I'll buy you a new one,” he said quickly.

“Oh no! You're not getting off that easy!” He grabbed Ford by the jacket and yanked him into the air, an inch from Aaron’s face. Ford squeaked.

“Hey!”

They looked. Stanley had pushed open the stained glass window. “You get your grubby paws of my brother!” He launched himself out the window, caught his foot on the sill and dove head-first into the bushes, knocking over the trash can.

Aaron threw Ford to the ground. “You. Me. Circle Park. 3 o' clock,” he snarled. “We finish this.”

Ford sat on his butt, shaking a little, as Aaron swung his leg over the Moped and sped away so fast the air smelled like burning tar.

“HYAAAAAAH!” Stan leaped from the bushes, swinging a broken stick and wielding the trash lid like a shield. “Alright, Canker, PREPARE TO MEET YOUR – awww, what?” Stan whined, looking around. “C'mooooon! You gotta be kidding, that was gonna be my best battle cry ever!”

Ford paced the living room. Ria, Grauntie Mabel, and Stanley were back to sitting at the table, but nobody was sewing. Ford didn't know what to do with his hands. He stuck them in his pockets. Took them out. Pulled his hair. Stuck them back.

“What was I thinking?! I can't fight!” he shouted. “I've never been in a fight before! Look at these noodle arms!”

“Just bonk him over the head,” Stan said, shrugging. “It's nature's snooze button!”

Grauntie Mabel rolled her eyes. “Boys. Why can't you learn to hate each other in secret, like girls do?”

Stan snorted. “Sure, sure, listen to Grauntie,” he said smirking. “Maybe she'll sew you a dress, too! BOOM!” He laughed. Ria frowned at him.

“Maybe he'll just forget about it,” Ford said anxiously, looking at Ria hopefully. “Maybe it'll aaaaall blow over. Right?”

“I do not know about this,” Ria said slowly. “My cousin Regina was in a fight once.”

“She fought a teenager?”

“She is a teenager. A thief attacked her for her purse, and she beat him until he needed a 10-week hospital stay, using nothing but a green frog umbrella.”

Stan nodded. “The frog is strong with that one.”

Ford started to hyperventilate. He backed into a corner. His jacket felt like it was choking him. “I can't stay here,” he gasped. “What if Aaron comes back?! I gotta hide!”
Stanley stood up on his chair. “Look, Sixer, you can't hide forever. You can stand up and fight for your woman, or you can run and hide like a coward. What'll it be?”

Ford crouched behind the Lazer Wizard video game, his arms wrapped around his knees. Fiddleford, who was trying to beat Ria's high score, glanced at him with pity.

“So ya wimped out, huh?”

“This is not wimping!” Ford insisted. “This is a tactical retreat! You've seen the guy, he's like twice my size! Three if you count the jacket. I mean what would getting myself killed accomplish?” He got up and started to pace. “I just have to hide here until three o’ clock passes.”

He checked his watch: 11:32.

Ford groaned. “This day will never end.”

“It's ok, Ford. Just try not to think about Aaron.”

Ford looked up and jumped. The wall was covered with Aaron's posters, all layered so that only the last part of the caption showed: KILLS YOU.

This did not bode well.

“Girrrl, why you ackin' so cray-cray?!”

The live audiences cheered – the one on TV, and Grauntie Mabel in her yellow armchair.

Stanley wasn't really listening to the show. He was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, his quilt spread over his legs. He'd done the big white triangle for the sail part of the boat, but the mast was really tricky because it was so skinny. Mabel had showed him how to fasten the brown strip of fabric with bobby pins, but they kept stabbing him in the fingers.

“This is cray-cray,” Stan muttered.

“I'll tell you what's cray-cray,” Mabel mused, flipping through the channels. “Ford's just hidin' out in the Arcade. Can't even face up to Aaron.”

“Whatever.” Stan squinted at the thread. Had he knotted it again?

Mabel rested her chin on her fist, watching him. “You know, sometimes it surprises me how different the two of you are. He's much more meticulous, so his quilt is coming out way better. But you're sticking with it longer, so yours will actually get done, even if it looks like crap.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Same thing with Aaron,” Mabel continued. “Ford's prob'ly hidin' out under some arcade game like a baby rabbit. I bet if you were in the same situation, you'd be halfway to Aaron's house, ready to pound the snot outta him.”

Been there, done that, with much bigger bullies. “Aren't you supposed to be telling us not to get violent?” he asked, plunging the needle into the cloth. A bobby pin jumped up and pierced right through the thin skin between his fingers. “YOUCH!”
Mabel jumped. “What happened, Stanley? Let me see –”

“I'm fine, I'm fine,” Stan grumbled, getting up and cradling his hand against his chest. “Where's the first aid kit?”

“On top of the aquarium.”

Stan looked. By ‘on top of the aquarium’, she meant on top of the cabinet that was over the aquarium – a shelf so high up it practically scraped the ceiling.

“Uh...never mind.”

“What?” She looked. “Oh, just use the ladder.” She pointed to the little step stool Ria used for changing lightbulbs.

Just the thought was giving Stanley vertigo. “Yeah, no, it's not that bad. I'm gonna go now.” He grabbed the quilt with his good hand and made for the door.

“Whoa.” She grabbed his shoulder. “Your hand is bleeding, like, a lot. Here...” She heaved herself out of her chair and went to get the kit from the shelf. She handed it to him. “You need some help with that?”

“Nope! All fine here! I am not acting suspicious at all!”

He scooted out the door, trying very hard to act casual. Stupid, stupid. Right after she'd basically called him fearless and then he couldn't even get a first aid kit.

He headed up the stairs. He could practically feel her thinking at him. This did not bode well.

Ford left Fiddleford playing a video game with cyclists who kept crashing into each other's tails of colored light. (Nort: A Game Based On The Movie Based On The Game!)

The Fight Fighters game was still hooked up. He shoved a quarter in and flicked past the characters, skipping through the character selection: Joe Zambique, Czar-Barian, Admiral Big-Calves, Rumble McSkirmish.

“ROUND ONE,” the game announced. “FIGHT!”

“Stupid Aaron,” Ford muttered, rapidly clicking the buttons. “Such a jerk...”

He briefly imagined Dr. Karate was Aaron, and took great pleasure in making Rumble punch his lights out.

He glanced down. Six fingers gave him extra dexterity, and when he was older he'd have slightly bigger fists, too. But at the moment he was scrawny as a chicken leg and just about as short. Especially compared to a guy like Aaron.

“K.O!” the game bellowed. He'd been so distracted Rumble had been knocked flat on his back. “CONTINUE?”

Rumble’s face appeared on the screen. “A WINNER NEVER RUNS AWAY FROM A FIGHT!”
Ford sighed. “Easy for you to say. You have more than one life.” He checked his watch. 12:04. Great. Only 2 hours and 56 minutes until Game Over.

He looked back at the screen. Both Rumble and Dr. Karate looked like they drank steroids in their orange juice every morning, with muscles on top of muscles and 10-pack abs. “I wish one of these guys could fight Aaron for me,” he said, fishing out another quarter from his jacket pocket. He went to put it in but dropped it. The quarter rolled away and he heard it spiral to a stop at the side of the game. He got down on the floor and reached for it, brushing away the cobwebs.

That was when he noticed it. An odd engraving on the side of the game.

TO UNLEASH
ULTIMATAE POWER
← ← PP → → ↓
KK ↗ P (x3) K

He brushed the dust away, thinking maybe he was just seeing things in his last two and a half hours of life. But the markings were still there.

“To Unleash Ultimate Power,” he read. “Hmm. I do like things that are ultimate.”

He popped in the quarter. He didn't need to check the engraving because his memory was nearly flawless.

“Back, back, hold, forward, forward, down, hold, quarter-circle forward, triple punch!”

The screen immediately went black and the whole game powered off.

Ford held back a sigh. “I guess it didn't work,” he said, turning away. Ria had shown up a few minutes ago. Maybe he, Ria, and Fiddleford could take turns at Nort.

Suddenly he heard a clattering noise. He turned. The Fight Fighters game was rattling, even though it was completely turned off, and none of the other games were shaking in the slightest. He backed up slowly. “Uh...Fiddleford?” he called. “...Ria?”

A blinding light suddenly struck Ford's face, so strong it actually ruffled his hair. He shielded his eyes.

“SELECT YOUR CHARACTER,” boomed the game.

He cautiously lowered his arm. “Um...Rumble McSkirmish?”

The light grew even brighter, flashed orange, then pink, then so white it was like looking into the heart of a star –

Rumble McSkirmish shot out of the screen, spinning and kicking-midair.

“BIG-BIG-BIG-BIG KIIICK!”

He landed with one fist punched into the ground, leaving a web of cracks in the solid wood.

Ford stared. He took a hesitant step forward. Rumble looked exactly the way he had in the game –
red bandana, dark blue jeans, poor pixel quality.

“You're real?” Ford whispered. He reached out to touch him. Then he saw Rumble's raised fist and grinned.

“Hi five!” they shouted together, slapping hands.

“OW!” Ford pulled back. His hand had been stabbed in the thin web between his fingers. “Agh, your pixels are really sharp!”

Rumble did not seem fazed by this. He stood up and resumed his typical 3-second animation loop, his fists raised, shifting his weight from foot to foot like a boxer. “GREETINGS, CHILD-BOY! I AM RUMBLE MCSKIRMISH FROM THE U.S.A!”

Rumble immediately executed a punch-kick-punch-dropkick combo that slammed his heel into Ford's cheek.

“Ow!” Ford checked his face. Rumble was just a video game character, but that had actually hurt! “This is so cool!”

He watched Rumble walk over to the change machine.

“CHANGE MACHINE! CHANGE ME INTO A POWERFUL WOLF!” Rumble bellowed, and proceeded to punch the machine to rubble.

Ford grinned, looking at his watch. “Ha! With Rumble around, Aaron will be so scared I won't even need to fight! I've got the world's greatest fighter to be my bodyguard!”

Suddenly Rumble's whole body started beeping and flashing red. He turned to Ford, a look of wide-eye (wide-eyepatch?) desperation on his face. “I NEED POWER-UPS!”

Ford checked his pockets. Fresh out of quarters.

“We can get you something back at the Mystery Shack,” Ford told him. “Let's go!”

Stan had settled himself in the kitchen with a plate of milk and chocolate-applesauce cookies. (Mabel's most edible recipe yet.) He'd packed the quilt upstairs. Maybe he should consider wearing some kinda thick leather gloves while sewing...

He reached for the glass of water.

“HAPPY GREAT-NEPHEWS DAY!” Mabel shouted, springing up behind him.

“GYAH!” Milk splattered everywhere. “Grauntie Mabel!”

She thrust a white box at him, neatly tied with a shiny purple ribbon. “Here ya go, Stan-O!”

He took it, squinting at her. “Great-nephew's day?”

“Of course it's not a day I made up!” She pushed the package at him. “Go on, open it!”

He pulled the purple bow loose and popped up the lid.

“Ew, Grauntie Mabel!” He held up a pair of gaudy high-heeled shoes with bright orange puffballs on
top. “For Moses' sake, these things still smell like old-lady funk! Let the eighties die!”

“What's wrong?” she asked, her voice too sweet. “Are these shoes...too high? Do they make you uncomfortable? Hmm?”

“Uh, duh. Was I being too sublte? Guh-ross.”

“Oh, just admit it!” she said, planting her hands on her hips. “You totally have a fear of heights!”

He dropped the shoes. “I do NOT!” he shouted. “That's why you gave me these things? You got me all excited for a holiday that doesn't even exist, and made me think you were giving me something really nice – when it was just a box of stink and disappointment.” He slumped over and practically dragged himself to the living room. Grauntie Mabel stayed in the kitchen, frozen with guilt.

He hid a smirk. He knew she'd fall for it. Now maybe she'd let the whole “heights” thing go.

He flicked on the television.

“WE NOW RETURN TO THE WORLD'S MOST TERRIFYING SKYDIVING!”

Stan screamed and backed up so fast he tripped on the carpet and banged his head on the wood floor.

Suddenly Grauntie Mabel was standing over him, looking down with concern. Gompers appeared out of nowhere and joined her, bleating at Stan.

“So I have a fear of heights,” he admitted. “Is that really so cray-cray?”

Ford looked through the fridge. Rumble McSkirmish was behind him, repeatedly trying to palm-punch a fly out of the air.

“Hmm,” Ford said, poking at the leftovers. Yam-and-chocolate cookies, a quart of spoiled milk, and a pitcher of Mabel Juice were the most edible things in there. Which wasn't saying much. “Well, we don't have any traditional power-ups – turkey legs, pizza boxes, or gold rings...how about...hey! Half a taco!” He held it up.

“PLACE IT ON THE FLOOR,” Rumble ordered.

Ford put it down. Rumble crouched next to it. There was a bleeping noise and the taco disappeared. An equip menu popped up over his head, with campfire, apple, CD, and taco options. The taco was selected and the menu switched to announce NEW WEAPON ACQUIRED.

“Wooow, you didn't even have to taste it!” Ford glanced back at the fridge and its potentially poisonous contents. “Wish I could do that.”

“NOW I MUST DEFEAT THE WORLD'S GREATEST FIGHT FIGHTERS!” Rumble shouted. “TAKE ME TO THE SOVIET UNION!”

“That's gonna be tough,” Ford said. “For a number of reasons. But I do know a Fighter here in Gravity Falls.”

Rumble crouched down to look him in the eye. “MAXIMUM POWER?” he asked hopefully.

“His name's Aaron Anker and his kind of my arch enemy,” Ford explained. He pulled one of Aaron's posters from his jacket and handed it over.
“DID HE KILL YOUR FATHER?”

“Well, he's dating the girl I like. And he's going on TV, which is really hard to compete with.”

Rumble balled up the flyer angrily. “AND THEN HE KILLED YOUR FATHER!”

“Uh...sure.” He figured Rumble's reasoning was probably limited by the game he came from. If he remembered correctly – which he always did – Rumble's heroic motivation was to avenge the death of his father. His programming probably couldn't handle an alternate motivation for battle. Like, say, protecting one's face and limbs and winning the girl of his dreams. “Anyway, I was hoping you could scare him off for me so I wouldn't have to fight him.”

Rumble stood up and laughed. “HAHAHA! YOUR QUESTION MAKES MY SHOULDERS BOUNCE!” And then, because it had probably been too long since he'd attacked something, he immediately began shooting fireballs and punching the ceiling. He even grabbed Mabel's juice and drank it, shouting, “BOWL OF PUUUNCH!”

Ford raised his eyebrows, impressed. Anyone who could drink that much Juice and not explode was hard core.

“So you'll protect me from Aaron?” he asked.

“CHALLENGE ACCEPTED! PRESS START!”

A red “Start” button breeeped into existance, floating in the air in front of him. Ford pushed it. It pinged! and disappeared in a flash of red and blue.

“Well that was...patriotic.” Suddenly he heard the front door open. “Uh-oh, I think I hear my Grauntie! Stay perfectly still,” he whispered to Rumble.

Rumble resumed his typical 3-second animation loop, his fists raised, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Ford frowned a little. “I said stay still.”

“THIS IS AS STILL AS I CAN STAY!”

Stan flopped on the bed, exhausted. Grauntie Mabel had dragged him to park and tried to get him to climb the highest slide there. She even put a hundred-dollar bill on top to lure him, which might've worked except she forgot to weight it down. He waited for the wind to blow it off, grabbed it, and sprinted as fast as he could to the cemetery. He figured she'd spend an hour checking behind each tombstone before she realized he wasn't there.

After running home, that left exactly twenty-eight minutes for him to either a) figure out a way to get rid of his fear on his own or b) permanently distract Mabel from ever thinking about heights, ladders, or Stanley in the same sentence ever again.

He heard a noise and turned so fast he fell out of bed. “Ow!”

“What's up,” Ford said, walking in.

Stan rubbed his side. “Geez, don't shuffle like that, I thought you were...” Then someone else entered the room and his eyes got huge. “What...th...”
“GREETINGS, CHILD-BOY!” said Rumble McSkirmish. “I AM RUMBLE MCSKIRMISH OF THE USA!”

“What the actual heck?!” Stan said, leaping to his feet. He grabbed Rumble's arm and squeezed it. “Dude! You're real?”

Ford grinned. “Better than that. He's my new bodyguard!”

“THE CHILD GAVE ME A TACO!” Rumble announced.

“Dude, that is frigging awesome! How do I get one?”

Ford hesitated. “I...think it was a one-time thing, Stanley, sorry,” he said. “But you can borrow him after today, if you want. I'm gonna use him to defend me from Aaron.”

“Isn't that kinda like cheating?”

Ford shrugged. “I guess so.”

Stanley put a hand on his brother's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye. “Sixer, I am so proud of you.”

Ford grinned. “Welp, I'll see you after the fight!”

Stanley flopped back onto his bed, listening to his brother leave the room. He turned his head so he could look out the attic window. He was kind of surprise he didn't feel scared, looking out at eye level with a bald eagle circling through the treetops. Maybe it had something to do with being surrounded by four sturdy walls with a roof and ceiling.

He had to find a way to outsmart Mabel. He knew she was vulnerable to cute cat posters, guilt, and pink things. Maybe he could threaten a cute pink kitten to get Mabel to leave him alone...but where was he supposed to get one in under half an hour? He could try dying Gomper's fur, but the goat didn't exactly scream “I AM ADORABLE” with those creepy-awesome pupils.

His eyes were starting to close. Maybe he could just hide from Mabel for the rest of the summer. He could go live in the Stan O' War, bring that dumb sailing blanket he was making. Hadn't he left it on the table in the den? Sure, that'd work. Ford could bring him food and he could use Rumble to make sure nobody bothered him. He yawned. He'd kind of miss Mabel's strangely addictive yam cookies, but what the heck. Anything was better than climbing way up high...

He woke with a start. How long had he slept? And did the air smell like glitter glue and Grauntie funk?! He jumped off the bed and raced down the stairs. Had to pack his stuff and get out of here before –

“Oh, no.”

His blanket was missing from the den table. In its place was a note which read:

STAN –
This is your blanket!
Grauntie Mabel has taken me to the Water Tower!
THE HIGHEST PLACE IN TOWN!
HELP SOS MAYDAY
– Your Blanket
P.S. Bring me snacks or something
‘cuz it's gonna get boring up here.

“...Ooookay.”

Well, he didn't need that stupid blanket anyway, right? He could just grab another one! There had to be at least one blanket that didn't smell like mothballs. Plus if she was waiting at the Water Tower he'd have plenty of time to grab whatever marginally edible food was in the fridge and get to the Stan O' War without being caught. Sure, that'd work. It's not like he put his blood, sweat, blood, life force, and blood into that blanket, right?

His fingertips throbbed. He looked at the front door and groaned.

Ford made several discoveries on his way to the park.

First, he had definitely been right about Rumble's programming limiting his understanding of the world. He seemed to think “Wet Pants” was a battle move. (Well, it was, but just for toddlers.)

Second, the locals were either oblivious to unusual events, or so used to Thompson Gable's cosplay, that nobody gave Rumble McSkirmish a second glance.

And third, the streets of Gravity Falls had really dangerous litter. Luckily, Ford got Rumble to drop the pipes he'd picked up before they reached the park.

Ford and Rumble reached the park just as the clock tower struck three o'clock. The park had a large grassy area and several paths running through it lined with a foot-high fence of wood stubs, which all eventually led to the playground in the center of the park. The day was windy, but the park was so close to the lake that a faint mist had gathered on the west end of the park, giving the scene a slightly surreal quality.

Aaron was sprawled casually on the park bench, right underneath the clock. His gaze darkened when he saw Ford.

“Well, well, well, look who showed up,” he growled, rising to his feet. “I thought you'd chicken out. You ready to settle this like men?” He looked Ford over. “Well, half a man?”

Ford gritted his teeth and stood his ground. “Look, Aaron, you don’t want to fight me. You should just call this thing off, before you get hurt.”

Aaron scoffed. “I knew it. You're chickening out, aren't you?”


Aaron did not look properly intimidated. “Who's your friend?” he asked. “And why is he...blurry?”

“This happens to be the greatest warrior that ever lived,” Ford informed him.

“Yeah right. Hey Eyepatch, what'd the kid promise you?” he laughed. “More tape for your forearms?”
“HOW CAN YOU LAUGH, WHEN YOU KILLED THIS BOY'S FATHER?!”

“Um, what?”

Ford stepped in front of him. “I'm gonna give you one more chance to back down, or this guy's gonna go nuts.”

Aaron scowled at him. “How about you back down, huh?” he said, jabbing Ford's chest again.

“You asked for it.” He stepped back and raised his arm like a referee. “Rumble...GO!”

Aaron started to laugh and stopped short, ducking just in time to avoid Rumble's first punch. “What the–?” He backed up, but Rumble followed with two punches and a kick. Aaron turned to run but Rumble grabbed the back of his varsity jacket and raised the teen high above his head.

“What the heck? What's happening?!” Aaron shouted.

“Tried to warn you, man,” Ford said smugly. “Maybe now you won't mess with–”

“HAHA!” Rumble slammed Aaron down so hard Ford heard his teeth rattle. Dirt went flying.

Ford jumped. “Whoa! Rumble you can stop!” He tried to grab for Rumble's arm. Rumble tore out of his grasp, scraping Ford's hand with his sharp pixels. He snatched up Aaron by the back of his jacket and threw him straight up into the air, up – up – twenty feet up!

“AAAAAAAAH!” Aaron screamed.

“Wait! Stop! I said STOP!” Ford shouted desperately.

Aaron landed with a nasty CLANG on the top of the jungle gym. He struggled to get out of the bars. “You're crazy! That guy's crazy!” he shouted.

“HRRRR!” Rumble pulled his fists back and a ball of white-hot fire appeared between his palms. “FIREBALL!”

A huge ball of digital flames rocketed into the jungle gym. Aaron threw himself free just as the whole thing exploded in bright-yellow smoke and drops of melting iron. Aaron scrambled to his feet and sprinted towards the park's exit.

“What the heck was that?!” Ford demanded, rounding on Rumble. “You were only supposed to scare Aaron, you almost killed him!”

“I WILL NOT REST UNTIL THE MAN WHO DISHONORED YOU IS DESTROYYYYYED!”

He punched the nearest tree with Aaron's poster on it. Then he ran after Aaron, punching whatever was even marginally in his way, leaving a trail of destruction in his path.

The gym was now a pile of smoking ruins, two trees had literally been smashed in half, and he already saw a power line going down a little farther away. And Rumble was playing Search-and-Destroy with Aaron.

“This isn't good,” Ford said.

Another tree went down with a crash.
Stanley stared up at the Water Tower. There was his blanket, tied to the railing like a flag. He looked around. There was a pretty big grassy area around the tower, with some trees and spare tires and stuff, but it looked like the place was deserted.

“I know you're here,” Stan said loudly. “I have brought sparklers with me and am fully prepared to set those bushes on fire.”

One of the bushes squeaked and then shushed itself.

“Oh-huh,” Stan muttered under his breath. He looked up at his blanket again. Just looking at it was giving him serious vertigo.

Maybe if I just wait here long enough, the blanket will just blow over on its own, he thought hopefully. Either that Mabel would come out eventually, and then he could guilt-trip her into getting it with his puppy-dog eyes.

He sat down to wait.

Ford stared up at the building in front of him.

“Something told me this would be his first stop,” he said.

Right on cue, a barrel crashed through the third-story window of Barrel & Crate, Incorporated. Aaron jumped out after it, covering his head with both arms and scrambling to get to the fire escape.

The builders of Crate & Barrel had an unusual idea of how to escape a fire. They'd built a small ladder which led down to the first of a series of horizontal ramps.

Aaron was still on the ladder when Rumble crashed through the brick wall, another barrel raised high above his head.

“Chill out man!” Aaron shouted, but Rumble threw the barrel. Aaron ducked just in time.

Ford jumped back as the barrel crashed at his feet. “Please, Rumble, you've gotta stop!” he shouted.

Rumble ignored him.

As Aaron scrambled down the side of the building, going from ramp to ramp, Rumble started throwing barrels down the slopes like a very angry bowler. Aaron leaped over them. A ‘+200’ appeared in the air every time he successfully cleared another hurdle.

Aaron landed on a pile of wooden crates sitting next to the building. He and Ford leaped away as Rumble dove straight at them, punching the crates into splinters. Aaron sprinted away as fast as he could. McSkirmish went straight for the nearest No Parking sign.

Ford tried to stop him. “Rumble, wait!”

The fighter ignored him and threw the sign after Aaron like a javelin. When he missed, Rumble ran down the street, punching the mailbox, fire hydrant, and anything else that even closely resembled public utilities, including a very confused mailman who ran away screaming, abandoning his car.

Ford tried to shout out to Rumble, but the stitch in his side made it feel like it his lungs had been sewn shut. The pain (plus the nasty image) forced him to pause, bent double and gasping for breath. He looked around. He had to find a way to keep up...
He took a second look at the mailman's cart. It looked pretty much like a suped-up golf cart.

“Hmm...”

McSkirmish followed Aaron past a guy giving his son a new car (Rumble destroyed it), a line of people waiting for barbeque (he destroyed that too), and a kitten in a tree (which Rumble rescued by punching the tree in half).

Ford hopped in the mail car and drove after him. Luckily, the mailman was a pretty short guy, so Ford could reach the pedals easily enough. He was just getting the hang of the stick shift when Rumble smashed the tree. Ford skidded to a stop to avoid crashing into the branches.

A familiar voice called out to his left: “Ford, are you driving?”

Ford jumped and looked around. Fiddleford was standing outside the Arcade, staring at him over the tops of his glasses.

“Oh, uh, hey, Fiddleford...”

“You're not even wearing a seatbelt!” Fiddleford said, pointing emphatically. “And did you steal that car?!”

“Look, I don't really have time to talk – I kind of, sort of, brought a video game character to life to be my body guard. But now I have to stop him before he destroys Aaron!”

Fiddleford took a moment to process this. Then he said, “Scoot over.”

“Huh?”

“Scoot over!” Fiddleford jumped into the car and climbed over Ford, buckling himself in. “Stan would skin me alive if I let you do this on your own!”

Stan had gotten bored and started throwing rocks at the blanket, hoping to knock it off the railing. Unfortunately, the thing was so high up that even Stan's terrific arm couldn't come close. Too bad he'd left his slingshot at Gordo's house. That sucker could probably knock the blanket loose, no problem.

Suddenly the bushes rustled and sprouted a glittery con woman in a bright pink fez. He hid a smile as she groaned and stretched her back.

“You're really not gonna go up there, are you?” she grumbled at him.

“Nope!” He made his eyes go huge, and he thought about a huge pile of gold to make his eyes tear up with joy (although he had to swallow a little to hold back the drool.) “Pweeeeeease get it down for me, Gwauntie Mabel?”

She sighed. “Look, kid, for all the hoopla you gave Ford about standing up to Aaron, don't you think you should at least try to stand up to your own fears?”

Stan dropped the cutesy act. “My fears are none of your business,” he said flatly.

“Are you seriously gonna be afraid of heights your whole life?” Mabel demanded. “You're actually going to be okay with never going skydiving or crowd-surfing or flying on a pterodactyl's back while you punch it in the face?!”
Stan snorted. “Like *that* would ever happen.”

“The point is, you can't live your whole life in fear of something.” Mabel pointed to the Water Tower. “That thing's as high up as you can go. If you can conquer that, you can conquer anything!”

“We're done here.” Stan turned to go. Who needed that stupid blanket anyway.

“If you're afraid of heights,” Mabel called, “how are you going to climb up to the crow's nest on a boat?”

That stopped him short.

“Look, I'll even go up with you,” Mabel offered. He slowly turned around. She smiled at him.

“C'mon. You said it yourself – I'm the biggest, baddest, most halitosis-riddled con woman of Gravity Falls! If I'm with you, there's nothing that'll keep us down. Literally!”

He looked at her. Back at the blanket. Back at her.

“Fine,” he sighed. “Let's just get this over with.”

Ford and Fiddleford tore up the streets – figuratively, mostly, except for that patch of lawn in front of Greasy's Diner. Aaron was fast enough that Rumble couldn't catch him, but the mail car wasn't designed to drive at high speeds, either, so they couldn't catch up and stop McSkirmish.

“Ford, slow down!” Fiddleford yelped, clinging to his seatbelt.

“This thing's barely going fifteen miles an hour!” Ford protested, swerving to avoid a mailbox.

“Hurry, we gotta think of a way to stop Rumble!”

“Why is he even after Aaron in the first place?!”

“That's not important!” He jerked the wheel, mostly to avoid a squirrel and only a little bit to avoid telling the truth. “You ever play Fight Fighters? What would stop them from fighting?”

“Nothing stops them. They just switch over to fighting a new character until one of them gets a knockout!”

“Okay, so we gotta knock Rumble out –”

*But not us!* Fiddleford screamed and pointed to a pedestrian. Ford yelled and turned the wheel so hard they did a 360-turn and landed with the grill of the car an inch away from the woman's kneecaps.

The woman didn't even look fazed. “You guys see the dude who just ran past here?” she asked excitedly, popping her gum. “He was all yellow and glowing and he was chasing this other guy! I was all like, 'Get 'em, get 'em!' It was nuts!”

Ford looked around frantically, but Rumble was nowhere in sight. “You see where he went?”

“Sure, over there!” She pointed towards the water tower. “Are you guys gonna get –”

Ford didn't stay to listen. He hit the gas and they tore down the road.
“You're doing better than I thought!” Grauntie Mabel said. She smiled at Stanley, who had not only made it to the top of the ladder, but had inched himself along the rail until he reached the blanket. “You know, though, you're going to have to let go of the handrail if you want to untie that quilt.”

Stanley was holding the railing so tightly he couldn't feel his fingers. “No,” he squeaked.

Grauntie Mabel frowned. “Hey, do you smell a gallon of hair gel?”

There was a rattling noise and Stan gave a tiny scream, certain that the tower was going to fall – but it was just Aaron the Canker, climbing up the ladder.

“Finally!” he panted. “I'm safe!” He plastered himself to the tower.

“Hey, Anker, getcher own water tower!” Mabel grouched at him.

Aaron looked almost as scared as Stan. “Shh! Keep it down!” he hissed. “He'll find us!”

“CHALLENGER SIGHTED!”

Stan glanced down. Ford's suped-up body guard was running towards them, glaring at Aaron like he'd just killed someone's father. He went right up to the base of the tower.

“YOU CAN HIDE, BUT YOU CANNOT HIDE!” he shouted, and immediately began punching the base of the tower. Metal nails shot out of the base and the whole tower rattled and shook.

“AAAAH!” Aaron screamed.

“AAAAAAAAH!” Mabel screamed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!” Stan screamed – or tried to scream, but he was too scared to make any sound at all.

“There!” Fiddleford pointed.

The clearing around the water tower came into view. It was mostly open grass with some boxes, old tires, and trees around the edge of the clearing. Rumble was pounding away at the base of the tower, which looked to be in danger of toppling over. Aaron was clinging to the railing at the top, along with –

“Stanley?!” Ford yelped. “And Grauntie Mabel! Hang on!” He drove the car straight at Rumble.

“What are you – NO!” Fiddleford grabbed the wheel and turned it at the last second. They screamed as the car drove straight into a big pile of boxes, which were apparently full of shredded rubber tires. They slammed into the dashboard and then the back of their seats as the mail truck bounced off the tires.

“Why did you do that!?” Ford screamed. Steam was coming from under the car's hood. There was no way he could use it to knock Rumble out now!

“You can't just hit someone!” Fiddleford gasped, holding his chest.

Ford scrambled out of the car and looked up. The tower was now tilting dangerously at a 76 degree angle, and the three people at the top were slammed against the railing, screaming.
“We gotta stop him!” Ford shouted. “There has to be a way!”

He looked around frantically, trying to find something, *anything* they could use to –

*A new challenger.*

*Knocked out.*

A plan took shape in Ford's brain.

“Fiddleford! Go take care of Stan and Grauntie Mabel!” he ordered. “I'll handle Rumble.”

Fiddleford's head popped over the seat as he crawled out of the car. “You'll handle Rumble?! What are you talking about, that's crazy!”

“It's the only way – hurry up!”

He grabbed two pieces of stiff black rubber and ran for the water tower.

Even as he watched, Aaron was knocked loose from the tower and fell two stories down. Ford gasped but Rumble grabbed the back of Aaron's jacket right before he hit the grass. Aaron looked downright terrified, but for once Ford wasn't enjoying it.

Words appeared above Aaron: “FINISH HIM.”

“N-n-no, don't finish me!” Aaron begged.

Rumble drew back his fist, growling, as darts of blue light began to collect on his fist –

Ford took aim and flicked a quarter at Rumble's head. The fighter whipped around, startled.

“RUMBLE!” Ford shouted.

“HYUUNNGHHGHXZK?!??!”

Ford was holding up the two pieces of rubber on the top and bottom of his face, just like the Fight Fighters game did to show their characters in the dialogue clips. As soon as Ford knew he had Rumble's attention, he threw them aside and marched up to the fighter.

“Rumble, this has to stop,” Ford said firmly. “Aaron...Aaron didn't kill my father.”

Rumble gasped (in capital letters). “THEN WHO DID?”

“No one did,” Ford said. He wanted to hide his hands, but he had to own up to what he'd done fair and square. He balled them into fists. “I...I lied to you.”

Rumble stared at him. “THEN YOU'RE ACTUALLY A...BAD GUY!”

Ford looked down at his feet. “I guess I kinda am,” he admitted.

The water tower was still wobbling dangerously. Fiddleford looked around quickly for anything he could use to stabilize it. The only thing he could think of at the moment was to knock a tree into it to counter its downward descent – but he had no way to calculate the weight of the tree; anything too small wouldn't make a difference, and too big of a tree would overbalance the tower and send it
falling the other way.

Ms. Pines and Stanley were still holding on to the rail for dear life. Stanley was white as chalk and Mabel was screaming nonstop.

“GET TO THE CENTER OF THE TOWER!” Fiddleford shouted over her. “TRY TO STABILIZE THE WEIGHT OF THE TOWER AS MUCH AS YOU CAN!”

“WE'RE GONNA DIEEEE!” Mabel screamed at him.

But Fiddleford's shout seemed to have broken Stanley's terror. He let go of the tower, grabbed Ms. Pines' wrist and dragged her back from the rail.

The tower was already beginning to stabilize, but one of its four legs was badly splintered – it looked like the wood was going to snap any second. There was nothing Fiddleford could do to fix the leg itself, but maybe...

He ran back to the mail car and tried to start the engine. It turned over twice before the engine ignited, pouring a thick column of black smoke from the dented hood. Fiddleford coughed at the smoke and threw it into reverse, trying to remember how he'd seen Ford driving. (Not that he wanted to drive like a maniac with road rage.)

He pulled the car from the pile of tires, turned it towards the tower, and pressed down gently on the gas. He didn't want the car to die before he got it where he needed it.

Just as he'd thought, the tower's leg was broken at just the right height for the mail car to fit under it. The problem was the metal bracing at the bottom. Could he drive the car over the metal? Was it low enough? The car would definitely get stuck on it, but what if the metal forced the car up at an angle, and the car's roof ended up too high and pushed the tower over?

Rumble hung Aaron on the nearest tree branch and faced away from them, one foot planted heroically on a tree stump. He closed his eye. His muscles flexed and his hair waved in a nonexistent wind. He was apparently having an internal monologue, which was somewhat ruined by the fact that Ford could clearly the captions for every thought in his head.

“MY ENTIRE JOURNEY...A LIE. MY HONOR HAS BEEN INSULTED. SENSEI WARNED ME NOT TO TREDR THE PATH OF EVIL. THE BOY HAS LEAD ME ASTRAY FROM MY TEACHINGS.”

He opened his eye. “IF AARON CANKER IS NOT THE LAST STAND,” he said, “THEN IT MUST BE...YOUUUUU!!!”

The tower started leaning, falling inward on its broken leg.

“IT'S A BAD DAY TO DIE!” Fiddleford shouted. He hit the gas and rammed the car right into the broken stilt.

The tower's other legs creaked ominously, and the metal bracing stabbed right into the car's engine. Fiddleford barely cleared it before it exploded with thick black smoke. He coughed, crawling quickly away, and scrambled to his feet.
The tower settled reluctantly back in place.

Fiddleford heaved a huge sigh of relief. “It’s okay!” he shouted up to them. “You can climb down now!”

“No thank you!” Stanley shouted back.

“I don’t know how much longer it’ll stay safe!” Fiddleford said.

Stanley turned white. “WE'RE COMING DOWN RIGHT NOW!”

Ms. Pines and Stanley scooted down the ladder, shaking, gasping, and sweating. They collapsed to the grass. Fiddleford ran over to them.

“I was not scared the entire time,” Stan said, staring up at the sky with glassy eyes. “I was so absolutely not scared that I’m actually just sweating from bravery.”

Ms. Pines was far less coherent.

“Glitter tall trees totem pole make a sweater no,” she mumbled.

“I think she’s in shock,” Fiddleford said worriedly. “It would be good if we had some kind of blanket or something.”

Stanley pointed wordlessly at his quilt, still tied to the rail and fluttering in the breeze.

“Well, that would work,” Fiddleford agreed. He looked nervously at the broken leg, but it at least looked stable enough. Maybe.

Ms. Pines continued to spout gibberish.
He sighed. “I must be crazy,” he muttered to himself. He told Stanley he would be right back and started up the ladder for the blanket.

Ford darted through the trees at the edge of the clearing zig-zagging to avoid getting hit by a fireball.

“I DO NOT HAVE POWERS!” he shouted at Rumble.

“A WINNER NEVER RUNS AWAY FROM A FIGHT!”

_I don't exactly intend to_ win, thought Ford. Still, he hardly wanted to get incinerated on the spot.

He found a tree with a branch just low enough for him to climb and scrambled up the trunk, ending up twelve feet above the ground. He was high enough that he was sitting over Rumble's head.

“NO! I HAVE NO 'LOOKING UP' ANIMATION!” Rumble wailed. He tried hard to look up – and fell flat on his back. _Literally_ flat. In he looked like a moving 2-D poster.

“Ha! You actually do, you know,” Ford told him smugly, swinging his legs. “Don't you remember smashing that change machine? You looked straight up as you shouted, right before you smashed it. Better luck next time!”

In retrospect, taunting was not the smartest tactic.
Rumble unleashed his FIST PUNCH RAIN attack and punched Ford out of the tree. He scraped at the trunk to try and slow his fall, landed on his back, and quickly scrambled to his feet. He was covered in scratches and bruises and the back of his head was pounding. He looked up.

“Hitpoint” bars had appeared above him and Rumble at the start of the fight. He had actually managed a decent uppercut, which decreased Rumble's hit points by .5%. His own bar, however, was over half gone.

Rumble got to his feet. Ford backed up.

“NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THAT I HAVE PUNCHES!”

Stan heard the sound of explosions, but he thought that was just his heart exploding in his chest, yelling “LET ME OUT OF THIS CRAZY KID SO I CAN LIVE!!!”

To his credit, he was not clinging to the grass like he was about to fall off the planet, unlike a certain Grauntie Mabel. He wanted to feel sort of vengefully satisfied that she was now even more scared of heights than he was, but he was a little too busy appreciating being alive. Plus she looked just a little bit pathetic with Fiddleford wrapping the quilt around her like that. He'd gloat later.

As his head cleared, he slowly realized that the explosions were not in his head at all. In fact, he could feel the heat and smell the smoke.

_The tower's gonna explode!_

Stan bolted upright and stared at it like he could hold it up with his eyes, but the tower was actually holding still (sure it was, now that it couldn't kill him). He looked around.

Barely six yards away, Rumble McSkirmish was winding up the biggest, baddest combo punch Stan had ever seen. And he was aiming right at Ford.

Stanley scrambled to his feet and sprinted towards them. “Stop!” he shouted. “STOP IT! Sixer, you stupid genius, RUN!”

Rumble raised his right fist and started yelling louder and louder. The world grew pitch-black and blue lightning zapped around his hand.

Ford glanced back up at his hitpoints bar. It was beeping a warning that he was dangerously low. There was no way he could survive even a normal punch, let alone whatever nuclear death ball Rumble was going to throw.

Ford swallowed. This was the part he'd been really, really hoping to avoid...but he also knew it was the only possible way he had to end the fight. There was no way he could win with his useless noodle arms. He just wished his brain could come up with a better strategy.

He took a deep breath, held out his arms, and closed his eyes, waiting for the blow.

“**SUPER POWER NINJA TURBO NEO ULTRA HYPER MEGA MULTI ALPHA META EXTRA UBER PREFIX...COMBO!!!”**

The punch hit Ford so hard that for a moment he was just a little blob of thought in a big black void.
He actually saw flashing lights and stars and triangles blinking in his skull. He wondered vaguely if he was seeing his neurons firing.

Then his other senses slowly started coming back, and he really wished they hadn't. His whole body hurt; his jaw ached; and his skin was singed, bruised, and scratched all over his body. He tried to open his eyes and realized he could only open the left one – the right one had already swollen shut, and he could feel drool dripping down his chin. He tried to swallow and couldn't feel his tongue for a minute.

Something was shaking him painfully. A dark blobby thing bobbed in front of his eyes.

“...er!” said the blob. “Omigod Sixer are you dead?!”

“I sure hope not,” Ford grumbled.

“RUMBLE WINS!” the Game Narrator Voice declared.

Rumble proudly held up a piece sign, his headband ribbon waving like a flag. “WINNERS DON’T LOSE!”

Ford sat up, leaning on Stanley, and smiled. “I wouldn't be too sure about that,” he groaned.

“GAME OVER,” said the Narrator.

Rumble’s fingers started dissolving into pixels. He stared at his fingers in horror. “WHAT? NO!” The rest of his body quickly followed suite, turning into little cubes of yellow and red that floated up and blipped into the ether. “NOOOOOOO!”

THANK YOU FOR PLAYING, said a big purple caption. There were even three letters underneath where he could put his user name, but Ford was too busy trying not to throw up to do it.

Stanley stared at the spot where Rumble had vanished. “Did he just...die?”

“I'm assuming he went back to the game,” Ford said, using Stanley's shoulder to leverage himself to his feet. “That's what happens in the game, anyway – it just restarts and the characters are good as new.”

Stan looked his brother up and down. “Too bad we can't do that for you. What the heck just happened? I thought he was supposed to protect you, not beat you up!”

“Hey!”

They turned. Aaron had worked himself loose from the tree branch and stormed over angrily. He didn't look quite as bad as Ford, but there were scratches on his otherwise flawless chin, his Varsity jacket was ripped, and he had a nasty goose egg developing on his head where he'd hit the jungle gym.

“Who was that guy?!?” he demanded. He jabbed a finger at Ford. “And why is it that whenever
you're around, there's always ghosts or monsters?"

“I dunno, man,” Ford said.

“Hey, back off,” Stanley growled, Ford's arm still around his shoulder.

“Shut up, kid,” Aaron snapped. “That guy almost broke my neck. Do you know how mad I am right now?!"

Ford sighed, which really hurt his ribs. “So, I guess this means we have to fight now, huh?”

Stanley's expression changed. “What?”

“Like you even have to ask!” Aaron said, so mad he was practically spitting.

Ford nodded slowly and stepped away from Stanley. “Go ahead, man. Do your worst. I just want to get this over with.”

Aaron smiled nastily. “Oh, man. I am so gonna enjoy this.”

He drew back his fist – and Stanley stepped in front of Ford.

“Wh...Stanley?” Ford said, surprised.

Stan didn't turn around. He stayed standing still in front of Ford, looking up at Aaron.

“Move it, kid!” Aaron barked.

He didn't. Stan didn't look mad, or angry, didn't look anything at all. His face was an almost-perfect blank. Ford shivered.

Finally Aaron jerked his fist down with disgust. “Ugh – forget it! You two wimps deserve each other.”

“Hey, guys!”

Ford turned, surprised to recognize the voice. “Seandra?”

She walked up to them, waving, as a bus pulled away behind her. Apparently it had just dropped her off.

She smiled. “What's up?”

“Nothing!” Aaron and Ford said quickly.

Seandra tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear, readjusting her backpack straps. “Man, I am beat. You guys ever realize how long it takes to view a whole shelf of microtapes?” Then she caught a closer look at their faces. Ford watched her eyes travel around to the devastation behind them – the broken boxes, burning trees, the water tower leaning on a mail car like a stepping stool.

Seandra whistled. “Whoaaa. What happened?” she asked. “Freak tornado or something? And why are your faces all messed up? You guys weren't fighting, were you?” She narrowed her eyes. “I hate it when guys fight.”

“No no no, no fighting here,” Aaron said quickly.
“We were, uh, trying to stop two other guys from fighting each other,” Ford said. He and Aaron glanced at each other.

Seandra relaxed. “Cool. It's a nice change to see my two boys hanging out together.” She kissed Aaron's cheek and ruffled Ford's hair. “I'm off to write up my article. Catch you later!” With a smile and a wave, she headed off for home.

Stan was standing back a little, still watching the two of them carefully.

Ford was grinning. “Did you hear that?” he asked Stanley excitedly. “She called me one of her two boys!”

“She was looking at me, though,” Aaron said sharply.

Ford turned to him. “Look, Aaron, if we keep fighting, we'll both lose Seandra. We need to make a Cold War pact.”

“Like...hate each other in silence?” Aaron asked with disgust. “Isn't that what girls do?”


Stan snorted. Ford jabbed him with an elbow.

Eventually, Grauntie Mabel calmed down enough for Stanley to lead her home. She said she'd ridden there on her motor cycle, but given how shaken up she'd been, Stanley thought she might accidentally drive them into a tree. He and Ford agreed there had been enough near-death experiences for the day. (And the summer. And possibly their whole lives.)

Fiddleford promised to find the mail man and explain where his car was, without saying exactly how it got there. One of the nice thing about Gravity Falls was that weird things seemed to happen all the time, but nobody seemed to mind. Or even remember. So Stanley was pretty sure they'd get away with nearly destroying half the town.

It was a couple of miles' walk back to the Shack. Stanley was fine with it, but when he saw Ford limping, he insisted they stop by Soos' house and ask him or Ria to drive them home.

“That's a good plan,” Mabel said, nodding fervently. “The sooner we get home, the sooner I can have my soothing hot chocolate cup with miniature marshmallows and extra glitter.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Sure, Grauntie Mabel.” She still had his blanket around her shoulders, but he wasn't going to ask for it back until she was calm enough to start giving them chores. Then he could pull some serious guilt-tripping to get out of it.

“You okay?” he asked his brother.

Ford shrugged and winced, holding his right shoulder. “My ego is fine, but my sanity is bruised. Also my shoulder. And various other body parts.”

He shook his head. “What did I tell you when you said you could bring video games to life?”

“That you wanted to borrow him when I was done, possibly for extortion purposes?”

“Are you sure we don't have twin telepathy?” Stan asked, and Ford laughed.
Grauntie Mabel put a hand on Stan's shoulder. “Listen, Stanley...I'm sorry I forced you to confront your fears when you weren't ready. I was really only trying to help. I didn't get how scary an actual phobia could be.”

“Whoa, hey, I do not have phobia,” Stanley said. “I'm perfectly healthy, thank you very much.”

“Phobia' means 'fear',” Ford whispered.

“And I'm totally brave,” Stan said matter-of-factly.

After watching Stanley step right in front of Aaron, Ford could only agree.

Grauntie Mabel was nodding, too. “You're right. You are.” She smiled at him. “You've gotta be one of the bravest kids I know.”

“Excuse me,” Ford said pointedly.

“Hey, man, when you climb up a rickety water tower, you can claim full rights to brave-hood,” Stan said.

Ford opened his mouth to reply, but his sore leg gave a nasty twinge and he turned mint-green.

Stan caught him before he could fall. “Easy, Sixer. Let's ask for some ice when we get to Ria's, okay?”

Ford nodded and leaned on his brother. Then he caught a glimpse of Grauntie Mabel's blanket and realized it was Stanley's quilt.

Water tower...Mabel's talk about fear...the time Stan had refused to scale a Port-A-Potty. Ford put it together quickly. Obviously, Stanley was afraid of heights.

Hmm. He looked again at the picture on the quilt. He decided they'd just need to make the crow's nest a little closer to the deck.

Chapter End Notes

You weren't expecting to see Fiddleford in this one, were you? WERE YOU? You're welcome my little potatoes.

Fight Fighters short will be up tomorrow, and then comes the FIRST EPISODE OF SEASON 2!!! We are on FIRE today! Bzow, bzow, bzow!
Fight Fighters Short

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

YFII FP ZLJFKD

Chapter End Notes

MUHAHHHAHAHAHAHAAAAAA

See you next week! PREPARE YOURSELVES FOR SEASON 2! IT'S GONNA BE THE *explosion noise*

(And don't worry, I promise regular-length shorts for the rest of the series!)

End Notes

I feed on the blood of my enemies – but comments make a nice vegetarian substitute. Like it? Hate it? Wanna read it while sticking jalapenos in your eyes? Comment below! (And if you do use jalapenos, post a picture. I promise it will only be used to frighten small children.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!