Summary

AU where Dipper remained set on accepting Ford's offer to learn. As a result, the Mystery Twins have grown into their teenage years somewhat distant from one another, until a fateful summer when Mabel is finally able to return to the strange town that stole away her brother. Dipper has changed a lot in the years since, exploring the unknowns of the universe and his feelings about a certain blond. However, even with all his newfound knowledge, Dipper has no clue about his sister's terrible secret, which she is determined to hide from her family no matter what. That may be more difficult than Mabel knows however, as Gravity Falls is a town where the dead don't sleep and the truth won't stay buried.

As the adventure continues, the intrepid explorers of Earth step through the portal to pursue a deadly threat and find a troubled kingdom. The friendly princess greets them with a smile, but hidden conflicts lurk beneath everyone in the land of Mewni. Who is the real threat?

Has it’s own TVTropes page, to my enduring surprise:
Mabel Pines, now a 16-year-old young woman, free of her childhood braces but still clad in a custom sweater, was nearing the end of a long bus ride back to the town that changed her life and lured away her brother: the town of Gravity Falls.

Roughly three years ago, she had made a mistake that dragged the town into hell, becoming the domain of a mindwarping demon named Bill Cipher. Mabel had ridden out the majority of this disaster inside a perfectly pleasant dream world, and only began experiencing despair after her brother had convinced her to depart and save their friends and family. She thought back to a specific moment, the moment when she said she'd be okay with Dipper leaving her behind to study under Grunkle Ford, if they somehow survived the battle to come.

Mabel didn’t know exactly how Dipper was going to respond but she had some ideas, but what she had been hoping for didn’t come. Dipper was quiet for a moment, before he became visibly lightened in stance, a smile spreading across his face even as tears welled up in his eyes. Mabel quickly became damp eyed as well, as she could tell what her brother was going to say before he even did, though the foreknowledge did nothing to reduce the pain it brought.

"Thank you Mabel," he said simply, looking at her with a bright, grateful look on his face. He looked tongue tied and emotional, but couldn't put everything else he was feeling into words. "I know this is hard for you, it’s hard for me too, but... thank you. This life here in Gravity Falls I'm being offered... It's everything I ever wanted.”

Mabel felt a heavy pit growing in her stomach at the way Dipper looked at her. "How can he actually say that!? How can he look so happy!?" she raged inside her mind. "He's abandoning me!" The realization quickly caused another thought, one which blew out all the fire inside her. "It was all for nothing then. The Rift, Bill, this bubble... I did it all for nothing..."

The girl swallowed her feelings though, and simply gave Dipper a small smile, and stepped towards him and the outside world. "Hey, don't get too ahead of yourself bro. We still have to win a battle against a demon first!" Mabel said, putting on an air of morbid cheer. Dipper laughed alongside her, and the two stepped back to reality.

The rest of the battle was a bit of a daze, but they eventually pulled through, somehow. Mabel was nervous and on edge during the entire conflict, but since they were going to fight for their lives against the legions of hell, no one thought it unusual. In reality, Mabel was nervous because the truth was burning inside her like a hot coal. After all, nobody present knew how Bill Cipher had come to the world. No one knew the role she had played in his arrival.

"And no one's going to know." Mabel thought to herself. "If Bill tries to tell everyone, I'll just call him a liar. Nobody would believe that monster anymore, not as he's actively destroying the world." She planned in her head. "That'll stay my little secret, and when all this mess is over me and Dipper will talk, and he'll come around and realize he doesn't want to separate any more then I do."

To Mabel's amazement though, the truth bomb never dropped. Rather then his tried and true psychological warfare tactics Bill had used to perfection during his time as a disembodied psychic essence, the dream demon, perhaps drunk with the power of his new physical form, attacked and battled largely through physical means, and was eventually killed by a a basic con launched by the
older two Pines Twins. As she watched Grunkle Stan lose his mind to ensure Bill's death, Mabel quietly breathed a sigh of relief amidst the emotional anguish of it all. Her secret was buried among the dead, and hey, Grunkle Stan even got his mind back shortly after!

Then, they did what came naturally to a bunch of people who just looked death in the eye and spat in it before merrily skipping away: They threw a party! The birthday twins were the talk of the town, even though not everyone Mabel had expected had shown up. They got plenty of good gifts and an even better series of thanks, apologies and congratulations from all over town for what they'd done. Mabel was happy to have some friendly words after the recent experiences, but Dipper would continually redirect credit for their victory to Grunkles Stan and Ford, clearly unused to such praise and positive attention.

Towards the end of the party, Mabel was off talking to Pacifica Northwest, both to thank her for the gift the former rival had given her and demand a minigolf rematch if the twins ever returned to the town. "So, you guys will really be gone when this is over?" She asked, actually a little downcast.

"That's how it's gonna be, yeah." Mabel replied nonchalantly. At the back of her mind, she remembered her statement to Dipper in the bubble and his response, but she had spent the entire party hoping, no, knowing he'd change his mind when it was all over. "It's time to go home and grow up, I suppose."

"I just... wish I'd gotten to know you two earlier." Pacifica said with regret. "Maybe we could have hung out more, gone and... done something I guess..." She was quiet for a moment, then looked up at Mabel. "Take good care of Dipper, okay?"

"You know I always do girl!" Mabel replied back playfully, swishing the cup of soda she had in her hand. Before she could speak anymore, the topic of conversation walked over to them.

"Mabel, hey, there you are!" Dipper called as he approached. "Oh, Pacifica, hi!" He added, then looked at her kind of uncomfortably. "Hey, uh, don't take this the wrong way, but can me and Mabel talk alone for a minute? It's, you know... twin stuff?"

Pacifica nodded understandingly and walked away to refill her own drink. "So, having fun bro?" Mabel asked right away. In response, Dipper got a bit of nervous look on his face despite his currently brimming smile.

"I mean, I don't normally like parties or having so many people around, but today feels good. I mean, really, really good." He explained, before getting more serious. "But, things are winding down, and since no one's left yet, I think it's time we, well, make the announcement."

"What are you talking about Dipper, what announcement?" Mabel asked, a confused little smile on her face.

"That I'm staying in town to be Grunkle Ford's apprentice."

In a instant, Mabel felt like she'd been shot. The barrier she'd built around her feelings of sadness and doubt regarding her twin, the shades she'd drawn closed on the reality of the situation, the walls of denial, all of them shattered at once, flooding her with negative emotions. The tears quickly entered her eyes as she made a few babbling noises before managing to finally put things into words. "But... but... Dipper... why?" "Why would you abandon me!?" she thought more clearly.

Dipper was sad to see his twin upset, nervously rubbing his arm, but had an edge of determination in his eyes. "Well, I still had some doubts even in the bubble, but I put them aside to focus on beating Bill. But this party, all the people here... it solidified things. It's not just about fulfilling my dream
Mabel. The people in this town, the friends I made... they're different from back home. I feel accepted here, like I belong. I can't just turn my back on that."

"What about me though, Dipper!? What about your sister!?” Mabel demanded, teary eyed and upset now.

"We'll still be in touch, I'm not going to exit your life completely." Dipper said reassuringly. "I'll visit for the holidays and we can communicate with email and phones."

"But... but what about growing up together? Facing life together? What about our twin bond!?" Mabel asked, growing less composed with every word.

"Mabel... we're growing up into very different people." Dipper replied, trying to hold a very steady tone despite the fact he was upset as well. "The events of this summer proved that. Going with you back to California won't change that. I have to take the opportunity that Grunkle Ford has given to me now, you understand? Every day I don't spend here, studying my dream, is lost forever. You're my twin sister Mabel, I'll always love you, but I can't say no to this opportunity, it's a chance to do things no one else in the world has ever done before, I can't just waste it!" He explained, before trying to put a hand on Mabel's shoulder, only for her to slap it away and run off.

Dipper watched her go, a frown on his face, but after a moment decided to let her have some time to figure out her feelings while he informed the crowd about his new vocation.

Sometime later, after all the guests had gone home, Mabel had emerged, her tears dried and a smile on her face. She'd found a quiet place to cry for a little bit as her thoughts stormed, before finally hitting on an idea that made her happy: Their parents. Surely the twin's parents wouldn't allow their only son to essentially leave the family and study under someone they'd never even met? The site of only one of their children getting off the return bus would horrify them! So, confident Dipper would be sticking with her one way or the other, she returned to the Shack, apologized for getting a little emotional and said she was happy for Dipper.

Then however, she learned they weren't taking the bus. Both pairs of Pines Twins would be traveling back to California in Stan's car, to introduce the younger twin's parents to the real Stanford and Stanley. Mabel packed her things, certain she'd be staying back home, but was put off by how confidently Dipper only packed the minimum for a few nights at most back. After promising Grunkle Stan he wouldn't chew on the seats, Mabel loaded Waddles into the car and spent most of the ride cuddling him, too internally torn to speak up.

"Now THAT was a conversation!" Present day Mabel thought to herself, cracking a very genuine smile. Her parents had been told ahead of time that Grunkle Stan would be bringing the kids home personally, and were extremely happy to hear the kids had bonded with their relative so closely, but hadn't been told anything else, since it'd be too hard to explain over the phone. They freaked out in extreme confusion upon opening the door to see an exact double (save the fingers) of their older relative on the porch, and turned into such an over the top confused mess of anger, disbelief, and personal hurt as everything was explained to them that Mabel couldn't help but find funny.

The humor of the situation had slowly slid away the longer the two pairs of adults talked though, and to Mabel's disbelief, Grunkle Ford gradually won her parents over. Though they weren't entirely sure what to make of Ford's statements about the kinds of things he studied, he managed to prove himself a legitimate scientist very quickly, having brought a few of his inventions as gifts for the family he'd never seen before (among which was a box of his custom light bulbs) along with his dusted off, legitimate college degrees. Stanley had never attempted to pass himself off as such an accomplished scientist during his impersonation of Ford, so naturally the parents were intrigued.
"And you think Dipper will be able to earn an equivalent level of academic credibility under your tutelage?" They had asked Grunkle Ford.

"Absolutely." He responded with totally certainty. "Dipper has great passion and potential in numerous fields. I have no doubt that, if given the proper opportunity, he can become an extremely accomplished and well renowned scientist."

"Well how about that. I never thought he'd get anywhere in life reading all those creepy books of his."

From there, the conversation between her parents and great uncles went directions Mabel couldn't quite follow but Dipper listened to with rapt interest. The idea of the tech industry being the fastest means to get ahead in California was banded around a lot, and by the time night had fallen, Mabel's heart had sunk and her hopes shattered, as her parents agreed to Grunkle Ford's proposal.

A while later, after Dipper had collected a few more things from the house to take with him and the parents had immediately granted Mabel's request to keep Waddles, the two were left looking at each other on the front lawn, the car back to Oregon ready to go, but determined to wait as long as the twins needed.

Mabel had surged forward and hugged her brother tight before either could say anything, tears in her eyes. "Dipper... I don't want you to go." she'd said with a choked voice.

Dipper looked down at her, a sympathetic frown on his face, but after a moment, he pried himself free of her grip and said. "This is for the best Mabel. We'll see each other next summer, okay?" And then, moments later, he was gone.

But next summer never came. Mabel began high school that year, and without the help she'd always gotten from Dipper, she floundered in class and ended up requiring summer school numerous times. Her newfound mood swings, where she'd go back and forth between her previous bubbly self and a morose temper brought on by memories of her twin, had hampered her ability to make new friends though she still pulled through and made a couple. Finally, she'd burned through boyfriends in high school, none of them able to make her happy the way she wanted. By the time Mabel was able to travel back to Gravity Falls, she and her brother had turned 16.

"But this year I did it!" Mabel cheered to herself, trying to leave distressing thoughts eating the bus' dust. "I buckled down, studied hard, and carefully selected mostly Art related courses! B- average baby!"

With the home troubles intentionally forgotten, the remainder of the trip passed in the blink of an eye, and soon enough, Mabel stepped off the bus, breathed in that crisp forest air, and looked upon her family away from family, who'd all turned out to welcome her.

Wendy, Soos, (now wearing the Mister Mystery costume, Dipper would tell her over the internet that he frequently "forgets" to take it off before bed) Grenda, Candy, both Grunkles, and at the front of the crowd, Dipper himself.

Though the two moved to embrace at the same time, Mabel crossed the gap much quicker and nearly tackled the boy to the ground with the ensuing glomp. The two hugged without awkwardness, then separated after a good while. "I'm so happy to see you again Mabel!" Dipper broke out grinning, then stammered a bit. "I mean, objectively it hasn't been that long since we last saw each other, during Christmas, so I guess I mean see you here, back in the Falls..."

Mabel looked really hard at her brother. She had seen him in his older form of course, when he kept
his promise to visit her during holidays, but there was something different this time. He was taller now, obviously, a little bit taller then her even though not by much. He was still entirely clean shaven ("Lab hazard" he had commented when she'd tried to tease him over still not having a mustache over Christmas dinner) but seemed a little bit more well toned and muscly. Though still nowhere near a hunk, he'd lost most of his baby fat and his arms were far less noodle-esque. But more then the physical changes she had observed during his visits to her, Mabel was perceiving that her brother was... lighter somehow. His face lacked many of the old stress lines that had marked it, he walked with more certainty to his step. Here, in Gravity Falls Mable realized, Dipper was comfortable, in his element.

Without her.

Forcing a smile to her face, Mabel cut off his stuttering. "Oh I gotcha ya big dork!" She said in a cheerful tone. "So I can tell you haven't changed, how about showing me what everyone else has been up to?"

What followed was a flurry of reintroductions, happy welcomes and promises to have longer, more in depth catching up at a later date. The sun was already setting and Grunkle Stan seemed eager to shoo everyone away so his darling niece could rest after her long trip.

The family drove through town to reach the Mystery Shack, driving slow to let Mabel take it all in. Though the town was much as she remembered it, there was a hollow air to many of the town she passed by. Looking closely at the buildings, it suddenly made sense: they'd been rebuilt to resemble the old buildings exactly, but had been done cheaply and presumably quickly, leaving an uncanny valley feeling to someone familiar with the originals.

"People in town just want to forget Bill ever happened." Dipper remarked grimly, picking up on his twin's thought process. "I can't really blame them for wanting to forget the terrible things that were done to them, but sometimes I worry they'll just restart the Society of the Blind Eye with how much people shove it down. It's why me and Grunkle Ford are doing research into the aftereffects of Bill's time in our dimension, to try and understand what risks we might still be facing."

"Dipper, don't bring your sister down with that kind of talk, alright? This is a happy reunion." Stan spoke up from the front of the car, then more warmly added "Don't worry pumpkin, the people here in town will never forget you! Everyone's really excited to see you again."

"We're here!" Ford announced as the car pulled into the shack. With the return of the older twins to the premise when the world voyage didn't pan out, Soos was originally afraid he'd have to leave behind his roll as Mister Mystery, but Stan had been determined to see his retirement stick. The old con man moved into his old room on the premise, Soos and Melody got an extremely cheap house in town with the proceeds of the tourist business, and Ford agreed to pay all of the utilities using his patent money, since his now active laboratory was a major electricity hog. In a move Stan never thought he'd be willing to do, he had to use his skill to negotiate a worse deal for himself, as Soos was entirely willing to put up the Pines family for no charge when they first announced their comeback.

"I've got to show you what we've been working on!" Dipper said excitedly as Stan fiddled with the locked door, the place having closed up early today. As the family walked through the old tourist trap, Mabel breathed in the dusty air, happy to note nothing had changed about the old house of oddities. Then, they approached the vending machine.

Mabel stood curtly, with breath held as the elevator descended to the lab below. The girl did not look upon her memories of this place fondly, and grew more reserved as the doors opened and it revealed the two scientists had been busy: The walls were lined with samples and charts, inventions that might
be half completed or non-functional, and at some point a ping pong table with several chairs had been hauled down here and piled with Dungeons, Dungeons and More Dungeons books and papers.

Finally, Mabel was escorted to the room that changed her life forever.

"You... you guys rebuilt the portal?" Mabel said, half surprised and half fearful, as the great disk once again dominated the underground cavern, currently inactive but with glowing lights and nearby computer terminals indicating it was very much operational.

"It's not a portal anymore." Dipper remarked while walking over to a computer and shaking the mouse to dispel the screensaver. "With Bill dead, we figured it was safe to resume our research into the multiverse, but for safety reasons we rebuilt the pieces into a viewer, instead of a portal." He indicated to a collection of data on the display Mabel couldn't make sense of. "With this viewer, we're able to survey alternate realities, analyze air composition, gravity levels, energy waves, and even the physical laws that differ from our own! It's so amazing out there Mabel, there's endless dimensions of alternate human knowledge and..."

"Okay, okay, I appreciate your attempt to help Mabel get to sleep after her long bus ride, but you're giving ME a headache with all this science mumbo jumbo." Grunkle Stan interrupted. Though his tone was deliberately a shade of over the top brusque, he did betray a small degree of unease at being down here. "Come on Mabel, I'll show you back to the attic room."

"Be right with you sis!" Dipper called after them as the two energetic twins stepped into the elevator.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Stan removed his glasses so he could rub the space between his eyes in confusion/frustration. "I can't believe they rebuilt that damn thing and are so proud of it, after everything that happened..." He suddenly looked over at Mabel, a little regretful but then with a forced smile. "But hey, you don't gotta worry about any of that nerd junk pumpkin! First thing tomorrow your favorite Grunkle's gonna take you anywhere in town you wanna go! Gotta lotta catching up to do with all your friends, eh?"

"Thanks Grunkle Stan." Mabel said with a smile, then got a little quieter. "So how's Dipper been these last couple of... years?" The last word tasted bitter on her tongue.

"He's been doing good." Stan spoke more curtly then usual, able to tell Mabel was in a delicate state and trying to scrounge up some uncharacteristic tact. "Spends his days running around the town and woods with poindexter, then works the nights away in the lab, always excited no matter how boring it all is."

"Does he have any friends?" Mabel asked.

"He kept up with the old crowd pretty well until Wendy got shipped off to that lumberjack camp, which by the way, she's still supposed to be at, so don't spread around that she came back to see you, and kinda stopped hanging out with anyone besides Soos." Stan replied, then perked up in remembrance. "Oh, and he hangs out with the Northwest girl pretty frequently, even convinced her to show up for basement game night on the weekends." he added while the two stepped out of the elevator.

Mabel was confused at this. Yes they'd parted on good terms, but it seemed an unusual step for both of them. "He's hanging out with Pacifica?"

"Yeah that's her name, and waited until she lost all her money to do it to." Stan snorted as he opened the door to Mabel's room for the summer. "But enough of all that, I'm sure Dipper will be more then happy to talk your ear off about all this tomorrow. Get to sleep early so you can stay awake during
Mabel let out a chuckle as Grunkle Stan closed the door behind him, leaving her to unpack and change for the night. It was already dark outside when she began, so by the time the contents of her suitcases had been roughly scattered about her half of the room she was ready to crawl in bed.

Right on cue, a knocking came at the door. "Come on in to sweater town!" Mabel called cheerfully, having been energized by the familiar sights and smells of the attic bedroom.

The door creaked open and Dipper, clad in plaid pajamas, stuck his head through the door. "Settling back in okay?"

"Like I never left dippen dots!" Mabel called back, rocking back and forth excitedly on her bed. "It'll be just like the first summer here! We'll stay up here all night, I can tell you all about our parents, how Waddles' is doing, my boyfriends, all the sweaters I've made since you left, how it feels to get pumped full of drugs when my cavities got filled, how I've been..."

"Actually Mabel, I'm just up here to wish you good night." Dipper cut in shyly. Mabel looked at him quizzically, prompting him to elaborate. "I, uh, don't actually sleep up here anymore. I've got my own room down in the basement near the laboratory. Having to trudge back and forth the length of this house every day was really tiring for the first few months here. Don't worry though, you can tell me all about everything tomorrow. Good night Mabel."

And with that, the light was turned off and Mabel was alone in her room. With notably less energy she crawled under the sheets, and shivered despite the heavy blanket sitting atop her.

For as long as they'd lived under the same roof, Dipper and Mabel had always shared a room together, and sharing space with her twin was something Mabel had looked forward to immensely upon her return. "Our shared living space is one of the reasons we're so closely bonded!" Mabel thought to herself, curling up into a ball under the blankets. "We lived our lives always exposed to each other, it's how we know each other so well!" Ruminating over her perspective, Mabel considered the what this meant. "Does this mean I don't know my own brother anymore... or does it mean he doesn't want me in his life?"

Ruminating upon such dreary night thoughts, Mabel eventually drifted to sleep.

A meaningless amount of time later, Mabel found herself floating through a dreamscape, a black void devoid of thought or imagination, instead of the vivid barrage of color her dreams once consisted of.

Though she didn't know it, her twin had come down with a sharp dislike for dreaming at around the same time she had, and his mental realm was similarly bare and self-censored during his restful nights.

The slow, deliberate boredom of waiting in the dark to wake slowly began to turn to tension though, as Mabel could have sworn a dream did fill this realm, just at the edge of her senses; sights on the corner of her eyes, a solid object passing so close to her the displaced air triggers her nerve endings but without making contact, smells so thin in the air they activate only the most sensitive spot in her nose.

But the noise though, the noise entered at the edge of her hearing but only got louder. Mabel realized it was her own voice, full of cheer and multiplied by twelve, well before she could make out the words. Then, just when it seemed as though the noise would be discernible with even a micro-decibel more, it fell silent.
Mabel let out a sigh of relief, tense muscles relaxing.

CIPHER SITS INSIDE YOUR HEAD

CIPHER LIVES AMONG THE DEAD

CIPHER SEES YOU IN YOUR BED

AND EATS YOU WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING

The sound was deafening her every sense, a simple nursery rhyme attacking her skin based nerve endings, her olfactory nerves. She tasted death on her tongue and could see nothing but endless horror through her eyes. She coiled into a ball even harder as the world around her melted into nightmares, her deepest fear and darkest secret attacking her from every sense.

After what was both an eternity and a fraction of a second, Mabel Pines woke up in her bed, still safe and secure in Gravity Falls. Soft light filtered through the room's new, non-triangular window. Her breath slowed from hyperventilation to a steady, normal rate, as she tried to bury what she'd experienced.

"Bill is dead", she repeated to herself with her thoughts, over and over. "And he can't hurt my family anymore!"

"Mabel! Breakfast!" Came a call from downstairs. "I made your favorite pancakes!"

A smile returned to her face, Mabel Pines resolved to bury her demons far away from where they could hurt her relationship with her brother, then set off down the stairs to set to work rebuilding it.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is my first go at fanfiction. This whole story pretty much arose from me reaching the end of Gravity Falls and coming to the conclusion I disagreed with a quite a few of the ideas it wanted to present as correct in the end, and a little bit later I was writing this. Obviously, the major change that everything else spirals out of is Dipper remaining committed to his dreams and staying with Grunkle Ford, and as a result the twins come to be very different while they're separated. So, tell me what you think about it, and thanks for getting this far.
Breakfast that morning was puddles of maple syrup with a side of pancakes added underneath them, accompanied with sugar dipped oranges and a tall glass of chocolate milk, a tried and true Mabel favorite. The Pines family sat around the table partaking together, happily catching up with the girl from California.

"...So then I told Chad that if he can't handle a bacon dog around, then this relationship isn't going whole hog!" Mabel said with a laugh, eliciting chuckles from the other three around the table. Still grinning, she added "He broke up with me after that." Then, she took the initiative with a question of her own. "So, tell me what a typical day out in beautiful Gravity Falls is like?"

"Well, me and Grunkle Ford have a lot of projects going on around the town and surviving wilderness, mostly mapping the long term effects of Bill's arrival on the natural and supernatural factors of the environment, which mostly consists of setting and checking survey devices and crunching the numbers they produce." Dipper explained. "You can come with me today, it's a great walk through the town and woods."

"So, what kind of new flavor weirdness can we expect while out and about?" Mabel asked with a grin. "Mermen that live on land? Gnomes that learned how to date? Dipper with a girlfriend? Gideon being tall?" she asked the last with a mocking tone.

"The Gleeful family no longer resides in Gravity Falls." Stanford cut in with a serious tone. "Though you two were able to turn Gideon against Bill Cipher, the overwhelming majority of the town still reviled him for his previous alliance. They wasted no time attempting to return him to prison, so he and his father went on the run. Mrs. Gleeful is still around town, poor woman."

"And good riddance to that little creep!" Stan added derisively. "Refusing to buy that little shit sucking barnacle's excuses was the smartest thing I've ever seen those townies do!"

Dipper just nodded in mild agreement while Mabel frowned a little over Mrs. Gleeful, but didn't really give it any further thought, aside from recalling Dipper's recounting of her stalker's turnabout, given while they were prepping their counter-attack on Bill. Dipper had quietly confessed that while staring down the devil serving sheriff and his posse of hardened outlaws, he'd resorted to pulling complete nonsense out of his ass and was completely shocked it actually saved his life.

The rest of the breakfast passed over discussion of more mundane topics, and soon enough Dipper and Mabel were off for the woods, running and laughing as they did that very first summer, only stopping to check the occasional artificial construct; a video camera tied to a tree, a bear trap laid in unicorn pastures, trapping bird houses for tagging, pollen collectors and air samplers. They ran and laughed like carefree children, jumping from logs and swinging from branches. Abruptly however, a chill settled over Dipper, and he came to a quick stop while frowning as Mabel pretended to be a pirate, swinging a stick cutlass.

"Hey Mabel, we should tread quietly for this next one." Dipper said nervously. "In fact, maybe it'd be better if you head back to the Shack and leave this to me."

"Oooh, Dippen-Dots got a secret experiment he won't share with his best ever sister!" Mabel whistled teasingly. "Is it a research camp for observing the red haired lumberjack in her natural
habitat, maybe even while baaaaathing?" she drew out the last word as Dipper got increasingly flustered.

"Fine, come on with, I can tell I won't hear the end of it if you turn back." He finally replied in an annoyed tone. "But I'm serious, step lightly up ahead."

"Ah come on Dipper, I'm just joshing you a little!" Mabel replied while falling in beside him. "So what's this super secret special place you got out here? Did Grunkle Stan finally found that religion based on gambling he always talks about and declare a patch of dirt out here his holy land? Stop by the blessed gift shop and absolve your sins for a... a buck... fifty..."

Mabel's words died in her throat as she broke the treeline and gazed upon a grove in the middle of the woods.

A grove covered in gravestones.

"People were worried he might have done something weird to them, and we had some reports during cleanup of corpses moving or speaking, though we never confirmed if any of those reports were true or just the products of scared, damaged minds." Dipper remarked with equal parts sorrow and anger as dread began to build within Mabel. "The townsfolk decided to bury them away from the main cemetery. Me and Grunkle Ford have kept watch for any kind of threat."

Mabel was shivering, chilled to the bone on a bright sunny day as the lines of headstones seemed to stretch into forever before her sight. "Who... who are they Dipper?" she asked, not wanting to know the answer that was blindingly clear.

"Everyone murdered by Bill Cipher."

Those words hit Mabel like a wave of sludge, knocking her over and drowning her in a tide of guilt, disgust, hatred, pain. The young woman collapsed to her knees and began gasping for air, pressure building in her stomach until she vomited onto the dirt, her body trying to purge itself of these negative emotions.

Dipper was on her in a second, gently patting her on the back and offering soft words. "It's okay Mabel, just get it all out. This is perfectly normal, the exact same thing happened to me when I can back here with Ford and Stan while everyone was still rebuilding."

"How many?" Mabel asked softly as soon as her throat was clear and she could stand up, away from her own vomit.

Dipper's face became concerned. "I... I don't really think you want to know..."

"HOW MANY!?" She demanded, gushing out tears.

"...113, and we still sometimes uncover bodies in out of the way locations." Dipper stated, then looked at his feet in guilt. "And I couldn't tell you the name of a single one of them. It... it was just so easy to not think of this. I mean we won, all our friends and family survived, so we just... had a party I guess."

Both twins stood there in silence for a moment, guilt crushing both of them, though Dipper did not even suspect the depths of emotional turmoil Mabel was undergoing, simply thinking his more outgoing twin had probably made friends with some of these townsfolk, not even guessing she was blaming herself for each and every one.

"It's all my fault!" Mabel screamed inside her head. "All of these people are dead because of what I
did! I'm a monster, a killer, a woman with bloody hands and a...

The train of thought abruptly ended as Dipper put his arms around her in a comforting hug. The growing warmth pushed back the self-loathing as Mabel felt her twin come close. "And a twin who still loves me." She realized. "Even after all these years." With newfound emotional strength, Mabel did what she did best with emotional problems; pushed them deep into her mind, locked the door and threw away the key. The pain, the disgust, the guilt and everything but the light receded into her mind. When the tears stopped falling, she hugged her sibling back.

"And I'm NEVER losing him again!" She thought defiantly as the two separated again. Dipper looked about, not quite sure what to do. "Thanks for that Dipper. Now, let's go get your fancy data or whatever!"

Dipper looked back at her with a soft smile, then walked over to the first of the seismic sensors, explaining how they worked. "The red light on top activates in response to movement, right now it's being triggered by us," he stated while fiddling a USB drive into a side slot. "These things are security devices that you can wire into anything, lights, alarms, automatic doors, etc, so Grunkle Ford modified them with a bigger data storage and set them to dump the information into these. Then we have a program in the lab which analyzes it for us."

"Couldn't just lay down some flypaper and see if you caught zombies in the morning, eh Dippen Dork?" Mabel replied with a chuckle as the two walked away, ignorant to the red lights burning bright well after they walked away.

The twin's journey took them into the town proper next, with a friendly face welcoming the female mystery twin back to town every couple of steps. Though officially Dipper was out in town to collect water samples, he was happy to take it slow so his twin could socialize.

As the two passed a little restaurant on the side of the street, Dipper abruptly pulled Mabel into the outdoor dining area and plopped her down on a table already occupied by someone she didn't recognize. "Hey, glad I caught you today, would hate for you to miss Mabel coming back to town!" Dipper exclaimed excitedly.

Mabel cocked her head sideways in confusion, until the table's occupant pushed aside their ice cream float and lowered her sunglasses. "Pacifica Northwest!?" Mabel asked, surprised and a little confused. Though still a tall, purple clad blond like she'd been years ago, the local heiress looked different. It abruptly occurred to Mabel she was devoid of makeup, seemed short on obvious jewelry, and was wearing a much lower quality version of her "discreet" outfit she'd worn when she'd first asked Dipper for help all those years ago.

Though her eyes looked tired, the Northwest grew a genuine smile at seeing the twins. "Welcome back Mabel. Sorry I wasn't able to come out and greet her Dipper, I just... lost track of the date."

"It's alright, everyone forgets things." Dipper replied, returning her smile. "Mabel, Pacifica's been helping me a lot with Grunkle Ford's research over the years. Remind me to tell you about the time we were trapped on top of the water tower and she pushed a hemovore of it!"

"It just feels good to help with something that matters." Pacifica responded. "Your brother is doing some really amazing stuff out here Mabel. He's a real genius." she complemented as Dipper pulled his hat over his face and blushed a little, while a complementary ice cream float was placed on his side of the table.

Though her outward smile was maintained, Mable was feeling confused and mildly upset by the scene in front of her. "Waaaaait a minute here, Mabel's matchmaking mind is picking up some
chemistry here... Why wouldn't Dipper tell me about this?" Then, she mentally slapped herself.  "Because he doesn't recognize it, the big dork. But still, why didn't he didn't tell me about Pacifica at all? He hasn't mentioned her once, not over the internet, not during the holiday, not nothing! Did... did Dipper replace me? Well, no bleach blond stereotype is gonna steal my spot as Dipper's mystery buddy!"

"So you're helping Dippen-Dots out with all his research huh? What's he got you doing, running on a hamster wheel to power the laboratory, or are you testing new cosmetics out before they move to animal testing?" The twin asked tauntingly.

"Mabel! That was rude!" Dipper chastised, and Mabel flinched involuntarily. She hadn't expected Dipper to respond so strongly. "Pacifica is more intelligent then you think." Then he looked over at the other girl and said apologetically "I'm sorry for that Paz, Mabel didn't mean anything, she's just, uh..."

"It's alright Dipper." The blond waved off. "I know from all your stories Mabel is a little different. I'm sure she didn't mean anything by that and thinks those are very important roles in the process of discovery." She said warmly to Dipper, before addressing his twin, still smiling but somewhat barbed in tone. "I might not be on the same level as your brother or your great uncle, (but then again who else is?) but I did have the best private schools and tutors money can buy growing up, so I keep up with them and help out where I can. It's all really fascinating."

Mabel narrowed her eyes a little while Dipper continued to look uncomfortable. "Well, I'm still sorry about that, but thank you for being so understanding Paz. Anyway, me and Mabel need to finish up our sampling for today, maybe we can all hang out more tomorrow?"

With the twins disappearing down the street, Pacifica Northwest's expression fell and she resumed drinking her ice cream float. When it was drained to nothing, she meandered around town until the sun began to set and it was time to return home.

Home for the Northwest family was a small, poorly maintained house on the opposite side of town from their former manor. In the aftermath of the huge financial losses they sustained when their local industries had been annihilated in the apocalypse, Preston Northwest had opted to liquidate the majority of the family's assets and try to rebuild back to the opulence they'd once enjoyed, despite the fact that the remaining money was more than enough for a family of three to live safe, secure and without a need for work at a middle class level for a lifetime.

The current house was a reflection of this determination: It was low quality even before the town turned into a hellscape and killed the previous owners, but the Northwest Patriarch refused to invest a cent into repairing it, fully confident they'd be moving back into a mansion in no time. Instead, he'd opted to add a high tech office space to the dilapidated shack, within which Preston would lock himself for days on end, traversing the modern electronic market in an attempt to turn his liquid assets into a new business empire.

Pacifica entered her house and made her way to her room, seeing neither her mother or father about. This made her happy.

Retreating to her room, a small, cold space with a few personal effects, Pacifica carefully shut the door then reached under the air mattress that she slept on to review her own plans for rebuilding the family fortune.

Scattered across dozens of loose pieces of paper were sketches, schematics and plans for dozens of hypothetical products and services with only a single thread connecting them all: they were all the product of the research into the supernatural the Pines family had conducted. If these rough sketches
could survive the long road to final product, she'd have the means to take the market by storm, a line of products light years ahead of the competition technologically.

It was a tenuous dream, Pacifica realized, but a dream none the less. For the moment, all she can do is help the Pines family progress forward and hope the Northwest family fortune is still there by the time she's old enough to use it.

Across the house, inside a tightly locked office illuminated by a dozen computer screens, Preston Northwest fiddled away at the stock market, attempting to multiply his slowly dwindling fortune on get rich quick stock schemes. Unfortunately the man's economic prowess are were somewhat underdeveloped, as the gears of the Northwest industry were in perpetual motion well before he was born, and over the course of his life the most he'd needed to do to stay rich was not cause a catastrophic disaster.

But now such a disaster fell upon him through no particular action of his own, and Preston had no way to solve it. He couldn't even resort to white collar crime, since all the experts who'd traditionally worked with the Northwests in that field were unwilling to become involved with a family in such a precarious position, afraid they might not be able to buy their freedom should it go badly.

"I'll show them. I will show them all the price of abandoning the Northwest family." Preston thought to himself as his tired eyes and fingers worked away. "The investors, the townsfolk! My treacherous wife, already searching for a new meal ticket. My daughter, consorting with commoners!"

"I'D INVEST IN WATER PURIFIERS, CYANIDE AND COFFINS!"

"Who's there!" Preston called angrily, reaching across to a nearby drawer to retrieve the contents in a rush. The answer came to him however, when every screen in the room suddenly projected a glowing yellow background with a single, unblinking eye starting back.

"JUST A FRIENDLY LITTLE DREAM DEMON DROPPING IN TO HELP RETURN MY HORSEMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE TO THE LAP OF LUXURY! I MEAN WHAT KIND OF DEMONIC FIGURE WOULD I BE IF I DIDN'T HELP MY FAVORITE HUMANS FULFILL THEIR CORRUPT DESIRES?"

Throat tightening up in fear, Preston stuttered back "No... no you're not here, you're dead! Leave me alone!"

"WHAT'S WITH THE HOSTILITY HORSEY? GETTING COLD FEET ABOUT THE WHOLE SELL OUT THE HUMAN RACE THING? SAY, HAVE YOU DONE SOMETHING WITH YOUR FACIAL ORIFICE? THEY'RE LOOKING A LITTLE... SYMMETRICAL. CAN'T SAY I LIKE IT!"

Now shivering in fear, Preston Northwest crawled under his desk and curled into a ball, trying to hide from the gazing eyes. He wanted to scream in fear, but was so choked up that he could barely breathe out "You can't hurt me anymore! You're not real, you're not real!"

CIPHER SITS INSIDE YOUR HEAD
CIPHER LIVES AMONG THE DEAD
CIPHER SEES YOU IN YOUR BED
AND EATS YOU WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING

The simple little rhyme screamed louder and louder inside Preston Northwest's head as he hid
beneath his desk long into the night, as his array of computer screens simply continued to display the ever shifting market trends and stock markets.

The twins similarly arrived back home as the sun was setting, having spent the rest of the day collecting data around town and afterwards Dipper treated his twin to a greasy, unhealthy dinner out in town. Inside the warmth of the Shack, they were kicking off shoes and shedding layers.

"That was a full day there Dipper! How'd you find the time to make any friends with a schedule like that!??" Mabel asked excitedly. Dipper frowned somewhat.

"Actually, we don't do this every day of the week. With the exception of some stuff stored inside the Shack, most of these can be left alone for a day or so, so we alternate collecting data and analyzing data day by day. Not tomorrow though, actually. Saturday is the day off." He explained, then looked at Mabel rather seriously. "Look, I know you didn't mean anything by it, but I need you to be a little more sensitive around Pacifica."

"Oooh, Dipper's picked up a chivalrous side while I was away!" Mabel teased. "And to think that once upon a time you were gonna let her get disemboweled by living golf balls!"

Dipper looked at his feet in response to that particular incident being brought back up, but continued. "I know she hides it well but she's had it rough these last few years. She took awhile to adapt to living normally and her parents are completely uninterested in her well-being anymore. Back when Wendy was still in town I asked her to help Pacifica out over at the town's high school, and I was hoping you'd be willing to be her friend as well."

Mabel's expression softened, and she felt kinda bad now. "Okay Dipper, I see whatcha mean. I'll make sure to apologize next time I see her." she said, while the two began to head upstairs to the attic bedroom.

"Great!" Dipper said, perking up a little. "That will be tomorrow actually. As part of our Saturday off, me and Grunkle Ford have a Dungeons, Dungeons and More Dungeons game we play in the evening, and Pacifica has been joining us for awhile now."

Mabel's mouth was agape. "That fancy rich girl likes that dusty old nerd game?"

At that, Dipper smiled. "Yeah, she was skeptical at first, but she gave it a try and really enjoyed herself. She's a good friend." By then, they'd reached Mabel's bedroom. "Anyways, have a good night Mabel."

As soon as she was alone in her room, Mabel cradled her head in her hand. "Dipper, you are hopeless." She said in exasperation.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is mostly about introducing the actually massive consequences Bill's invasion would actually have had but were quickly brushed over by the show itself, and the toll that would take on people, particularly those who helped it to happen. In addition, we get a little look at the kind of day to day work Ford and Dipper do to advance the field of supernatural science, both of which will be ongoing themes for this work. I also tried to add back that psychological, dream logic terror edge Bill had that he lost during the endgame.
Mabel found herself floating through her barren dreamscape once again soon after falling asleep. Again it was an empty realm, purposefully suppressed during the years since that first summer to hold back the night terrors that left her awake and screaming for the first few weeks back in California.

Mabel's aimless drifting was abruptly interrupted when something rough and wet latched onto her leg and began to drag her through the endless darkness, eliciting an unheard scream from the teenage girl. She was dragged through forever then deposited onto a fancily embroidered tea table, where a warm cup with five sugar lumps sat dissolving in front of Mabel's chair.

She continued screaming for a few seconds, then abruptly stopped and admired the table setup in front of her.

The world around her had changed to perfectly square organic room, pulsating biological matter from organs Mabel didn't recognize making up all four walls, the floor and the ceiling. The wall directly across from her folded back with a sickening wet noise, revealing that a long eyeball on top of a stick was inside the wall. The bloodshot eye stared down at the girl, and the entire room shook when the voice of Bill Cipher reverberated from all sides.

"SO YOU'VE FINALLY OPTED TO SHOW YOUR FACE IN TOWN AGAIN EY SHOOTING STAR? WELL LET ME BE THE FIRST TO WELCOME THE RETURN OF MY HERALD!" The voice called out mockingly as a puff of confetti was ejected from an orifice in the ceiling, falling limply onto Mabel's unamused face.

"This is just a bad dream." Mabel said to herself, working to remain calm. "Bill Cipher is dead, he can't be talking to me, so this must just be my brain responding to being back in Gravity Falls, and I'm not going to let my brain tell me what to do."

"OH, HAS SHOOTING STAR TRIED TO PICK UP A LOGICAL SIDE IN MY ABSENCE?" Bill asked sarcastically. "WELL THAT ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH TO MAKE PINE TREE LOVE YOU AGAIN."

"Good thing then that I don't need to MAKE Dipper feel anything, our twin bond is as strong and secure as ever!" Mabel spat back, angrily dismissing the voice around her.

"YOU'RE STUPID AND THAT'S WRONG!" Bill Cipher's voiced answered in a bluntly cheerful tone, drawing a frown out of Mabel. "EVEN YOU CAN TELL PINE TREE HAS BEEN HAPPIER THEN HE'S EVER BEEN IN LIFE AFTER LEAVING YOU BEHIND AND LIVING IN THIS TOWN! BUT THE GOOD NEWS IS, I CAN HELP YOU HAVE YOUR BROTHER ALL TO YOURSELF AGAIN, AND ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS WORK AS MY HERALD! IT'S NOT A HARD JOB, YOU HAVE PRIOR EXPERIENCE..."

Mabel tensed up at Bill's latest line of taunts, but quickly picked up her tea cup. "Sorry adorable kitty." she whispered to the design of a cat chasing its own tail around the cup, then hurled the drink into the bloodshot eyeball nestled among the organ material walls, the ceramic shattering on contact in the squishy orb, drawing out spurts of black blood and agonized screaming.

"You can't hurt my family ever again Bill! Rot in hell where you belong!" Mabel screamed out as the world around her began to die. The thick black blood that pulsed out of the cuts to the giant eyeball was now gushing out of the walls, bursting from veins in the organ layers with sickening snaps. The room filled up rapidly, until Mabel was slowly submerged and drowned, screaming defiance at the
The second the dark goop strangled her throat and blocked out her eyes, Mabel awoke in her attic bedroom, soft morning sunlight illuminating her shivering form underneath her covers. "It was just a dream Mabel." she said to herself, trying to calm down. "You're just a little freaked out by that... that mass grave you saw yesterday formed from people you got killed and had a bad dream. Perfectly normal thing to have happen." She rationalized, full aware of the absurdity of the statement. "But Bill is dead and your secret is safe. Just push it all out of mind and get on with the day."

Stanford Pines was taking a morning walk through the woods. Though today was the day off for the researching family, he kept his senses open as he walked through nature, the gentle mixing of the natural and supernatural world dancing on the edge of his experienced ears.

There was much beauty in these woods that couldn't be replicated anywhere else on earth, and even with the decades of torture and hardship he suffered because of his research, Ford still loved this place and the untold secrets it held, ready to revolutionize mankind.

Indeed, his private war against Bill Cipher eventually came to strengthen Stanford's resolve to push the boundaries of human understanding. It wasn't just a world of undiscovered whimsy and wonder beyond the veil, there was danger lurking in the dark reaches of the world, danger the human race was totally unequipped to protect itself from! How many, across the ages of history, had lost someone to, or been blamed for the actions of an elusive monster than no one believed in and could not be caught?

Such creatures defied the understanding of the humans they preyed on, and to that end Ford intended to expand that understanding, carefully gather results for decades until the time was right to enter the world stage, irrefutable proof in hand! For the sake of the human race, for those who had suffered in silence! For his family...

Stanford stopped for a second and smiled. His family, the ones he's proud to acknowledge relations to, were all together again. Stanley, though still carrying a great many personal flaws (the final straw convincing the twins to relocate research back to Gravity Falls indefinitely was a bar brawl that started over someone trying to stab Stanley to death over cheating at poker), felt like a brother again, content to live out his old age his twin's side, no matter where that took them. There was newly returned Mabel, who held many of Stan's positive traits but had a young, bubbly cheer to her in addition. And Dipper...

Not a day went by when Stanford Pines didn't feel proud of Dipper. Of course the boy was admirable for his natural curiosity and dedication to truth, but Ford ultimately admired him for his wisdom. Though the two walked the same path, Dipper had avoided many of the same pitfalls Ford had, and when he did succumb he learned quickly. The master teaches the student, and the student teaches the master.

Stanford's musing were interrupted when he heard a twig snap nearby. Though his first instinct was to hide in a nearby bush, he held himself in place. He was in Gravity Falls among family and friends, and that was simply one of his paranoid habits he was trying to break. "Hello? Anyone else out here today?"

Dread began to build inside Stanford as not only was there no reply to his query, but that the forest grew unnaturally silent in response while a heinous scent had blown in on the wind. The scientist discreetly felt through his coat to see that one of Stanley's "anti-ladder wielding maniac" firearms (specifically a Browning Hi-Power pistol chambered for .40 caliber rounds) that technically belonged to him was still there, which it was.
He wasn't working to break ALL his paranoid habits, after all.

Now cautious and verging on gagging from the smell, Ford began to move slowly and softly, senses open wide. The silence was deafening out here, a far and unnatural cry from the usually vibrant background hum of forest life. It had been like this in the first few weeks after Wierdmaggedon, when everything living had fled or been killed by Bill's rampaging forces. Even the trees and the grass had seemingly shrunk and stunted in vain attempts to escape notice, while the stench of death permeated every inch of land.

After a short sweep of the area, Ford made a discovery that made his blood run cold.

Painted in blood to the trunk of a tree was a Bill Cipher, drawn perfectly from the tip of his hat to the end of his feet. Sitting at the base of the tree was the creature whose blood had been collected for the drawing, a black bear with its throat savagely cut and its chest cavity torn open, guts spilling out upon the forest floor, already attracting swarms of insects. Despite the immense amount of gore scattered over the forest floor, the tree trunk was immaculate besides the finely done blood painting, free of splatters and running lines.

On instinct Ford waded into the guts of the slaughtered animal and began recklessly striking the trunk of the tree, bloodying his knuckles in the process of knocking loose the chunk of bark the blood was painted on then stomping it to splinters when it was on the ground, rupturing a spilled bit of bear intestine in the process.

Once the wood had practically been reduced to sawdust by his manic stomping, Ford came to a stop and set his hand against the tree, trying to catch his breath and calm his body, which burned with fight or flight instincts and chemicals.

"Calm down Stanford, be logical about this." the scientist thought to himself. "We cannot panic and make a mistake... like last time."

Stanford was thinking back to an incident that occurred roughly a year into Dipper's apprenticeship, one he still carried regret for to this day. Bill Cipher imagery had been turning up around town, first as crudely drawn back alley graffiti, but slowly become bigger and more public over time. People were scared, and the Pines promised to investigate.

Stanford, despite his own certainty that the memory gun had killed Bill for good, had failed to control his own fear of a possible return to life by the demon, and to his great shame, that fear infected Dipper. The boy had been relentlessly frightened and paranoid over this possibility, refusing to sleep and staying close to Ford at all times, calling his side "the only place I'm remotely safe if Bill has returned."

Ford would look into Dipper's eyes when they journeyed together to investigate the clues, and saw a mirror to his own pain.

Eventually the trail had lead to a scrap hut out in the woods, inhabited by a single man whose name they never managed to learn: he had no identification and no family or friends could identify him. It was an unsettling thought to all members of the Pines family, and a reality Ford had briefly lived.

Based on a collection of scattered personal journals, he had been dragged under the earth by one of Bill's friends during Wierdmageddon, trapped in a completely dark underground space he just barely fit in, unable to move and viciously tortured from the dark by things he couldn't even see. Though his writing was scrawled and incomprehensible when it came to the subject of his suffering, gleaned points included rats devouring his legs (which a medical examination found fine), an appendage from the dark plucking out his eyes (which were still there) and his skin peeled back so his nerves could
be burned with a heat source, which disturbingly came across as the most possible due to scarring on both arms.

As his writings detailed, terror and hopelessness so controlled this man that he forsook the god he'd been raised to believe in, spewing hatred at Him for not even allowing him to die from this torture, and desperately began calling out to Bill Cipher, whose entrance to this world demonstrated his great power, and endlessly prayed, begged and bargained for even momentary freedom from his torture until his throat went raw, then continued screaming in his head.

The unknown man never truly escaped the hole. As the town returned to normality, he bore deep psychological scars from his experiences (as many residents did) and eventually began to hallucinate his tortures again, and after discarding his identity and fleeing into the woods did not let him escape the monsters in his head, he began worshiping Bill, hopelessly appealing to the only deity with dominion over these monsters. The symbols he scattered across down and the cats he slaughtered in his basement were monuments and sacrifices to Bill's glory, material offerings meant to inspire divine intervention.

Of course, the two didn't know all that until after, and upon breaching the forest dwelling scrap metal hut, a wildly disheveled and dirty man who'd painted rough pictures of Bill all over his house in body fluids attacked them. Noting numerous self-inflicted wounds and a willingness to ignore pain when Ford tazed him, the two assumed he was possessed by Bill, and to save his Grunkle and himself, Dipper found a shovel leaned against and wall and based away at the man, who was distracted hitting Ford with a bottle that wouldn't shatter.

Running on rage and fear, Dipper continued striking the man even after he'd been driven away from Grunkle Ford and forced to the ground. In the end, the older man had to pull the shovel from Dipper's grip as he was winding up for another hit, causing Dipper to jump out of his own skin in fear before collapsing from guilt. In the end, they figured out the man wasn't possessed and Bill was still dead. He was taken to a hospital, and eventually a mental institution.

Dipper and Ford had spent a long time talking about this, Dipper's feelings of guilt and pain eating him alive, awful memories of being possessed and tortured that one summer. They hugged, and Ford spent a long time assuring his nephew that Bill was dead forever.

These memories, though painful, filled Ford with resolve. He pulled out his smart phone (unlike Stanley, he had acquired one as soon as he learned about the concept) and shot Dipper a quick text message saying he was going to have to miss game night due to working late. He resolved to determine the nature of this and resolve it quickly, and spare Dipper's peace of mind.

Set on this course of action, Ford began searching the area for more clues.

It was around 3:00 PM when Pacifica arrived at the Mystery Shack, giving a small greeting to Soos running the front before descending down to the lab. Upon turning into the room where the messy game table was and small library of source books was kept, she experienced a small surprise.

"Hey Pacifica! You ready to play?" Mabel asked from her seat on the table while Dipper sat at the head, getting papers ready behind the divider screen.

"Mabel, I take it you're joining us tonight? I didn't know you knew how to play." Pacifica replied calmly, sensing something amiss in Mabel's intensely friendly greeting.

"She spoke up about wanting to give it a try this morning, so I've spent most of the day explaining the basics." Dipper elaborated, "And Grunkle Ford is staying out late looking at Bigfoot tracks before they vanish, so I figured tonight would be perfect for a little oneshot I've been making."
"Sir Thimble-Bob the Sweater Knight of Lollipop Land is ready for action!" Mabel exclaimed in cheer, then got an extremely serious look to her face. "He's a loose cannon who doesn't play by the rules, hunting down the bugaboo who killed his wife."

"Bugbears, Mabel." Dipper gently corrected. "You're dealing with Bugbears."

"Whatever they are, they ain't prepared for the Mabel!" The twin sister exclaimed as Pacifica took a seat across from her, and the game began.

It started off well enough, Mabel's fighter and Pacifica's rogue working well together mechanically. The adventure began simply, with large monsters raiding outland farms that need to be stopped, but took a turn for the worst when they pursued the monsters into the depths of an abandoned mine.

The first sign of trouble was a sealed door a short ways into the mine, barring further travel down but which could be opened by answering a riddle. "I depart with the morning and arrive with the night. I am all around you but hide in your sight. I can survive buried underground for decades, but can be killed with a single pick. What am I?"

"The moon!" Mabel called out really fast, then tapped her chin. "No, wait, that's not right, third sentence. Nighttime stuffiness? Crushing fear about your future? No that's harder to kill then that. Is the answer Grunkle Stan? Are you metagaming Dipper? You said that was bad!"

"Darkness." Pacifica spoke up with a smile on her face, after letting Mable run her mouth a bit. Dipper smiled at her. 

"Correct." He said, and began drawing the rest of the map while Pacifica shot a smug smile at Mabel and the other girl frowned back.

The adventure continued to the bottom of the mine, where they came upon a central pit where Lord Bosscrime (as Mabel had taken to calling their Robber Baron adversary) was holed up. Pacifica wanted to circle around and prepare an ambush through a smaller passage, but as Mabel observed the map Dipper had meticulously drawn, she came up with a better idea.

Over Pacifica's objections (Dipper asked if his sister was sure, but she was doing it all in character) Mabel used the fireworks she spent her starting gold on to blast a mine cart down the tracks into the central pit, and with some exceptionally good rolls pulled off a quadrupedal rolling decapitation on the boss and his flunkies, while Pacifica cleaned up the only survivor with piddly arrow shots.

"Clever thinking there Mabel. I think you'll have the hang of this in no time." Dipper complimented, causing Mabel to bask in the praise while Pacifica crossed her arms.

But then, as they were digging through the loot, the Apple of Discord was uncovered. "...And one Dancing Blade, a finely sharpened light blade with a jade dragonfly decorated hilt." Dipper finished, describing the loot from the encounter.

"Ooh, ooh, dibs on the fancy sword!" Mabel called out.

"Mabel, you don't even know what a Dancing Blade is, much less what it does." Pacifica interjected dryly. "If you did, you'd know it would work best in my hands."

"Well, sor-ry that I don't have every little detail of your guy's nerd game memorized to the letter." Mabel replied flippantly, leaning back in her chair.

"Well since you don't, I'll tell you. Dancing Blades are magic weapons that can fly and fight independently of the wielder, and use that persons mental stats as the controlling attribute. Which
"Not so fast, Northwest!" Mabel interjected. "My character's raw weapon fighting skills outnumber your mental advantage!" She said energetically, then glanced down with a frown. "...I think.

The two girls poured over their character sheets, crunching the numbers as Dipper just sat at the edge of the table, growing a little nervous and looking for the exact rules on Dancing Blades to have somewhere to put his attention.

Both the players completed their math at roughly the same time, revealing that their two very different stat blocks added up to make them exactly equal in using the Dancing Blade. As a result, the arguing got more intense.

"Mabel, just pass it to me. You're new and won't use it properly." Pacifica said in a demanding tone, drawing a curious frown from Dipper. She was normally very laid back and informal about the game, and her sudden bout of seriousness was out of the norm.

"I'm the one who took out the boss holding it AND I found it, so it's mine to do what I want with!" Mabel argued back. The two girls stared daggers at each other, before breaking into smiles as it seems they hit on the same solution simultaneously. They turned in unison to look at an increasingly awkward feeling Dipper.

"Dipper..." Pacifica asked softly, widening her eyes at him. "Who do you think should have this?"

"C'mon Dippen-Dots, show some faith in your sister here!" Mabel spoke up cheerfully. "I can handle it!"

"Don't drag me into this argument!" Dipper cried out, clearly nervous now. "This isn't the DM's job to rule on things like this, you guys need to sort it out within the party."

"Are you sure you can't sort this out for us just this once?" Pacifica asked him, but Mabel abruptly cut in.

"Hey, cut it with the puppy dog eyes you meddlesome hussy!" Mabel yelled at her, provoking immediate anger from Pacifica.

She breathed out a shocked "You little brat..." but quickly suppressed her anger, balling her fists and scooting her chair back while glaring at the other girl. "I'm going upstairs to get some cold water."

"You have a bottle right next to..." Dipper stated, but trailed off as the blond pushed the bottle to the floor without even looking at it and walked out. As soon as she was gone, Dipper buried his head in his hands while Mabel perked up.

"So, that was unpleasant, on with the game?" She asked.

Dipper simply let out a groan. "I thought you guys were cool with each other after the whole golf thing." He said in a low tone, audibly disappointed but not directed at anyone besides himself. He pulled his hands from his eyes and looked at Mabel with genuine bafflement. "Is this some kind of girl thing I'm just not getting?"

Mabel waved her hand dismissively. "Nah, I guess Pacifica was still just a mean girl after all. Don't worry about her though Dipper, you sis will keep you safe."

Dipper was actually frowning at this, unnerving Mabel somewhat. "I know you mean well and just want to look out for me Mabel, but you're wrong about Pacifica though I don't blame you for that,
you haven't been here to see how she's changed." He described, passion building in his voice. "She
genuinely wants to change herself and be a good person, and she's made a lot of genuine effort in
that regard! She's a really good friend, and tonight just kind of came out of nowhere."

Mabel was growing increasingly worried the more Dipper talked about her. She was detecting some
strong feelings coming off her brother. "And... well, you did kinda start on the wrong foot when you
two first met again back in town." He added reluctantly, then asked very seriously. "So Mabel,
please, as a favor to me, could you go upstairs and try to talk this out with her? I'm sure Pacifica will
apologize if you guys work out whatever is wrong between you two."

"Of course Dipper." Mabel said reassuringly as she got up, then did a little dance of victory as soon
as she was alone in the elevator.

"I've made my move and successfully drawn the backwards 4 space card right out the gate! I'll sink
my little plastic green piece and promote him to checkmate in no time!" Mabel thought with glee,
remembering a simpler board game the family would play a long time ago. "I'll uncover this
Northwest's true angle soon enough!"

As Mabel walked out from behind the vending machine, she found her rival standing in front of a
sink, holding a glass of ice water in her hands but not really paying attention to it. "I'm guessing
Dipper asked you to try and patch things up between us?" Pacifica asked without turning around, as
she heard Mabel's soft but quick footsteps approach.

"Oh, so you think just because I'm out of the picture for a couple of years and he gets all sweaty
when you bat your eyelashes at him, you suddenly know Dipper better then his lifelong twin sister?"
Mabel asked pointedly, finding a spot on a nearby wall for what she could tell was going to be a
heated argument,

"I know Dipper better then his twin sister because I actually listen to him!" Pacifica shot back. Mabel
was a little surprised, that wasn't one of the several responses she'd guessed was coming. "That's
how I also know you so well, Mable Pines. Dipper is always talking about you, about the adventures
you two shared together when you came to this town the very first time. He was so excited to have
you finally coming back." She finished derisively.

Mabel's brow furrowed in confusion. "Right, this is not where I was expecting this conversation to
go. Was expecting more evil cackling and proclamations of her charms having hopelessly ensnared
Dipper's heart."

"He's so hard on himself in conversation, but once you actually get to know him it's obvious Dipper
is such a strong person." Pacifica described, a bit of a far away look creeping into her eyes as she
remembered talks and adventures. "He knows what his dreams are and refuses to compromise them,
he's harshly intolerant of injustices, and he refuses to let anyone have power over him or those he
loves. He's shown me an entirely new way of life, how to be able to live life without being
controlled!"

Mabel gave a small snort and rolled her eyes. "Geez, you make him sound like some kind of badass
action hero. Pacifica, my brother is an adorable nerdy cinnamon roll who sneezes like a kitten."

"That's because you're his blindspot." Pacifica replied, her voice low and cutting. "Unlike with
everyone else, he lets you and you alone control and belittle him. I've heard all the stories: You pick
at his insecurities, like his height or his voice. You offered him support over his crush on that
lumberjack girl then insulted him over it! As a reward for helping save your mermaid boyfriend, you
humiliated him over the internet! You always have to have things your way, and try to destroy
Dipper's things when he wants a even a little bit for himself, from his disposable camera to his
dreams here in Gravity Falls! But worst of all, you abandoned him when he was possessed by the devil purely to satisfy your own petty, selfish crushes."

"You're wrong! I saved Dipper from Bill Cipher when he was possessed!" Mabel shouted back, but with a twinge of uncertainty in her voice, her own memory of the incident reminding her of her own failings there.

"After he had begged you for help previously, and you left him behind to wander as helpless ghost while his body was relentlessly tortured. You didn't even take him to a hospital after!" Pacifica spat. "Do you have any idea how much that single incident hurt him? Did he ever bother to tell you, or did even he known on some subconscious level you wouldn't care?" She continued, the anger beginning to crack with a tone of worry. "We had a scare here in town a year or so ago, when some lunatic was spraying Bill graffiti everywhere. Everyone in town was terrified he was coming back, and Dipper and Doctor Pines worked night and day to see if it was true, and if Bill could be stopped."

As Pacifica reached the painful part of the memory, she stopped to breathe for a moment. "Dipper stayed so strong for the entire thing, never taking a moment to panic or cry, just kept working no matter what. When they finally figured out it was just a lone lunatic and announced it, the whole town was ecstatic! I ran over to give Dipper a hug in relief, but then... he just, fell apart on me." Mabel was growing increasingly sick to her stomach as she heard all this.

"It started with just some tears rolling down his face, but as soon as I asked him if he was okay, weeks of emotional exhaustion just hit him all at once. He was sobbing, shaking and smiling all at once. He was so scared the entire time that Bill had returned and would take revenge on him, but he kept going even when it was eating him alive because he knew if Bill was back he'd come after you next. He didn't care if he fell apart as long as YOU were safe." Pacifica spat out, her contempt for the other girl dripping from every word.

"Oh Dipper..." Mabel breathed with regret as a crushing weight settled on her, shoulders falling and her eyes clouding over as she began to understand.

Now a little calmer and her face growing harder, Pacifica finished her tirade. "A week or so later, he confessed besides me, only Doctor Pines had ever seen him in that state, and he was hoping I didn't think less of him for it. I told him of course I didn't, and though he didn't say anything, it was obvious he'd been expecting me to mock him over it, like you and Stan do, and was surprised I wasn't."

Then, she got rather quiet and practically spat her next few words out. "And that's the worst part. He's never come to realize how terrible you are. You have him wrapped so far around your finger that he blames himself for problems YOU create."

Pacifica was quiet for a moment, unsure if she should be angry or victorious feeling at Mabel's inability to respond. Then, in a much softer tone, she said "I see things in you Mabel, things I was raised to be and want to get rid of. But where Dipper showed me why those things were wrong for me to hold, he still thinks the world of you."

Mabel was speechless after the dressing down she'd received, it's length and passion indicating this was clearly something Pacifica had been seething over and putting into words for a really long time. Conflicting emotions raged inside her, but before she could even begin to think of something to say back, a commotion from the front of the Shack broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Dude, we're closed right now! And even if we were, that's an employee's only door!" Soos shouted up front over the sounds of somebody pushing past him. A moment later a tall man broke threw open the door leading to the back of the building and locked his eyes on Pacifica, whose blood ran cold at the sight.
"Daddy?" she asked quietly, fear having taken over her voice.
Three Can Keep A Secret: Chapter 4

Preston Northwest was not looking well. He’d dressed back into one of the couple of suits he’d held on to, but in addition to not having been cleaned in years it was also smudged with dirt and had numerous leaves stuck to it. His eyes were saggy and bloodshot and his mouth was still spattered with cheap takeout.

"Pacifica," he said with an odd, stuttering mix of anger and nervousness, "Get your things, you're coming with me and you're not seeing these commoners again."

The Northwest girl was scared and a little bit saddened by this sight, and found herself unable to move until her father took a threatening step towards her, at which she stepped back.

The next series of events happened so quickly they barely registered to Mabel: First, Preston snapped forward to grab Pacifica by the wrist, and when she wrenched herself from his grip his hand lashed out with horrible speed and slapped her with enough force to knock her off her feet.

Before Pacifica had even hit the floor though, a cry of anger filled the air and Dipper Pines practically flew around the corner and slammed into the Northwest family head fist first. The teenage boy had struck hard enough on impact to draw blood from the nose.

Stumbling backwards, Preston flailed his arms about seemingly at random, but struck with purpose as soon as they found purchase on a large clam that had googly eyes glued to it, and smashed it down on Diper's skull. The younger man had been hit with the edge of the preserved sealife, and felt a narrow gash trickle blood where it scraped his scalp. "You will not drag my daughter to your level!" The adult man screamed during his assault.

Luckily, the two girls in the room where already in action. Pacifica and Mabel moved with surprising coordination given their current hostility, but in one move Mabel had jumped behind Preston and knelt down behind his knees while Pacifica charged forward and shoved her father backwards, causing him to trip backwards over the Pines twin and land on a glass coffee table, which shattered on impact.

Further fighting was interrupted by heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. "Alright, I can tolerate overemotional family arguments (god knows this place has seen a lot of that) but I draw the line at breaking the merchandise!" Shouted Grunkle Stan, who was entering the room in his casual outfit, slipping on brass knuckles. When he reached the bottom floor though and saw the whole situation, his eyes narrowed and his voice gained a rare tone of seriousness. "Alright rich boy, you have five seconds to get out of this building, or else you'll be waking up tomorrow in an ice bath with two lower back scars."

Preston was climbing to his feet when he heard the threat, glass cracking and localized smears of blood getting on the floor as he straightened out his lacerated back, staring down the five (Soos had run into the room and was trying to look menacing) people opposing him, and with a seemingly desperate look in his eyes, spoke to his daughter one last time. "Pacifica, now! We. are. LEAVING!"

When she refused to budge from her spot next to Dipper, Preston retreated wordlessly, glaring dagger all the while and pushing a jar of eyeball themed super bouncers off the counter as he exited the door.

Everyone in the room had tension visibly leave their shoulders when the door slammed shut, and
they all began fussing over Dipper's head wound, as now trails of blood were dripping over his constellation birthmark.

Once bandages had been applied to the head and the boy insisted for the hundredth time that he's taken scrapes worse then this out in the forest, attention turned to Pacifica Northwest, who had found a corner to sit in with a downcast expression.

Dipper stepped over to her, really not sure how to open this conversation. Luckily, she did it for him. "I'm sorry Dipper."

"You have nothing to apologize for." He responded

"Yes I do!" Pacifica yelled back. "You got hurt just for being around me, and who knows what will happen if dad comes back!" Then, she got quiet and looked down at the floor. "I should just give myself up to him. It'll keep you all out of trouble at least."

"No way girlfriend!" Mabel cut in, her argument with Pacifica earlier seemingly forgotten. "Your dad looked like he'd gone completely nuts, no way you're going back to him!" Then, her fiery spirit cooled and she asked softly "How long has he been like that?"

"I... I honestly can't say." Pacifica responded. "He's been angry and short tempered ever since we sold the mansion, and over the years spends more and more time locked up in his office trying to rebuild our fortune. We rarely see each other and when we do it's so he can hit me for "muddying the Northwest name", as if that's possible." A moment after speaking this, Pacifica's eyes widened as she realized what she'd said.

"Your parents have been beating you!?!" Dipper screamed in anger and fear while Mabel simply covered her mouth while gasping in shock. Then, his tone softened and he asked, "Why didn't you tell us Pacifica? We would have helped you."

"Because I knew you'd blame yourself." Pacifica said resignedly. "You always do Dipper. If something bad happens just in your vicinity you'll find a way to blame yourself, and if you knew how bad it was you'd make yourself wish I'd never become friends with you, that night at the party.” Then, the blond girl stood up and looked in Dipper's eyes, a warm expression growing slowly. "And I never want you to regret that. No matter what the future holds for me, becoming your friend was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I wouldn't change it no matter what. Besides, you wouldn't have been able to help me anyway."

Her expression fell again as Pacifica went to a window, gazing out into the forest. "I mean, even if you did help me get out from under them, where would I go from there? I have no actual possessions of my own, no life skills and no personal wealth. I may... I may hate what they've become, but without my parents I couldn't survive and would have no where else to stay."

"You can stay here." Dipper said without hesitation.

"YEAH!" Mabel cheered from across the room. "It'll be like a non-stop sleepover!"

"Always room for one more under this roof." Soos added in.

"Oh great, you guys decide to start collecting rent on the Northwest after she's broke!" Grunkle Stan spoke up, eliciting withering glares from everyone in the room for his poorly timed sarcasm. "All right, all right, she can stay, sheesh!" He said defensively, then his hardened face softened into a somewhat distant look of sadness on his face. "It wouldn't be easy, having to survive on your own, abandoned by your parents..." he said to himself softly.
Pacifica looked on the verge of tears at this out pour of support. "I... I can't... Thank you, all of you. I really don't know what to say..."

"Say you'll stay!" Mabel called from the back of the room.

"...except that I will pay you all back for this someday, I promise."

In-spite of the very serious atmosphere that had permeated the room, Dipper couldn't help but chuckle a little at the girl's awkward phrasing. "Hey, don't worry, call this one a freebie." He joked, then got a little sheepish and said more seriously "But really, I mean it. I really do respect you for always trying to be so selfless all the time, but there is nothing wrong with asking for help."

"I'm glad I didn't ask for any help with this." Stanford Pines muttered to himself while trudging through a particularly dense patch of forest. While all of the family drama had been occurring over at the Mystery Shack, he'd spent the day trudging through the deep woods of Gravity Falls examining spiritual locations linked to Bill Cipher, looking carefully for signs of his return.

The reason he had opted not to get help (Dipper would have been his only real choice in the matter) was not so much the increasingly thick overgrowth he was hiking through, but the location that was at the end of it: a simple, moss laden cave entrance hidden among the rocks of the strange cliffs overlooking the town.

This cave was the home of a Native American shaman who had been Bill Cipher's pawn a great many years in the past, in much the same manner Stanford once was: The triangular demon had offered the wise man great spiritual knowledge, so in his journey to commune with his muse and understand the world the shaman spent long hours meditating in this cave, with Cipher iconography painted on all surfaces while consuming psychedelic herbs and mushrooms to achieve the waking sleep needed to access the Dreamscape at will. In fact the only major difference between the two men was that Stanford had developed a synthetic, syringe delivered alternative to munching on random toadstools found in the woods.

As a result of all that, this cave was a spiritual hotspot and possibly a connection to the Dimension of Dreams, though testing on that front was inconclusive. The location also made Dipper extremely nervous and uncomfortable, once bringing him to nervous dry heaving that he thought was Bill Cipher strangling him from beyond the grave, so Stanford preferred to work alone when it came to the cave.

The inside of the cave curved back and forth very shortly after opening to the outside world, then straightened back to normal, ensuring visitors were plunged into darkness almost as soon as they entered. Ford entered with his flashlight at the ready, sweeping over the damp walls with it and confirming everything was still normal.

Then the flashlight died, shorting out with an electrical hiss.

Always prepared, Ford quickly withdrew a matchbox from his pocket and lit a flame.

When light returned to the rock cavern, the man saw something he never wanted to.

During the temporary plunge into darkness, the walls of the cave had become coated in human blood, all carefully arranged to spell out a very clear message for Stanford Pines.

CIPHER SITS INSIDE YOUR HEAD

CIPHER LIVES AMONG THE DEAD
CIPHER SEES YOU IN YOUR BED

AND EATS YOU WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING

The message repeated over and over and over and over covering every surface of rock, the blood beginning to drip off each letter as if it had just been freshly applied. Underneath Stanford's feet, the earth itself began to writhe as a thick layer of insects and vermin seemingly came to life and squirmed with sinister intent.

Though he was terrified on the inside, the scientist kept his composure and analyzed the situation. "Must be a psychic projection, blood is too fresh for me to have simply overlooked it upon entering." He looked at the floor, creating puddles of grimy bug innards with every move of the foot. "One of those was a Deinacrida elegans; terrifying, but also exclusive to the island of New Zealand. Floor is also an illusion. Metal plate in the head prevents direct nerve stimulation illusions, meaning this is a product of the cave's spiritual nature. Results... inconclusive."

Stanford moved for the exit of the cave, walking slowly and trusting his memory more than his senses, as the imagery of the cave was growing more and more horrific in an attempt to frighten him from the exit, dripping blood pooling into a puddle from which crawling chaos emerges as the cramped ceiling seems to stretch forever into a burning sky while the dead and the wicked rise from the bed of squirming vermin.

Ford could see his parents writhing in the vermin swarm below, and wanted to be away from them. He willingly walked into the maw of a great, six eyed dragon whose syringe teeth leaked acid that sat where he knew the entrance to the cave was, and in a moment was back in the muted sunlight of the forest, the sounds of a cannibalistic galaxy being devoured by entropy replaced by the gentle, soft hum of wildlife and distant, slow moving water.

Ford took a minute simply to breathe in and out, in the crisp forest air, waiting for his heart to slow and limbs to stop shaking. That was the most intense experience he'd ever had in that cave, and he had to assume the worst: Bill Cipher had found a way to return.

Inside the Northwest town house, Preston shoved his way through the door a disheveled mess, crashing onto a kitchen table chair, across from his wife who was laying face down in a rat poison laced ham sandwich, foaming saliva pooling on the table, which mixed with the blood flowing from the closed eye carved into her forehead. The ruined industrialist held his head in his hands and began to sob quietly, a mixture of sorrow and terror in the blubbering noises he made.

"WELL WELL WELLY WELLERS." Came a high pitch voice from nowhere and everywhere. "GUESS YOUR PLAN TO JUST GRAB THE GIRL AND RUN AWAY DIDN'T WORK OUT! WHO'D HAVE GUESSED THAT? YOU DO KNOW HUMAN SACRIFICE CAN ONLY HOLD ME AT BAY A SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME, RIGHT?"

With wordless whimpering, Preston crawled underneath the table, trying in vain to block out the voice. "NOW I WILL ADMIT, I LIKE THE WHOLE "GRAB THE DAUGHTER AND LIVE LIFE AS WANDERING SERIAL KILLERS" ANGLE YOU CAME UP WITH TO TRY AND AVOID ME, BUT YOU STILL TRIED TO DESERT MY SERVICE, SO I GOTTA PUNISH YOU. THEM'S THE BREAKS."

Preston, still simply hiding and shivering under the table, felt the clumsily applied bandages scattered on his back rip open, and hundreds of chittering, crawling insects poured from the wounds, piercing his flesh with every step and tormenting his body beyond his eyesight, driving stingers into his spinal cord, crawling inside his ears to chew the eardrum with mandibles, and running wings through his hair. He couldn't see their shapes, but could feel their wretched bodies invading him.
The man was beyond crying, beyond screaming, beyond the reaches of all human expressions of discomfort, for the human species is a social animal, and all human displays of pain or discomfort evolved as mechanisms to acquire assistance from one's peers. Preston Northwest however, knew he was beyond help, that no one would come to his rescue. He was wholly within the demon's power.

As he writhed and whimpered under the table, the insect swarm having been joined by a sickly, bitter vine forcing its way down his throat and blooming into a tree inside the man's lungs, Preston heard the only voice in the world that mattered to him once again.

"YOU KNOW WHAT YOU NEED TO DO TO MAKE UP FOR THAT."

And so, after a few minutes, Preston Northwest, back still bandaged and lungs free of flora, stood up from the floor of his perfectly normal suburban home, walked to retrieve a shovel from the garage, then vanished into the night, traveling towards the forest.
Night had fallen over Gravity Falls and the Mystery Shack was closed for business. Inside the building’s den, an air mattress had been inflated and set with a generous helping of blankets and pillows. A couple of years ago Pacifica Northwest would have complained relentlessly about the conditions, but between the scrappy home she wasn't returning to and the adventures Dipper had taken her on, she had become accustomed to dirt and grim, though never fond of it.

Dipper was helping her get settled in for the night and tentatively discussing what they were going to do now. Going to the police was being seriously discussed, which in Gravity Falls indicates the concerned parties were truly at a loss. All the while, Mabel watched them from the next room, equally at a loss.

Her initial worry and uncertainty had transformed to certainty then gone back to uncertainty again. Meeting Pacifica back in the town had seemingly provided an easy solution to the gap between her and Dipper: her brother's lack of communication with her and strange behavior were the result of a wicked snare cast by this manipulative seductress, probably trying to wrest the secrets of zombie making out him to sell to the military!

"But then things got really messed up and I jumped to Pacifica's defense because her dad is messed up and I guess she's not that bad but they're REALLY REALLY in love with each other but it's kinda cute since they're both huge clueless nerds they can't tell but do I want them to know UGH this got so complicated!" She thought to herself, but was fortunately interrupted from her difficult emotional struggle by Grunkle Ford smashing through the front door.

Dipper's greeting to his returning relative died in his throat as he took in the state of Ford, who was dirty with small skin cuts and stuck foliage all over his body, a clear sign he'd been sprinting through the forest. But what concerned everyone the most was the grim look on his face, the look of a hard edge applied over fear.

"Code Yellow." He said in a simple, serious tone, then strode across the room to the vending machine elevator as Dipper and Pacifica jumped into action. Mabel simply stood in place, unsure of what to do but with a growing dreadful certainty of what that meant.

The girl was busy pulling armored shutters over all the house's windows and unlocking hidden cabinets on the walls and floors, while Dipper had pried back a floor panel to reveal a hidden generator device, which he was eliciting a gentle static hum from as he worked its controls.

Grunkle Stan was back downstairs again about a minute later with a scowl on his face. "Stanford, I swear if you've decided to have another code yellow drill on this day, at this time of night, I'm going to take the upstairs yellow light and use it to smash up the downstairs yellow light." However, his attitude softened as he saw the two working quite seriously on the lower levels of the building. "This isn't a drill is it?"

"No it's not Stanley." Ford spoke up, reentering the ground floor, and in response to this knowledge Stan wordlessly held Mabel close. "Dipper, Pacifica, status update?"

"Psychic static generator up and running."

"Windows are secure and the emergency stashes are open."

"And I've reactivated the security system." Ford commented, briefly sliding an armored window
plate to confirm that a modified roomba with over sized wheels and an enlarged carrying tank with release chute was spreading an updated synthesized unicorn hair solution around the building. Then, he gathered everyone present around the kitchen table to explain the situation.

"This morning when I was performing the rudimentary checks on our equipment, I found a bear that had been slaughtered and it's blood used to paint Bill Cipher on a tree." He explained in a to the point manner. "My first hypothesis was that this could be another deranged cultist, so I opted to check several spiritual locations alone, to hopefully confirm my guess and avert a panic."

Dipper was beginning to shake in his chair as the new became more obvious, while Pacifica put a hand on his shoulder, Stan's expression became hard and angry, and Mabel just looked at her feet.

"My last stop was the Shaman's Cave, and within that... within that I suffered a severe psychic attack, far beyond the ability of any human medium to generate." Ford continued, wavering slightly from the fresh wounds. "For the time being, we must assume Bill Cipher is alive and poses a threat to the world."

"He could have been alive all along!" Dipper cried out, face contorting with horror as he slammed his fists on the table. "It CAN'T be a coincidence this happened right as you returned to town Mabel! He waited until you were back so he could kill us all at once!"

"That sick triangle freak..." Stan breathed, his rage running cold now. "Forget about punching it, if I get my hands on him again I'm carving that eye out!"

Mabel looked up after a bit of uncertain silence had fallen over the table. "I've been having dreams." She admitted, drawing concerned looks from the table. "At first I thought it was just bad memories brought back by being in town, but Dipper's right, it can't be a coincidence. I've seen Bill when I dream."

Ford's expression fell even further at this. "Dipper, take Mabel down to the lab and make sure she's safe. The machine will be activating due to the security system going on."

"Hold on, you're not thinking of using the brain scrambler doohickey on her!?!" Stan yelled accusingly.

"The Mental Investigation/Neural Defense device is in its fourth version and is perfectly safe." Ford replied confidently. "Furthermore it's the only way to ensure Bill doesn't have a hold inside... her...head..." The scientist trailed off, the short rhyme the cave showed him coming back.

"It made Soos think he was a dolphin! We're still banned from that sushi place!" Stan yelled back, but Mabel put a hand on his arm.

"It's okay Grunkle Stan." She said softly. "I know Dipper will keep me safe. I trust him."

Ford looked at his brother sympathetically. "If it will make you feel better, you can go with them even though we need more hands up here. Goodness knows I wouldn't be able to stop you."

Instead of storming off with the kids though, the old con artist opted to smile softly. "Nah, I'll give you a hand poindexter. Mabel's right, I trust Dipper too." Then, his grin got wider and slightly malicious, in a way that indicated he was spoiling for a fight. "Now, let's take a look at what you've cooked up in the weapons department!"

Once Dipper and Mabel were aboard the hidden elevator, the boy was the first to speak up. "You said you were having dreams?"
Mabel looked a little nervous at this question, but answered regardless. "Well, yeah, normal stuff, specters of Bill ominously mocking me in realms of sprawling chaos. That kind of thing."

Dipper gave her a soft smile in response. "Hey, that's alright, one of the best things to do about stuff like this is talk about it. I had bad dreams for quite awhile after I came back to town." He explained. "It's not easy to come face to face with death the way you did in the forest, to know you were so close to dying just like they did. Once it happens, and you fully realize how close you came to the end, the thought of death can work its way into your head and dominate your every waking moment."

Mabel frowned and looked away from her twin. "How did you get over it?"

"You never do, not completely. You can't put the realization of your own smallness in the face of an infinite and wonderful universe back in the bottle," Dipper admitted, with a resigned tone, but then added hopefully "But what you can do is find somewhere inside it that's worth living, somewhere that overpowers the urge to crawl away somewhere lonely and safe in order to cling to life for as long as possible with feelings of accomplishment, satisfaction."

Things were quiet for a moment as Mabel processed what he said. "Besides," Dipper added, "I'm not scared of death. I'm scared of Bill, and what he'll do to you if I can't stop him."

Though her brother's concern touched her heart, his words left Mable looking at her brother with fear and concern. "Dipper, do you hear what you're saying? Those were terrible things to say, to live by! You're... you're hurt inside bro, and those wounds need to be healed, not ignored." Then, she spoke really softly and got closer to her brother. "Please, when this is all over, come back with me. Get away from all this weirdness and pain. You can heal back at home."

Dipper looked at her regretfully. "I've... I've thought about it sometimes. Sometimes when I'm staring up at the stars and understanding the relative meaninglessness of human existence or wrapping a bandage around a fresh animal bite, I think maybe it would be better if I traveled back to California and just lived a normal life."

"You still can Dipper."

"No. No I can't." He said solemnly. "I've seen too much of the true nature of the world. I wouldn't mentally survive returning to a normal house on a normal street surrounded by people living in ignorance. It'd be maddening." Then, Dipper cracked an uncomfortable little smile. "Besides, those bits I was talking about are just the rare bad day. Most days here are fun or at least interesting."

Mabel's brow furrowed. "Dipper..."

The conversation abruptly ended when the elevator reached its destination. Dipper seemed relived by this. "Come on, let's get the machine going."

Back above ground, the Shack's defensive systems, installed in chunks over the years by Ford, were fully operational. Stan had just gotten off the phone with Soos, who would likely be taking Melody and his grandmother to the safe room the Pines family had freely added to his home soon after he bought it.

After that though, not much could be done, for the humans had very little knowledge of what their enemy was up to. Ford was sitting at a radio equipment station hidden behind a wall panel, monitoring local frequencies for signs of trouble, while Pacifica had plugged a laptop into a USB port hidden behind a light switch, giving her access to the building's sensor suite, which she was observing for anomalies.
Unfortunately, neither detection system was able to locate the enemy, which moved unnoticed until Stan, by chance, opted to crack open an armored shutter just an inch to look outside the building.

As a result, he was the first to gaze upon the army of the dead.

Deep below in the sound protected basement laboratory, Dipper had successfully strapped Mabel to the chair of the MI/ND Device, an improvement on and expansion of the technology he and Grunkle Ford used to fortify their minds against Bill Cipher years ago.

"So this stuff will keep Bill out of my head forever, right?" She asked.

"Not right away." Dipper replied regretfully. "The mental encoding process takes hours, and we don't have that right now. So instead, I'm going to use this to locate any presence or influence Bill might have inside your mind, and remove it with the machine's integrated McGucket neurodrive."

"You're going to use the memory gun on me?" Mabel asked nervously.

"It's an improved model!" Dipper said with apologetic haste. "Despite the risks associated with it, the memory gun's ability to kill psychic entities and free their victims was too useful to throw away. We got really lucky with Grunkle Stan regaining his memories, so we refined the device. With the aid of the direct neural link of the larger machine, it can locate and destroy just Bill."

"Don't worry Dipper, I told you already that I trust you." She said, then got an excited look on her face. "Now come on, let's burn that sick shape outta my head!"

Back above ground, the three had gathered around the cracked window to gaze upon the army of the undead gathered outside. Red eyes glowed on the dark as emancipated, malformed bodies swayed in the soft moonlight.

"So, we got zombies." Stan remarked. "Time to turn on the sound system?"

"No. If these are Bill animated zombies then they're controlled by a very rudimentary interface of Bill's mental powers connecting with the remains of their nervous systems to propel the withered remains of the bodies, as opposed to pure necromantic reanimation." Ford explained.

"You lost me at If, but I get the point."

"The thing is, Bill can't normally reanimate the dead purely by his own will." Ford mused. "Dead brain tissue doesn't interface with the Dimension of Dreams the way living minds do, so to touch them he needs physical presence. If he had a physical form again, we'd know by now, so that means he must have physical conduit."

The unspoken question of who this unknown acolyte could be was answered quite quickly, as one of the crowd stepped forward, triggering the Shack's motion sensor lights and illuminating the form of Preston Northwest, who looked like more of a wreck than ever. Probably because he was dead, the three realized simultaneously.

The ruined aristocrat moved with the same jerky, rough puppeteer movement that the other zombies did, his suit was deeply stained with dirt and drying blood, and he had an immense gash carved onto his lower neck. Pacifica, who less than an hour ago was overcome with fear and hatred for her father, had no idea how to react to the cadaverous puppet that remained of him, and her emotions eventually settled on horror.

After coming to a stop near the walls of the Mystery Shack, the skin flaps around Preston's lethal neck wound began to shake as a rasping noise whistled out of the open hole. To the growing horror
of the three inside the building, Bill was manipulating the corpse’s vocal cords to stimulate noise out of the neck wound, speaking while the loosely attached head bobbed about limply with a frozen open mouth.

"LONG TIME NO SEE SIXER! BASED ON MY LACK OF PROJECTION ABILITIES I'M GUESSING YOU REDECORATED IN THERE? WON'T MATTER MUCH SOON, BUT GOOD EFFORT IN TRYING. THANKS FOR BURYING ALL MY VICTIMS IN AN EASILY ACCESSED MASS GRAVE BY THE WAY."

Stan had jumped into action, going about the building and preparing for combat. Pacifica was as well, but at a slower rate due to shock. Taking a second to confirm he still had his gun from earlier in his coat, Ford activated the Shack's speaker system to talk to Bill, buying time for everyone involved to get to work.

"So, you've returned to physical life somehow, but you've clearly lost most of your power seeing as you're hiding behind corpses instead of just dropping a fearamid on us. You're theatrical, but not stupid. What are you playing at?"

"KILLING YOU AND YOUR FAMILY IN A STATE OF ABJECT FEAR AND DESPAIR." He remarked, almost casually despite the gravely tone of voice the macabre method of delivery gave the words. "JUST LIKE THE REST OF THE HUMAN RACE. SEE BEFORE I WAS WILLING TO KEEP SOME OF YOUR PATHETIC SPECIES ALIVE. AFTER ALL, YOU MAKE SUCH FUN TOYS TO PLAY WITH! BUT YOU, STANFORD PINES, HAVE CONVINCED ME HUMANS ARE FAR TOO MUCH OF A THREAT TO MY POWER! SO, I'M GOING TO CLEANSE THIS PLANET DOWN TO THE MICROBES AND USE THE DEAD BALL OF ROCK AS A STORAGE ROOM FOR PARTY SUPPLIES." Despite the lack of active face muscles on the corpse puppet, Preston's expression almost seemed to become smug. "CONGRATULATIONS!"

"But how are you doing this!?” Ford asked, not expecting a real answer but stalling for even a second's worth of time while Stan loaded a heavily sawed down Winchester Model 1887 Shotgun with shells of Ford's own design, a highly irregular mixture of silver dust, rock salt, iron filings, and high explosive compounds. "How did you survive the memory gun?"

"I SEE WHAT YOU'RE UP TO SIXER, PLYING ME FOR INFORMATION SO YOU CAN PLAY BIG HERO AND FOIL MY SCHEME AT THE LAST SECOND WITH SOME CAREFULLY APPLIED SCIENCE, EH?" Bill replied mockingly, then went on cheerfully, "WELL LUCKY FOR ME, I DON'T HAVE A COMPLEX PLAN BEYOND BRUTALLY MURDERING YOU IN THE DEPTHS OF YOUR DESPAIR WITH AN ARMY OF ZOMBIES! SO WHY THE HELL NOT, LET'S CHAT FOR AWHILE! IN FACT, SPEAKING OF THE WHOLE DYING IN DESPAIR THING, THE HOW OF THIS EVENT MIGHT HELP ON THAT FRONT, BECAUSE BOY IS IT A DOOZY..."

Still unaware Bill had struck so soon, Dipper and Mabel were down below with the MI/ND Device up and operational. The girl simply sat in place in her seat with the wire sprouting metal cap on her head, too nervous to even feel boredom, while her brother intuited thick displays of data on a computer screen and adjusted the device as necessary, hunting his ethereal foe over the landscape of the mind. Everything was going well enough, until a sudden data pop up elicited a look of disgust from Dipper.

"Okay, did not need to know that..." Dipper said softly as he closed that box. Mabel looked away from him, well aware of dozens of things inside her mind she didn't want her brother knowing that it could have been.
Despite his handling of the computer system, the exact same data block popped back up right over the one Dipper was currently reading. Then another unwelcome bit of information about Mabel's journey through puberty, then another, and another, each one getting increasingly crudely written until the screen was covered with pop ups like a 2000's machine with inadequate firewalls. Then, the screen froze with an audible wirring noise, and after a second the streams of data were replaced with Bill Cipher's glowing eye.

"PINE TREE, SHOOTING STAR, HOW YA BEEN?" His voice asked over the machine's speakers, in a tone that implied he'd be tipping his hat were he there in person.

"Bill!" Dipper shouted while jumping back from the console in shock, while Mable simply gasped.

"IN THE ELECTRON STREAM FLESHBAGS!" The dream demon taunted back as Dipper fought down his fear and rushed to the controls. "AW, NO HELLO, NO FLOWERS PINE TREE? NOT EVEN A PALTRY HOW CAN THIS BE TO WELCOME YOUR OLD PAL BILL CIPHER BACK TO THE WORLD OF THE LIVING?"

"Not this time Bill!" Dipper shot back, fingers flying over the control panel. "No more tricks or lies! You're trapped inside this machine, and this machine kills psychics!"

"YEAH YEAH GREAT, I'M SURE IT DOES." Bill said dismissively. "ANYWAYS, YOU'VE PROBBED AROUND MY NEW HOME ENOUGH ALREADY!"

Static enveloped the screen and Bill's eye vanished, replaced with a first person view of a forest. Dipper ignored it at first, intent on completing his task to save his sister, but was eventually forced to look up when it occurred to him he needed to read the display, and scowled with confusion at the seemingly unimportant scene Bill had displayed for him. As he was working to wire a secondary monitor in that the data could hopefully be projected onto, a familiar face popped up.

"Blendin Blandin?" Dipper said, confused more than anything else, while Mabel's blood ran cold. Despite himself, the boy couldn't help but keep looking at what Bill was showing him. Mabel's blood ran cold as she realized the exact memory Bill was showing them.

"No, no no no no nononono!" She thought to herself as panic came over her. With shaky, frantic motion and without thinking, Mabel pulled herself out of the chair, discarded its headpiece, ran to the computer and pushed Dipper away from the machine before looking for a power switch to turn it off. "Mabel what the hell!?" Dipper shouted at her in surprise. He lay on his back for a moment, expression registering confusion as he crawled backwards a few inches.

"Dipper, please, Bill's trying to trick you, you really, really, REALLY shouldn't watch that!" Mabel pleaded as she found and flicked a switch on the monitor, her panic and heavy breathing getting more intense as Dipper climbed to his feet and put his back to the wall, carrying the posture of a cornered, kicked cat.

Being pushed to the ground had caused Dipper to miss most of the memory on replay, but when he turned his attention back to the monitor, Bill had just left the Time Agent's body, gloating over his victory. The boy trembled in place, weakness flowing through his muscles as tears built up in his eyes and a dark look grew on his face.

"So, there it is." He said in a measured tone that comes from being overloaded by numerous conflicting emotions. "We never did understand why you bothered to stick Mabel in a big illusion world bubble when you were more than happy to just murder me, until just now. It was a trap, a perfect trap with the perfect bait."
"Dipper, what are you talking about?" Mabel asked, increasingly frightened.

"You're inside her, you've BEEN inside her the ENTIRE TIME!" The boy yelled, sadness and pain on every word. "You got her to make a deal and put yourself in her mind, took control of her actions! I should have known something was wrong in the bubble, Mabel isn’t capable of the kind of heartless, monstrous cruelty you showed me there!" Dipper berated himself while Mabel cringed with regret, steadily growing afraid of her brother.

"But it's you inside there now, isn't it Bill!? How long have you controlled her? WAS THE LAST TIME I TRULY TALKED TO MY SISTER A STUPID ARGUMENT!?" Dipper screamed, tears running down his face.

"Dipper, please, you're wrong, it's me Mabel!" She pleaded, even forcing out a little jig where she waved her arms in front of her to try and convince him. "I'm not possessed by Bill Cipher, it's really me!"

"You won't trick me again Bill. This time I'm going to kill you." Dipper said darkly. Then, he picked up crowbar kept in the room for plying open the panels on the sturdy machinery. The boy paused his advance for a moment to look his wet, swollen eyes upwards. "Mabel, if you can hear me somehow, I'm sorry. Your body is going to be in a lot of pain when you get it back."

"YOU SEE, YOU ACTUALLY DID MANAGE TO DESTROY ME WITH THAT LITTLE CLOTHES TRICK!" Bill explained through his puppet back above ground. "FORTUNATELY AS A MASTER OF 13 DIMENSIONS OF MAGIC, I MANAGED TO CAST A SPELL TO PULL ME OUT OF THE FIRE. BUT OF COURSE, MAGIC ISN'T AN EXACT SCIENCE, SCIENCE IS! WHICH IS WHY I WANTED YOU TO HELP ME SO MUCH SIXER!"

Ford frowned a little bit at this, then glanced aside to notice Pacifica and Stan had left the room.

"MY RESURRECTION SPELL SPLIT ME APART BY THE SIDES, THEN DEPOSITED THE THREE PIECES OF ME INTO THE MINDS OF THREE PEOPLE WHO HAD BARTERED FOR MY SERVICE." A tone of annoyance fell onto his voice briefly. "YOU AND PINE TREE WERE MY FIRST CHOICES, BUT THOSE METAL PLATES YOU TWO ARE SPORTING SPOILED THAT BIT OF FUN."

"YOU SAID YOU WEREN'T GOING TO DO THAT!" Both Stan and Pacifica screamed at Ford from elsewhere in the house, causing him to flinch a little. Bill seemed to chuckle at this, but it came out a whistling rasp.

"THAT LEFT ME WITH THREE WORTHY CHOICES. THE WANNABE HORSEMAN OF THE APOCALYPSE THAT YOU SEE BEFORE YOU, WHO WAS ALREADY TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF MADNESS BEFORE I PUSHED HIM OVER WITH AUDIO/VISUAL HALLUCINATIONS." Bill explained, doing a mocking little pose with the decaying corpse. "THE INCOMPETENT TIME AGENT FROM THE FUTURE, WHO FLED TO THE WILD WEST TO ESCAPE HIS FAILURE BUT WAS EVENTUALLY TRACKED DOWN, FORCED TO DIG HIS OWN GRAVE, THEN SHOT IN THE HEAD BY ANGRY COLLEAGUES IN REVENGE ALL THOSE PEOPLE HE GOT KILLED." Bill paused for a moment. "ZOMBIE NUMBER 38, TAKE A NOTE: WHEN WE'RE DONE HERE, WE NEED TO ROAD TRIP TO ARIZONA AND DIG THAT CLOWN UP."

None of the corpse puppets moved in response to this demand. "AND FINALLY, LITTLE SHOOTING STAR HERSELF. A GIRL SO SELFISH SHE WAS WILLING TO TRUST SOMEONE WHO TRIED TO UNBIRTH HER FOR THE SMALL CHANCE OF HOLDING BACK HER SIBLING FOR AN INFINITE LOOP OF TIME." Another gravely attempt at
laughter, like helium escaping a tank. "NEVER WOULD HAVE FIGURED THAT ONE OUT, WOULD YOU SIXER? SHE SENT YOU ALL TO HELL AND SPENT THE APOCALYPSE PARTYING IT OUT IN AN ILLUSION WORLD! OH, WHAT I'D GIVE TO BE ABLE TO SEE THE LOOKS ON YOUR FACES RIGHT..."

More villainous gloating was interrupted as Preston's chest cavity exploded, spewing rotten meat and putrid fluids everywhere. The mangled form collapsed to the dirt, and while its sustained twitching and writhing indicated Bill still controlled that nervous system, the body was far too physically mangled to function now.

"Ford, does this guy EVER shut up!?!" Stan called out from an upper floor window, leaning out with a smoking gun in hand. "I don't know if you can hear me you sick son of a bitch, but here's a free tip: Never lie to a professional liar!" As the zombie hoard began to move, the sound of shuffling and groaning filling the air, Stan ejected the spent shell from his weapon. "Especially not one with a big gun and three kids to protect." he said in a quieter voice to himself, then took aim into the hoard.
Mabel was circling the room slowly, keeping her eyes on her increasingly despair wracked brother, who circled her back with trembling hands gripping a crowbar. "Is Mabel still around somewhere Bill? Watching you parade around in her body for three years as a helpless ghost? Or have you wiped away her consciousness by now?"

"Dipper, please! I'm not possessed by Bill!" Mabel said defensively, her arms held out with palms up.

"ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT SHOOTING STAR?" Bill's voice rang out inside her head as the world slowly melted into chaos within her perceptions, the colors of every object beginning to run like paint, pooling in puddles across the ground and spawning horrors. As Bill warped her world from inside her mind, the only constant was Dipper staring her down, crowbar in hand and eyes alight with hatred, for even his twisted mind could generate nothing worse.

In a surge of motion preceded by a barely breathed apology, Dipper struck forward with his crowbar, attempting to bash Mabel over the head with one motion so he could drag her into the machine right after. The blow was slow, clumsy, and jittery however, and Mabel escaped by diving sideways to the floor, her sweater showered with spark when the crowbar smashed an unrelated computer.

Sprawled out on the floor, Mabel wanted to get on her feet and run for the elevator, but she found her rise from the floor slowed by a twist to the ankle she sustained on the fall, so instead she resorted to scrambling backwards on her hands and feet away from Dipper.

"How'd you do it Bill?" He demanded to know, slowly advancing on his sister, crowbar still in hand. "How did you stay hidden in there for so long, under everyone's notice!?"

"I'M NOT BILL, PLEASE DIPPER, I'M YOUR SISTER!" Mabel yelled back, fear and begging in her voice.

"LIAR!" Dipper screamed, messily slamming the crowbar down but missing the prone figure by a mile as Mabel scooted backwards. "Your cruelty betrays you Bill! I had never even considered the possibility but I should have known it from the bubble! My twin sister would never have been so cruel as to produce a horrible imitation of me and rub in my face how much they preferred them over the real me! Only your sick imagination could have thought to do that to me!" Deeply repressed hurt bled through every word, memories of being made to feel worthless by the person Dipper treasured more than anyone else in the world.

Mabel froze up in terror, flashing back to her "more supportive" version of Dipper that she'd paraded before the real thing back in the bubble while a guilty chill encased her heart, that Dipper had such a high opinion of her that he attributed her misdeeds to Bill Cipher. Her panicked backing came to an end as Mabel's head collided with a wall, and in a flash she threw both arms over her head and closed her eyes. After a long, dread filled moment however, the crowbar never fell, and Mabel slowly opened her eyes and looked upon Dipper.

Her twin was just standing there, openly crying with the crowbar held limply in hand, looking down at his sister being more terrified then he'd ever see her. After a stare down that felt like forever, Dipper simply fell to his knees, crowbar clattering to the ground.

"Damn you Bill." He breathed with defeat. "I won't give you the satisfaction of begging for you to make it quick."
Mabel looked on her brother, overwhelmed by a confusing mixture of fear, guilt, sorrow and regret. Even when his own life was on the line, even when he was afraid he'd be at the mercy of Bill Cipher, he can't bring himself to hurt his sister.

"And I can't even be honest with him." Mabel thought ruefully, then climbed to her feet. Dipper winced in anticipation as she approached him, but the girl kept on going, depending on her memory of the room to brave the illusion, and sat herself in the MI/ND Device, bringing the helmet down and closing the leather limb straps that had gone unused during her last sit. "It's... it's okay Dipper. Run the machine."

Wary that this might still be a trap, Dipper rose from the floor, and moved slowly towards the control panel, watching Mabel all the while like a big cat ready to pounce. Then, when he could touch the controls by blindly jabbing his arm out sideways, he contemplated the situation, then decided that if this was a trap he had no option but to spring it, and spun around like a flash of lightning, plugging away at the computer while tensing for a knife in the back.

The memory began to play on screen again, but this time Dipper was ready, and quickly routed the workings to another screen, allowing him to proceed with purging Bill Cipher from inside his sister. The Time Agent's deceptively warm voice began to filter through the computer's sound system, filling Dipper's ears with words he never imagined, and soon enough his work was complete, meaning all he could do was watch as the now gently crying girl waited for her mind to be free.

Back above ground, the battle against the undead had begun in force, with the previously still horde surging forward in motion, unleashing a synchronized wail of what seemed like rage as soon as Preston's body was shot down.

The Shack's automated security downed a few of them, electrified surfaces burning away the nervous systems Bill's magic puppeted to animate them while Grunkle Stan continued to fire at them from the upper roof, but their sheer numbers let them burst down the door after a bit. Grunkle Ford already had his pocket gun at the ready, and was firing into the crowd downing zombies while climbing backwards up the stairs.

He was soon joined at the top of the stairs by his twin brother, and together the two Stans stood against the zombie hoard, firing their weapons over and over into what seemed like a sea of dead flesh slowly advancing up the stairs, held back only by the kinetic impact and torn muscles of the raining bullets.

Eventually though, they did run out of ammo.

The two looked down at their guns clicking harmlessly, then up at each other. "We need to get to the attic!" Stan stated.

"What about Pacifica, where'd she get to?" Ford responded, only for the answer to come as the sound of rapid footsteps and a female yell as the girl in question ran up behind the twins and clumsily hurled a bowling ball she'd found down the stairs, the heavy object slamming through the crowd of flesh with the power of gravity fueling it, smashing through numerous cadavers in a sickly fountain of putrid tissue.

With the three together, they retreated to higher ground, having no choice but to hope the younger twins would be safe underground. Fortunately they managed to retrieve more of Stan's guns as they got farther up, keeping the hoard back, but eventually they'd be stuck on the roof, and they simply couldn't kill zombies fast enough, especially since, barring severe anatomical damage, many zombies could get up from their bullet wounds and continue pursuit.
Ford wracked his brain for a solution to this, but abruptly figured it out as he watched Pacifica and Stan attempt to escape out a window, their process briefly slowed when the old man stopped the young heiress, pointing out the armed electrified metal plate built under the window, designed to electrify invaders using this window as an entrance.

Urging the other two out after using a nearby emergency switch to disarm the trap independent of the full system, Ford abruptly began to shoot the floor of the shack, drawing confused cries from his two cohorts. The scientist began to grin however, when he struck metaphorical gold: a bullet grazed the plumbing, which began to leak water across the floor. Adding a few more bullets to speed the growth of the puddle, Ford put one foot out the window and rearmed the electrical plate on his way out.

The zombies soon kicked down the door, but were gradually eradicated as their attempts to shuffle forth and kill Stanford drew them into the electrified puddle, destroying their nervous systems and ending Bill's means to puppet them. Ford remained in place on the roof to maintained their attention, while Stan and Pacifica climbed down and flanked the zombie hoard, cleaning them up in short order.

Now, all that was left was to check the basement.

When the three stepped out of the elevator they found Dipper having taken a seat in a chair, body lax seemingly from shock, while Mable still sat in the chair as the machine simply hummed away. Neither were looking at each other, and the computer was playing the footage of Mabel's forest deal on repeat, Bill's final attempt to torment the Pines family as the weakened, passive section living inside but not controlling Mabel's mind was burned away.

With an eagerness to be doing anything else but be in this room, Dipper addressed the newcomers. "Hey guys, how are things going up there?"

"Bill attacked the Shack with an army of zombies." Ford said bluntly, then looked closer at the screen. "Dipper, what is going on here?"

In an uncharacteristic moment of silence towards his great uncle, Dipper simply looked at Mabel once and opted to run to the elevator. "Dipper, wait! There's a bunch of corpses up there!" Pacifica called out and went to follow him, leaving the Stan twins alone with Mabel.

Ford approached the machine to finish the work Dipper was doing, but came to a stop as he watched the scene repeat, a difficult to read expression on his face. When he'd seen the entire thing, he turned towards Mabel and simply asked. "Is this true?" he asked, having to speak somewhat loudly in order to be heard over the replaying memory.

As the recording reached the point where Bill emerged from Blendin's body and laughed over his victory, Grunkle Stan surged forward, ripped the computer's speaker out and furiously smashed it against the wall, allowing silence to reign again.

Mabel only nodded, refusing to look her great uncles in the eye over the emerging truth. To her surprise though, she felt a six-fingered hand sit gently on her shoulders. Stanford struggled to put his words in order, but eventually said "I won't mince words with you Mabel, you made a mistake, one I'm certain you are well aware of the consequences of. But, I made mistakes just like yours a lot more often, and nobody is more familiar with Bill's ability to manipulate others than me. It's not my place to judge you and what you've done, but you do understand that you have to talk to Dipper about this, right?"

Mabel looked up at her Grunkle Ford, eyes puffy and red, and nodded resolutely. "I understand
Then, she looked across the room at his twin. "Grunkle Stan?"

Stan looked at her with a moment of confusion, then snorted that "If you expect me to pass moral judgement on anyone pumpkin, you're looking at the wrong old man. Yeah you did something wrong, but I've done much more worse things for much worse reasons all over my life!" Then his tone softened a little. "But Ford is right. You absolutely need to talk this out with Dipper. Just, not right now. Best let him cool off for a bit."

"That's well enough then since I need to finish scanning and clearing your mind." Ford added while beginning to work the control panel. "Bill explained a bit about how he was alive up above, but I think we can learn a lot more with a look inside your head."

The dawn eventually soon broke over the Mystery Shack as its inhabitants continued to work from night into day. Dipper and Pacifica left right away to alert Mayor Cutebiker to what had happened, quickly acquiring assistance in cleaning up the felled zombies and returning them to their graves, the whole town being always eager to erase evidence of Bill's existence.

Pacifica, who was sullen and quiet while working, was not terribly surprised when the police car that had been sent to her home discovered her mother dead. Bill's sadistic nature precluded any other possibilities. Not long after, she slipped away, and Dipper lost track of her in the rush to get all the corpses cleaned up as quickly as possible.

Down in the basement, Stanford worked through the data he had collected. Bill Cipher was indeed inside Mabel's head, but had been swiftly purged by the machine after an extensive scan of all data needed to work out what exactly happened.

"I'll tell you the good news Mabel," Ford began. The girl in question had gotten out of the chair awhile ago. Though she'd been awake for almost 18 hours at this point, she felt no desire to go to sleep, and had remained underground with Grunkle Ford when Grunkle Stan went up the elevator to help clean up the corpses. "Bill was inside your mind since you left Gravity Falls those years ago, but based on your brain chemistry I can safely say he was dormant until your return to town a few days ago."

"So I'm still me then, right? Those years I spent back in California, I was still myself?" She asked, and Ford nodded in affirmative. Mabel wasn't sure if that made her feel good or not.

"The Bill that was inside your head, as well as inside Preston Northwest and this time agent, were simply pieces of Bill, which he split apart in order to escape death and attempt to rebuild himself at a later time." Ford's hand began to stroke his chin. "In addition to his power, I suspect this also strongly reduced his intelligence. This invasion of the undead was sloppy and impatient in comparison to his previous scheming."

"Oh, three pieces, triangle, I gotcha." Mabel replied. "So, he'd dead for good now, right?"

"We can only hope, but I'm going to keep running tests to make sure." Ford stated. "In the meanwhile, I think you know what you need to do."

Mabel nodded and made her way to the elevator. The time she'd spent below ground had been put to good use by those working above, as the concerned citizens recruited by the mayor and directed by the town's exceedingly cheerful funeral providers had made swift work of the assorted corpses. While the contents of the Mystery Shack were still a mess and the whole room stank to high heavens, the obvious evidence of supernatural foul play had been cleaned up posthaste, allowing Mabel to search for her brother without being knee deep in the dead.
Despite her efforts however, she would not locate Dipper by her own efforts. Shortly before his twin had come up from the basement, the boy had concluded his own search, having found Pacifica Northwest sitting on the Shack roof, looking towards the morning sun.

Completely unsure of what to say in the face of this tragedy, he simply said "Hey" and sat down next to her. The air was exceedingly silent and awkward for an agonizing period of time, until Pacifica broke it with a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry Dipper."

The boy looked at her with confusion. "What do you mean Pacifica, you have nothing to feel sorry for." Then, when he realized how callous that sounded in this context, Dipper slapped himself in the face and began to stammer apologetically. "No, wait, I mean yes you have every right to feel sorry right, I meant that you have nothing to feel, well, responsible for, I mean..." His stammering ended with a groan of frustration. "This is all MY fault anyways!"

"No it's not!" Pacifica cut in firmly, snapping her eyes towards him with a hard expression. "Nothing that happened here is your fault, and I know it Dipper! You can't blame yourself for any of this!"

Then, her tone softened with regret and she looked at her feet. "Anyways, I'm sorry I failed to live up to your example. You've spent so long showing me to be a good person, a selfless person, and none of it's stuck."

Dipper could only look at her in confusion, struggling with his own feelings at the moment. The blond simply let out a sigh and explained. "Both of my parents just died Dipper, and I'm not feeling what a good person should feel. I've known they were rotten since the night in the mansion, and they've only gotten worse since we lost it, but even then I know I should still feel bad about this but..." She threw up her hands in exasperation. "I don't know how I'm feeling! I'm feeling worse about the fact that I don't feel bad about my parents dying then I feel about my parents dying!"

Though still unsure how to best respond, Dipper made an attempt to assuage her feelings. "Well, there was a time when I hated Grunkle Stan for awhile and was going to leave him to die, but then I found out he was just doing his best to toughen me up, but then way later I found out her was actually repeating the mistakes of his own abusive parents that destroyed his relationship... with... Grunkle Ford..." Though he gradually trailed off and pulled his hat over his face when he realized how useless all that was.

Pacifica scowled at him for a moment, but then her expression softened. Dipper could be a tactless emotional klutz around her sometimes, but he always had a well meaning sincerity about him even when he messed up, and for a girl who'd been raised in a world of deception and social masks which she strove to escape from that meant a lot to her.

"Look, I appreciate the effort, but I think I just need some time to think this over alone, okay?" She asked of him, and Dipper wordlessly agreed, leaving the roof and returning indoors. Upon returning to the living room of the Shack, he ran into Mabel.

The two simply looked at each other for the longest time, a mire of emotions crossing both faces as they struggled to know what to say.

Mabel was the first to try and break the silence, stammering out "Dipper, I don't... I didn't... I'm sorry Dipper, I never meant to..."

"Do you trust me?" Dipper interrupted, and when Mabel looked up at his expression, she was struck by just how disappointed he looked. Anger she'd been prepared for, but this cut her to the core.
"Of course I trust you Dipper! You're the most capable, caring person I know!" Mabel cried out, tears beginning to form.

"Because I don't think you do!" Dipper accused, pain cracking his voice as he looked at the floor, tears of his own beginning to run. "You couldn't just let me be happy by myself so you ran away, tried to lock the town in a time loop, hid inside a world of fantasy while all your friends and family were dying, and you replaced me with a cheap copy. And all that..." Dipper breathed, choking on his own words. "And all that, I would have forgiven you for."

This was not the response Mabel was expecting, and she looked up at him with a small amount of confusion. Her greatest fear, made even strong after discovering the cemetery for Bill's victims, was that her brother would judge her beyond redemption.

"You were tricked by Bill at an emotional low point, and I'm in no position to judge you on that." He remarked, unconsciously rubbing a fork shaped scar on his arm through his clothes. "Heck, you didn't even know you were dealing with Bill at the time. I should have known better."

Mabel seemed to grow a smile at this prospect, albeit a faint one. "So, is that it then? Are we Mystery Twins forever?"

Dipper's next words crushed her. "No." He said simply. "Because while I can forgive you for all that, the thing I can't or just aren't ready to forgive you for is that you lied about it all."

Mabel's stomach dropped and she felt very small as Dipper looked right at her with teary eyes. "Why didn't you think you could tell me Mabel? Do you think so little of me that you assumed it would destroy our sibling bond? Or were you trying to manipulate me into staying with you back in California, away from my passion!?"

"I couldn't tell you because it hurt!" Mabel cried in response. "Everyday I was alone back at home I thought about telling you the truth, but the scorn I thought you'd feel for me, the rift it could create between us, I couldn't bare it! Everything else, all the hurt of growing up without my twin, the joyless grind of high school and the cruelty of everyone else there, I could take it all knowing you still loved me Dipper! Even just thinking that you hated me left me crying awake at night!"

Dipper was quiet again for a long while, trying to process how he felt about all this while Mabel quietly sobbed to herself. After a long think about it, he walked over and gave Mabel a hug of comfort, but pulled away before she could return it, disappointment still marking his face, but now diluted by pity.

"Mabel, you're my twin sister and the best friend I've ever had. Even though you're flawed, I know that you care about me more than anyone, even if you don't express it in the best ways. You're a bubbling, shining light inside my life, and every day that I lived in here in Gravity Falls I missed you too. You're my only sister Mabel, and I'll always love you."

"But, after everything I've learned today, I just can't trust you, and I don't know when I'll be able to again." Dipper said with regret, clearly wishing it weren't so. "Life is painful sometimes Mable, this life of truth and knowledge I lead even more so. Truth is paramount in this world, no matter how painful it is!"

"But this doesn't need to be your world Dipper!" Mabel yelled back. "We can home together, and just be normal teenagers and live normal lives away from all this terror and pain and death!"

"You know that's not actually possible Mabel. Not anymore." Dipper said solemnly, and then, when neither of them had anything else to say to each other, the boy simply pulled his hat over his eyes and
walked away.

Time passed in a blur from there on out. It could have been days or just hours later, but soon enough Dipper and Ford were mounting up for everyone's worst fears: an expedition to another dimension.

"My analysis of the data confirmed Bill had correctly explained his method of survival." Grunkle Ford was explaining as the family was assembled before the portal, down in the basement. "However, he had told a critical lie, one I discovered by plugging the data extracted from Mabel's mind into the dimensional viewer device. According to that, there are nine pieces of Bill Cipher still out in the multiverse, lining up to the three dimensional form he achieved upon entering our reality."

"One one hand, this does mean that by deleting the fragment of Bill inside Mabel's head, I believe I've reduced his potential power forever. However, if three pieces of Bill reunite, he'd be restored to his original state, and he's still hugely dangerous in that form." Stanford continued while firing up the machine. "To that end, Dipper and I have returned the Viewer back to being a Portal, and will use it to track Bill Cipher across the multiverse and eliminate him, piece by piece."

"Ford, c'mon, this is crazy!" Stan protested. "I spent thirty long years trying to get you out of that thing, and you're looking to go back in and drag Dipper with you!?!"

"The only other choice is to spend the rest of our lives with the threat of a returned Bill Cipher hanging over out heads." Ford replied, and that possibility even made the other grown twin nervous. "I have taken precautions to ensure we are not cast adrift however." He added, while pulling a small disc out of a coat pocket that possessed a simple metal switch on top of it. "This is a fast return switch, a device I invented that will remotely activate the portal, lock it onto the switch's location, and carry back anyone holding it. Me and Dipper will have a dozen each." Then, he put his hand on his twin's shoulder. "And before you say you're coming with us, I'm leaving you behind because I need someone I trust absolutely to keep the portal open, so we can return."

"Don't worry Grunkle Ford, me and Stan will keep this portal wide open for when you need to come back!" Mabel spoke up, then looked at Dipper. "You can trust me with this, I promise."

"I hope that's true Mabel." Dipper said a little cryptically, before the sound of the upstairs elevator opening caught everyone's attention. Pacifica Northwest had joined them in the basement, clad in the practical cargo pants/shirt/jacket combo she wore while on field work with the Pines family, with a bag slung over her shoulder and a nervous look on her face.

The room was quiet for a minute, then the newcomer spoke up. "So, uh, Soos told me you two are going to be gone for awhile. Dipper, Doctor Pines, can I come with you?" She asked, nervous but eager at the same time. "There's... there's nothing left for me here in Gravity Falls, and if I'm hanging around when my parent's disappearance gets reported I'll be shuffled off to a Northwest branch family on the other side of the world who only want what's left of our... my fortune. And I want to help you guys as much as possible before that happens."

"This is going to be difficult and dangerous. You understand that, right?" Grunkle Ford asked.

"What isn't when it comes to you Pines?" She replied jokingly, but then got a serious look. "It's about Bill, isn't it? He's still out there in some form and you're going after him I'm guessing? It's the only threat big enough that I could imagine that would convince you to do this, and I want him dead just as much as all of you."

"You have helped Dipper with his research before, so you're not completely unprepared." Ford mused, then differed to his apprentice. "Dipper, it's your call."
The decision was made, and then the two twins watched as the three figures stepped towards the active machine and dissolved into the light.
Multiverse Chase: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This next section of the story is more of a science fiction/action story focused on chasing an aspect of Bill Cipher against the backdrop of a galactic war with interludes about Mabel and Stan on earth. The parts in space could be considered something of a "soft crossover" with.. a different science fiction work, but for the purposes of the story that will be left vague. Feel free to post guesses about who the vaguely described "Enemy" is from this chapter.

The blinding light receded and reality returned to focus again, a bright world of vague shapes giving way to a dark, cold place of simple metal shapes. Dipper Pines and Pacifica Northwest simply revealed in wonder over their first jump through dimensions, while Stanford Pines, a man more familiar with the experience then he'd like, simply set to work, pulling a scanning multi-tool from inside his voluminous coat.

"Chemical mix in the air is normal, temperature is survivable, atmosphere is a little low on oxygen/high on argon, but breathable. Gravity levels roughly equivalent to planet Venus. Background arcane radiation is zero." His first check done, Ford snapped the device shut and stowed it away. "Right, let's find out where we are."

The previously mentioned wonder at the other world held by the younger two quickly faded, as they spent several minutes discovering that "the wonders of infinite realms of possibility and unlimited probability" consisted of several long, unmarked corridors constructed from grey gunmetal, or something visually equivalent to it. "Based on the size and shape of these doors..." Ford mused while looking over one of the irregular panels in the wall which he was admittedly assuming was a door "Whoever lives here is probably humanoid in basic morphology, though I don't know what to make of this keypad..." He thought while glancing at the door's controls, three interlocking rings of illuminated buttons with depressed pits in the center and in a hexagon pattern around it.

"Uh, guys, I think I hear something!" Pacifica spoke up, a true enough, the two Pines soon picked up the sound of soft humming, drawing closer from around a corner.

"Alright, best behavior everyone." Ford said quietly while stepping in front, and raising his hands to show he wasn't armed. "Let's see who we're dealing with here."

Around the corner glided a sculpted being entirely made of metal, four spinning arms with hands connected to a thin looking metal pole that was topped with a glowing red light on top and a wide, thin circle touching the floor. It caught "sight" of the three and came to a stop, the red light atop its head passing between the individuals.

"Hmm, some kind of robot no doubt, could be security or service." Ford muttered quietly. "Hopefully the mind swimmers have had long enough to work." He added, causing Pacifica to squirm slightly at the memory of having the living fish-like creature swim up her nose and nestle in her sinus cavity. Though gross, they were a key component of dimension exploration, as before Ford discovered them after a few years of being lost between worlds the language barrier was completely insurmountable, but he found them living in a small nightmare about drowning during a brief stay in captivity within the Nightmare Realm, and soon after discovered that when taken to a material realm
and bonded to a host, they independently explore the collective unconscious of wherever you've ended up, learn the local language as quick as possible, then psychically translate back and forth for you. Very useful for realms where things like sound, time, and mouth delivered speech don't exist. As dreams spun to flesh, they were very easy to care for, and Ford had transformed the small jar of fingerlings he had in his pocket when he exited the portal all those years ago into a healthy pond community back on earth.

"Do you recognize it Grunkle Ford? Do you know where we are?" Dipper asked.

"Not exactly. No two universes are exactly alike, but a great many of them are very similar. Comes with all the alternate universes and such, with there being presumably billions of worlds similar enough to our own that we could fit into with no difficulty." He explained as the machine processed them without words. "Based on previous experiences with minimalist metal corridors, lack of windows, air that's both ample and stale, and a magnetic drive robot clearly designed for very little environmental ruggedness aside from zero gravity, I can safely hypothesize we are on an outer space construction of some kind or very deep underground."

"You are... ORGANIC!" The machine stated, abruptly synthesizing a sing-song voice clip cobbled together from recordings of different people in different conversations. "You are to be... taken to... Security Captain Straldezar/Security Captain Straldezar is unavailable for duty... taken to... Security Overseer Tralbagari/Security Overseer Tralbagari is unavailable for duty... taken to... Security Coordinator Davgeloch/Security Coordinator Davgeloch is unavailable for duty..."

The machine continued to vocalize like this for almost a minute, seeming to cut together jarringly different recordings for the purpose of arguing with itself over who the three travelers should be turned over to. Ford knew better than to interject with a machine like this, as it was no doubt too simplistically programmed to accommodate willingness to help by the people it has captured, and he'd very much not like to place a bunch of robot shenanigans in-between himself and whoever is running this place.

"Security Ensign Flemabulun!" The security robot declared, using a voice clip of what sounded like a screaming superior officer, then proceeded to say something new. "Is on duty, deck C-23. You will accompany. Please be advised that... trespassing on a, Valignian, Military, Outpost... is a serious crime, and commission, of another/serious crime, such as... resisting arrest/assaulting a security drone/destruction of property/public waste dispersal, will upgrade your threat level... to shoot on sight." It explained, while the hand facing the direction of the three began to shift and fuse, until it had taken the unmistakable form of a gun barrel. "You will accompany."

"Of course, of course, we have no desire for further trouble!" Ford stated reassuringly, looking about to see if he could spot security equipment. The security robot meanwhile was seeming to glide backwards as it led the intruders through the station, its singular visual scanner remaining placed on its prisoners all while it expertly navigated the corridors. All three in the group noticed that it had no need to interact with the oddly shaped control panels to make doors slide open for itself and its charges. "Alright you two, prepare yourself, for I feel we'll be dealing with a strictly military mind soon, one of the multiverse's annoying constants."

"You take me to the nicest places Dipper." Pacifica remarked with a sarcastic tone as three were led deeper into the strange complex.

As they passed through the winding corridors of identical metal, the lack of any living things walking the halls began to arouse curiosity. The falling footsteps of the humans and the gentle hovering of the machine were the only noises in this place, echoing across the long and empty halls. Finally, they were led into what was clearly an elevator, for although the cylindrical space was completely silent
after the four figures pressed it, they were in a completely different location when the door slid open again. For the younger two dimension travelers, the sight took their breath away.

The room they were admitted into was a large, circular space with the ceiling being a huge glass dome that offered one a dazzling view of outer space. Unfamiliar stars and winding nebulae dominated the sky, unobscured by atmosphere or light pollution. Ford's attention however was drawn to the surface level environment, a sprawling series of what seemed to be computer stations, albeit highly advanced and configured for inhuman physiology.

Everyone's attention was caught though, when the sound of chattering feet on metal began to fill the room and shape began to move through the gently curving rows of computer stations. It kept itself low, allowing the humans to catch only brief glances of a strange, angular shape between consoles and screens. When they finally saw it in full, the creature was almost right on top of them, extending to full height over its captives.

The alien creature could be described in earth biology as a seven legged arthropod, three to each side of its cylindrical center body and the odd numbered leg coming directly from the the back. The front of the body ended in three gaping, writing tentacles that ended in open holes, a circle of micro eyes spread around each gap and a grasping series of prehensile, stringy strands hanging out of each one. From the perception of the earthlings, it broadcast perfectly flat sounding English from inside these three holes, but this was merely the result of the mind swimmers being pushed to their furthest.

"You are intruders/enemies/lawbreakers." It stated, each tentacles rapidly examining one of the three humans. "But you are organics/non-cyborgs/solid bodies, so you cannot be invaders/killers/the enemy. Explain/enunciate/educate." The longer the alien creature spoke, the more emotion seemed to creep into its voice as the mind swimmers gained a better grasp of its thought process, better able to relay that this alien was in the depths of great fear.

"My name is Stanford Pines of the planet Earth, and these are my two assistants, Dipper Pines and Pacifica Northwest." Then he quietly looked behind him and said softly "Just roll with the assistant thing, explaining mammal family dynamics to outer dimensional arthropods can take days."

"Earth?" It seemed to asked. "Earth earth earth earth earthearthearthearthearth." It chattered to itself, rolling the word around its three mouths in an attempt to swallow it. "Earth is an enemy breeding ground/training camp/factory. Gilweggle has show it to us, along with other enemy breeding grounds/training camps/factories."

"How can Earth possibly be your enemy!?" Dipper asked up. "The people of Earth have barely traveled to their moon, how are they a threat to all this?"

"We are in an alternate dimension." Ford chided gently. "Please, Security Ensign, tell us about this enemy you face, maybe we can help you." he asked, stalling for time.

"The enemy are a galactic virus/enemy nation/racial purists." It began to explain, voice taking on a tone of eager fear and anger. "They sweep across the galaxy invading/collecting/sterilizing worlds. Space controlled by them is dominated by genocides/crackdowns/fascists. All possible lengths have been authorized to defend against/defeat/take revenge upon them. Such as the nanomachine virus."

"Nanomachine virus?" Stanford asked, becoming increasingly off put by this situation but definitely feeling like he was on Bill's trail.

"Nanomachine Virus, devised by Science Officer Gilweggle." The creature explained, displaying a strange degree of trust in these invaders. "200 Cycles ago this station was attacked by a biological weapon/synthetic illness/murderous song deployed by the enemy to blind this observation post. I and
Science Officer Gilweggle were the only survivors due to damage to the outer solar collectors that required repair/replacement/regeneration. The service robots/military droids/metal friends decontaminated the station before our life current ran dry, but all comrades/allied soldiers/friends had been killed/purged/extirminated by then, and without any surviving communications officers or pilots, we could not acquire aid from the greater Valignian military."

The two younger explorers balked slightly, as they realized they'd been striding through an empty tomb.

"Roughly 60 Cycles ago, Science Officer Gilweggle began to experience aberrant/extraordinary/inspiring personality malfunctions, displaying advanced knowledge beyond his training/strange speech patterns/Class 2 personal ambition. He performed modification/heresy/improvement to the station's sensor suites, unveiling the fact that several allied/primitive/organic inhabited planets had been conquered/extirminated/processed by the enemy, and devised a counter-attack, a swarm of self-replicating nanomachines programmed to devour enemy weapons/constructs/civilians. They will be loaded into magnetic drive message pods. Unfortunately, Science Officer Gilweggle explained that the magnetic radiation of the pods prevents robots/service machines/metal friends for functioning in their repair chamber, meaning the enemy weapon still grows/occupies/sings in that room. He has willingly exposed to himself to death to load the nanomachine virus. I have been left with the duty/honor/privilege of launching the pods, which are already primed for release and will initiate the cleansing/conquest/defensive maneuvers when this station's galactic orbit has placed it on a prime firing vector."

"Well, thank you for that very detailed explanation, I understand perfectly now." Ford stated before drawing one of the handguns he brought from earth and emptying it center mass into the security robot. The repeated bullet impacts punched down the metal stalk and finally snapped it half, causing the head of the robot to fall to the floor and uselessly request assistance while the magnetic hover skirt rolled aimlessly across the floor. "Keep him busy!" Ford shouted regarding the alien while running towards the largest and most important looking computer in the room.

Dipper had meanwhile produced a collapsible crossbow from his backpack, while Pacifica pulled out a small hairdryer, which she dropped out of annoyance and went back to digging around in her bag. "I'm not as good at this as you two, okay?"

Dipper just gave a small, amused smile at this while looking at down at the alien. "You just don't have practice, that's all. Remind me to tell you about the time I was just starting out and tried to threaten a Popobawa with an oil diffuser." Then, we remembering his job, Dipper attempted to sound more threatening. "As for you, uh, just stay where you are! We don't want to hurt you, but you are on the verge of doing something terrible for a really bad reason and we can't let it happen!"

By now Ford had pried loose some metal panels and was wiring his universal psychohacker tool into the computer system, and was soon greeted by a hologram of a familiar open eye, springing to life unprompted from the device's hologram projector.

"HEYA SIXER!" Bill Cipher's grating voice rang out. "IF YOU'RE WATCHING THIS RECORDING IT MEANS I'VE ALREADY JUMPED SHIP FROM THIS TOMB OF PARANOID ALIEN SOLDIERS AND LEFT A SEVEN TIMES GENOCIDE BEHIND AS A PARTING GIFT! AND, HERE'S A PLOT TWIST, ONE OF THE PLANET'S I'VE MARKED FOR DEATH IS THIS UNIVERSE'S VERSION OF EARTH! I GOTTA THANK YOU SIXER, DESTROYING PLANETS HAD HONESTLY GOTTEN KINDA BORING FOR ME AFTER EONS OF HILARIOUS MASS SLAUGHTER, BUT NOW, THANKS TO YOU? DESTROYING ANY VERSION OF YOUR DISGUSTING HOMEWORLD FILLS ME WITH A SPECIAL KIND OF JOY! AU REVOIR SIXER!"
Ford had stopped listening and begun running at the words parting gift. He'd projected up all static visual files inside the computer then flash memorized what he had to hope was a diagram of the space station they were on. He was unable to read the alien lettering before him (a notable weakness of the purely mental mind swimmers) but based on the high usage of magnetic technology here, the scientist was able to extrapolate from the shape of the station and its magnetic polar design what a magnetic rail gun installation that would launch "magnetic drive message pods." Several large stations with magnetic tunnels that ran near the length of the ship were present, but based on positioning and how similar they were to each other, Ford concluded those were weapon emplacements. Finally, he located a small magnetic firing line near the bottom of the station, with a much shorter rail and no other position like it. After all, a military outpost of this nature would no doubt have several gun emplacements, but only a single magnetic message pod chamber.

"Don't let him touch any of the computers! I'll be back!" Ford yelled as he ran out the exit door, leaving his backpack on the floor for more speed.

"Does ally organic wish to avert our counterattack/genocide crusade/mercy killing?" The large alien asked, with what the mind swimmers interpreted as confusion. "Impossible. Such actions are illogical/treasonous/self-harming. This miscommunication must be resolved." It spoke before trying to move to a computer, only for Dipper to bark at it.

"Can't let you do that big guy." He said sympathetically. "Look, I know you're scared, I know you're grieving your friends, and I know this enemy of yours sounds really bad, but you can't launch those nanomachines. You've been tricked and will kill trillions of innocent lives! Your science officer was not what he seemed!"

"Impossible. Science Officer Gilweggle is Science Officer/Superior Officer/Surviving Official he cannot be wrong. Experts must be obeyed in times of crisis. You are enemy infiltrators. Either the enemy has improved hologram or cyber-conversion technology. Command must be informed, and you must be Killed/Slaughtered/Saved." It reasoned out, before beginning to take ominous steps towards the two young earthlings.

Down below, Stanford Pines had rushed through the station complex, having to depend entirely on a projected hologram in front of him for guidance. While he could have ensured a more sure route by taking longer to plan, the old scientist knew Bill would leave him as short a clock as possible, and acting quickly was his only chance to save those planets. In the pit of his stomach he feared he might already be too late, but like Mabel would have he focused on the bright possibilities.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he reached the room on the map, a circular chamber with eight cylindrical chambers, primed and ready to launch. Ford ran to the closest one and used a pocket stored plasma cutter to begin cutting through the steel tube. It was slow going though, and in the end his work only rewarded him with a crumpled up alien of the same species as their "host" sloughing out of the tube, crunchy and leaking liquid. "You always find some way to top yourself Bill." Ford spoke with disgust, pulling out an atmosphere reader and discovering that this room had been properly disinfected just like the rest of the station. The human snorted, having been suspicious of the room's effect on robots after realizing magnetic acceleration tubes ran the length of this station several times.

He thought for a moment, analyzing his odds of safely cutting free all seven nanomachine bearing pods before the unseen clock ran out, and determined he couldn't risk unleashing the machines on Dipper and Pacifica or that even one would be fired. He readied his psychic hacker and attached it to the mail system's control computers.

"Machine!" He thought to himself after establishing a mental connection to the tool. "Sweep
operating system for all numerical values with a 73% similarity to three dimensional space coordinates in any known numerical systems. Then search, erase and replace all designated values with your exact coordinates."

"Acknowledged."

With a mental note to build a new one back on Earth, Ford left the device behind and sprinted off to run the height of the station again, unconsciously checking his coat to see if the Fast Return Switch was still there, which it was.

Meanwhile, an alien warrior was advancing menacingly towards Dipper. He shouted out a few increasingly begging warnings, then with regret let the crossbow bolt sail.

At that kind of range he couldn't miss, and the stainless steel bolt ripped into the chitin flesh with surprisingly little resistance, sending steady pumps of smelly dark liquid spilling onto the polished metal floors. The alien shrieked out a noise that could only be distress and went into a mad charge, barreling into Dipper and beating him to the side and sending his crossbow scuttling across the floor in the opposite direction. The creature then climbed over Dipper, raising one foot high up above the boy's head, letting him notice for the first time that their otherwise spindly feet ended in extremely sharp looking barbs. "Ah, of course it'd be like that." Dipper remarked, employing his tried and true strategy of averting mortal terror with sarcasm as he shielded his face with his arms.

However, the executioner's blade never fell, and very quickly the smell of ozone reached the boy’s mouth. "Dipper, move!" he heard Pacifica yell, and after the momentary shock of not being dead, rolled to the side. It proved unnecessary, as the menacing arthropod fell to its side, sizzling with smoke and spilling more putrid bio-fluids onto the ground. Still, the sharp foot landed closer to where Dipper's head was then he was comfortable with, so he was glad nonetheless.

Then he looked to the source of the cry and saw Pacifica standing there, with Grunkle Ford's 8th model direct energy personal blaster in her hands, and his open backpack at her feet. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were going back and forth from the gun to the cooling body with a look of uncertainty on her face. "I...I didn't..." she stuttered out, then looked at the floor in disappointment. "I did something bad again Dipper, and I don't know if I'm feeling remorse for it. He, it, that... that guy didn't deserve that."

Dipper crossed the floor to but a comforting hand on her shoulder, but was struggling with what to say. "Well, yeah, I mean... I agree that guy wasn't bad, just tricked, but you saved my life, and probably Grunkle Ford's as well, not to mention everyone living on all those planets!"

She looked up at Dipper, and a comforted expression came across her face. "Yeah, I guess it was a good thing then..." Pacifica abruptly looked horrified and tossed away the gun away in self disgust. "Wait, no, that's a terrible thing to say! I've killed a living thing!"

For his part, Dipper pulled his hat over his eyes and was quietly cursing his lack of a way with words. "I didn't mean it like that! I mean, you did do something terrible, no that makes me sound like a jerk! I mean, it was bad but it was also... necessary?" Both were left to stew in their moral relativism until Grunkle Ford stormed in, Fast Return Switch in hand.

"Kids, we need to return now! I've reset the nanomachines to target this space station, and after consuming everything here they'll float in empty space until they run out of energy from having nothing to consume and shut down. A nice little self contained cleanup, but we need to get out of here now!"

"What about Bill?" Dipper asked.
"Lied about the still deadly bioattack, forced his host to commit suicide by crawling into a magnetic tube, has probably psychic jumped somewhere else in the multiverse." He explained, before noticing the dead alien on the floor. "I hoped it wouldn't come to that, but kinda expected it would. Now, grab on everyone!"

The three held onto the disk, and when the switch flipped, nothing happened right away, but slowly static electricity built up in the air before reality began to dissolve around them, and the last thing they felt was the deep earthquake like sensation of the station eating itself as they dissolved into the warm light of home.
Mabel sat along in a quiet area around the Shack, having found a nice sign post from some long forgotten event to slowly bump her head against. She'd been soaking in the damp dirt for some time now, leaving her quite filthy looking, a fact that was entirely eclipsed by the emotional turmoil she was sorting through at the moment.

"Dipper doesn't trust me" she thought to herself, turning it over in her head and trying to make sense of it. If she were to vocalize the thought, Mabel had no idea whether the sentence would end in a question mark, and exclamation point or a period. "We're just like our Grunkles after all..."

Then, with another bonk to the post, she rethought her position. "No, that's not right Mabel, you looked in Dipper's eyes when he willingly stepped in the portal, and he was as sad as you were! Dipper WANTS to be able to trust me, but thinks he can't."

Her head hit the post again, harder with anger this time. "Well then, I'll just stay right here until Dipper comes back from his stupid adventures and decides to trust me again!" Within moments, the absurdity of her statement hit her and the anger deflated. "No, that's hopeless, Dipper won't just come back to me at some point. He's got Grunkle Ford, and the mysteries of the infinite, and Pacifica Northwest now!"

The next hit to the post was another strong blow. "Of course Dipper trusts them though, they deserve it! They didn't help Bill Cipher destroy the world, and they weren't useless against him!"

A sense of realization was beginning to flow through Mabel Pines as she banged her head on the sign post. "Just look at me! I'm laying around in the mud hitting my head on a post, of course Dipper can't trust me, he can't even depend on me! I'm not smart like him or Grunkle Ford, and I'm not even clever or strong like Grunkle Stan! I've always gotten through life just by being Mabel, but Mabel isn't going to cut it anymore!"

Flesh slammed into the wooden post again, but this time it was an angry, determined fist, cracking and splitting the wood in several places. "Even if I have to change who I am to make myself worthy of Dipper's trust again, nothing will stop me from getting my brother back!" She proclaimed out loud.

"No way kid." replied Grunkle Stan, looking over at Mabel applying bandages to her recently desplintered and cleaned hand.

"But Grunkle Stan, I need to be able to help and protect Dipper if he's ever going to be able to trust me again!" Mabel begged. "And you're the toughest, coolest old man I know! Can't you show me some of your tricks?"

The old man let out a regretful sigh. "Mabel, I didn't exactly train at some kind of crime dojo that I'm sure you're imagining to pick up these skills of mine you know. I mean, the boxing lessons as a kid helped, but that was basic stuff. Everything I learned about real fighting, survival, I learned on the cold, hard streets, and I'd rather relive every bit of pain and cruelty that part of my life had then let you experience a second of it!"

"Fine, don't do it for me, do it for Dipper!" Mabel yelled. "When he said he couldn't trust me it hurt him just as much as it hurt me. Help me stop that Grunkle Stan, I need to be capable and helpful, someone Dipper can depend on, someone worthy of his trust!" She exclaimed, tears beginning to creep into her eyes.
Stan seemed to be getting nervous now. "Look, pumpkin, you're overreacting. Dipper's just got a lot going on right now, he'll cool off and you'll be back best friends in no time! The best thing to do is wait it out and not do something stupid that could get you hurt while he's gone." He said hurriedly.

"Is that what you did when you lost Grunkle Ford?" Mabel asked pointedly, then looked down when she realized what she said. "I'm... I'm sorry Grunkle Stan, that wasn't fair. I haven't lost Dipper, he's just... being distant right now. I'll pass I guess." When she looked up, Stan had taken to staring at his own feet.

"I'll help you Mabel." He said in a softer voice. "I'm sorry, I just... I want to keep you kids safe more then anything else, but if you and Dipper split up it'll be way more painful then anything that could go wrong if we do this." Then, he perked up a little and cracked. "Alright, rule number one: never tell you parents I taught you anything!"

Mabel's face brightened up and she giggled back. "Come on Grunkle Stan, I'm not a kid anymore, I'll be 17 by the end of this summer! And besides, I've been following rule number one since that fishing trip you took me and Dipper on!"

"Hey, when you're as old as I am, you can call anyone you want to kid!" He laughed back. "Come around the back of the house in 20 minutes, I'll have things set up."

20 minutes later, the two spirited twins were behind the Mystery Shack, where Stan had set up a punching bag on a stand and was presenting Mabel with a pair of boxing gloves. As soon as she slipped them on her hands, Stan bopped her on the head with a rolled up newspaper. "First mistake Mabel: playing fair! The gloves alone might cut it back in boxing class, but I think we can skip to the more advanced concepts! Now, I'm gonna turn my back for 10 minutes, and during that time you're gonna weigh those gloves with whatever you can find!"

10 minutes later, Stan turned around to find Mabel waiting for him, humming an innocent tune with a smile on her face. Stan grinned back at her. "That'a girl! Now, since I don't really know where I'm starting here, just go to town on that punching bag for a bit, let me size you up a little."

Mabel nodded her head, then set up in front of the bag. She jittered in place for a few seconds, dukes up, then began throwing punch after punch at suspended bag.

"Hmm, no technique at all and very little strength behind each hit, but boy is she fast!" Stan thought to herself as she landed a lightning quick barrage of light, untrained blows on the punching bag. As she went though, Mabel's punches were hitting harder, as it seemed she built energy from extended hitting as opposed to draining. She slowly grew a more focused and angry expression as she hammered away, turning Stan's proud smile into a small frown.

He became properly concerned when her constant punching eventually snapped the old rope connecting the bag to its rickety setup, and instead of collapsing in exhaustion Mabel jumped on top of the bag as soon as it hit the dirt and viciously punched the same spot over and over. "Mabel, Mabel, stop, that's enough!" Stan called out in a concerned tone, then added "I think you got him." in a sarcastic tone as her arms slowed down, the section she was punching over and over beginning. "Jeez kid, what got into you? Thinking of a high school teacher you didn't like?" His jokey tone faded as he saw Mabel's eyes were beginning to water over.

It vanished completely when her gloves slid off revealing a thin layer of blood all over her hands.

Stan was stunned silent as he checked the gloves, revealing Mabel had filled the gloves with discarded garden bricks. They'd added weight to every punch while grinding her knuckles raw. Trying to blink back the pain without any complaining or further tears, Mabel asked "So what's the
"Next lesson is not to give yourself bloody knuckles by dropping a brick in the gloves!" Stand yelled, anger born of worry. "I left a perfectly usable pair of broken garden spades right in the open. The flat metal plate would have slid in perfectly, and more importantly wouldn't have ground up your hands!"

"I wanted the most damage per punch." Mabel replied simply.

"More damage at the cost of hurting yourself is never worth it kid." Stan stated in an usually stern voice. "You fight to keep people from hurting you, to punch back at the world when it punches you. Damaging yourself defeats the whole purpose of it!"

"If it protects Dipper, I'll take all the damage I have to." Mabel said determinedly. "I have to become worthy of his trust again Grunkle Stan, I can't let our bond dissolve! But I'm useless to him as I am, a helpless complainer who killed all those people by helping Bill Cipher invade so I don't know why he'd ever... ever trust me again..." Her previous tears of pain had begun to turn to weeping.

Grunkle Stan looked down at her solemnly. "You're not a murderer, Mabel. I mean, at best all that would get classified as manslaughter." Realizing that was rather tactless, he then added, in a more serious tone of voice, "Besides, it takes one to know one..."

A shiver went up Mabel's spine as she looked at Stan with wide, almost scared eyes. "No... no Grunkle Stan, that's not true!"

He looked down at his feet, a very rare expression of shame on his face. "Kid, I was a wandering criminal since I was a teenager until I stole Ford's identity. I never went out and... well, hunted someone down to kill them, but you don't need to be a genius like Ford to know that sometimes when you beat someone's ass they can just die from that!" Stan shouted in an unexpectedly angry and frustrated tone. Then, he emotionally deflated and sat down on the beaten punching bag, holding his head in his hands.

Despite the foreign feeling of fear of her Grunkle worming into Mabel's mind, she nonetheless sat besides him and patted him on the arm. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked awkwardly, not sure if this was at all appropriate but finding it strangely cathartic.

Grunkle Stan pulled his face up, and looked dead ahead as he began to speak. "His name was Jacob Daleson, he was a fence who did business out of his garage in an ideal small town America, post the coal mine drying up and crank becoming the area's main export. I was trying to sell some... god I don't even remember what it was. I might not even have stolen it. Anyway, we were arguing over price, he got mad and attacked me with a tire iron. He got a few good hits in, but I managed to snatch it from him, bashed him across the chest with it, then punched him in the head until he went down. Then I stole one of the bikes he had stored among the goods and fled."

Mabel was quiet all the while, but could tell Stan was burdened by the same feelings she felt upon seeing the forest graveyard, and they weighed down on him for many years. "I was reading the paper a few days and... and he was in the local obituary. I hadn't even seen it when I ran away, but he landed face down and drowned in his own blood. Like I said, you don't need to be a genius to know that could happen... you just needed to be smarter then me."

He let out a long sigh at this. "I felt sick as soon as I read that. I had to throw up in a cheap public toilet. I had only been out on my own for a few years at that point and just... felt terrible about killing the guy but didn't know what else I could have done. So, for a few months I did my best not to end up fighting people. When that ended up with me getting beaten up, I fought back again but tried to
be more careful with how I was swinging. That didn't work either, so then I just made sure to avoid reading the obituary."

The two were quiet for a very long time after this. Grunkle Stan, despite his desire to come clean, used the silence to tell a practiced life of omission, his lifetime habit of deception crushing him like a weight, added by the emotional pain he felt as the possibility of losing Mabel. "After all, you're already in dangerous water here Stanley. She'd never want to look at you again if she knew what happened in that South American prison." And so, despite having barred his soul to her less than a minute ago, Stan closed it again, sealing away the unspeakable things he did to survive in that foreign penitentiary, never to see the light of day.

"Mabel... do you think I'm a bad guy?" Stan asked, genuine nervousness in his voice.

"If you're a bad guy Grunkle Stan, then I'm a bad guy too." Mable replied in a comforting tone.

"Heh, I'll agree with that." Stan replied in a relieved, forced jokey tone, and the two opted to just sit there for awhile, watching the sky and ruing their mistakes.
The light receded as three travelers found themselves standing under a beautiful expanse of a thick orange alien sky, with patches of green dotted among it. Under the guidance of Stanford Pines, Dipper Pines and Pacifica Northwest has taken their first steps onto a life bearing alien world.

After escaping the space station they'd previously adventured on, the trio had returned to their home for only a short while. Stanford's work quickly determined Bill Cipher was still in the same universe, having merely used psychic projection to travel across space. As such, they could not use time distortion between dimensions to buy themselves downtime and had to set off after him as soon as they were resupplied.

"That was probably for the best." Dipper thought to himself. He hadn't even seen Mabel during his return to earth, having not even left the underground laboratory during the stopover. "I can't run away from this forever, but... I just need time to work this out. How could she have hid that from me for so many years!" Then, he shook his head and gazed onto the horizon, deciding to stow such thoughts for and take in the breathtaking alien vista.

Pacifica was in much the same place of mind, the grand view and wonder of an alien world spoiled by dark thoughts. Shooting the insect soldier to save Dipper's life had brought back to surface the deaths of her own parents at the hands of Bill Cipher. Even if they'd become increasingly harsh and neglectful to her as they lived as members of the middle class, Pacifica was uncomfortable with her stunted emotional reaction to the event. Should she be feeling bad, feeling bad about not feeling bad, or is this void of emotion acceptable? In the end, she also opted to simply watch the skyline for a moment.

Ford meanwhile, had completed his analysis of the surrounding area. "Atmosphere is breathable but projected, so keep your eyes out for some kind of dividing line we shouldn't cross. Other than that conditions are surprisingly Earth-like, though gravity tension shows we're pretty high above the planet's sea level..."

The reason for that became clear a moment later, as the three began to look around their environment properly and realized they were on a huge platform attached to some kind of industrial installation, as when they turned around from their original positions the colorful skyline disappeared behind tall exhaust towers and light studded buildings.

More pressingly, Bill Cipher was right behind them.

Well, a body possessed by Bill at least. The original being was human shaped (two arms, two legs and a head) but clearly alien, having long, bony fingernails, exceedingly damp, slimy skin that danced with shifting patches of bright color, and a head that was covered in firm bristles but not a spot of hair. Despite his ability to hide his possession, Bill was proudly broadcasting a twisted grin, an improvised walked stick and a bright yellow light flowing out of the alien's naturally small, beady eyes.

"Heya Sixer, Pine Tree, Laama, enjoying the sights!?" The possessed vessel spoke to the three. Ford didn't even respond, instead opting to dig inside his coat for a non-lethal weapon, but was quickly chided by the possessed alien. "I wouldn't do that Sixer, since Overseer Fex (that's me now, by the way!) has posted security snipers to observe your arrival and called for backup. Oh, here they are now!"

With heavy footsteps, a band of aliens of the same species as Bill's possession but in heavier armor
came storming out onto the platform and surrounded the intruders, menacing them with drawn sticks cracking with electricity and hip stowed sidearms. "Take them away boys! And do be careful with them, we CERTAINLY wouldn't want any accidents befalling our mysterious guests, now would we?" The dream demon stated sarcastically.

The security staff moved in around the three humans, and while the younger two were tense with potential motion, Ford was indicating they should give up for now. "Now gentlemen, if you're going to be rough on anyone take it out on me, these two are no threat to you. Now, I'm guessing your immediate assumption is that we're spies, so I'll get things out of the way and protest that we're simply visitors so you can not believe me now rather than later." He remarked as his hands were folded behind his back to march him.

"Wait, guys, you're all being tricked, your boss here is an evil demon!" Dipper tried to argue as he was similarly manhandled. "...Wait, I bet most of you already think that..."

"Is nobody in the multiverse ever happy to see you guys?" Pacifica asked sarcastically while being captured herself.

As they were marched through the industrial facility, the travelers from Earth noticed that, for the massive size of the construction on the outside, the interior was a notably small series of corridors, offices and control rooms with very few elevators and stairs. "Given the apparent tech level, much of this facility is probably heavily automated..." Ford observed out loud.

Everyone they passed fit into two categories: Either they were more members of the alien species Bill had possessed, wearing everything from military uniforms/body armor, baggy full body outfits similar to industrial laborers on earth, and jumpsuits held on by tool bearing belts and sturdy helmets, while the other group were more uniform: Extremely tall individuals clad entirely in what were presumably protective suits with large breathing mechanisms on the face and chest, connected to back mounted tanks. It was unclear how whatever was inside the suit saw the outside, as the outfit lacked a viewing plate.

To their surprise though, instead of prison cells, the trio were delivered to what was clearly a medical laboratory, with several cots, human sized liquid tanks and secured needle boxes scattered between the tables piled with sample bottles, chemical mixers and data reading personal computers. One of the aliens was waiting for them, clad in a bright orange and extremely tight long sleeve jacket and pants but no shoes, gloves or head garment. Instead those areas were encased with a thin plastic-looking sheer that extended out of the arm holes, pant legs and neckline of his outfit.

This alien scientist approached them with careful intrigue, already taking note of their unique demeanor: Stanford was straightening his back and attempting to look non-threatening but dignified, mentally putting his words together for the inevitable moment when he'd be asked who they are. Dipper was simply gazing around the alien laboratory in delight, while Pacifica was tapping her foot with a mix of anger, impatience and wariness.

"Hmm, emotional responses seem possible, engaging preliminary central scan." He breathed to no one in particular, first running a display bearing stick with two curly coil wires coming out of the end up and down Ford's body, before holding up a large, flat pad with a screen on one side and a wide lens and numerous sensory devices on the other. After holding it up to Ford's head for a minute, he used the pad but not the stick on Dipper and Pacifica, and soon after set it down and cracked a smile at the three. "Well congratulations, none of you are Cybercontrolled Auxiliary Organics to the enemy."

While the group simply looked confused despite the psychic translation, the alien continued on. "Of course, this means you think you're not converted. Could have all kinds of little tricks and flash
programmers wired into your nervous system just waiting to strike, which is why I regret to say that you'll all have to remain in this room, under guard until the Deep Nerve Analyzer confirms you have no bugs inside you." He explained while pointing to a raised platform across the room, which when active used magnets to float a sensor ring up and town the user's body. "But, this preliminary tests show your original intelligence is currently intact, so I have some conversation buddies for the long analysis. But where are my manners? I am Mutrak Galaray Havrum of the Swift Coral School, and I apologize for the whole prisoners thing."

"Doctor Stanford Pines, a pleasure to meet you, think nothing of it." The old human replied with startling practiced efficiency while stepping forward to be the first one into the scanner, taking any possible hits for the younger two and getting close enough to examine it.

"Ah, a sapient of science, that's delightful!" The lab worker said with sincerity. "Tell me, what brings you to this backwards stretch of the galaxy? Do you... do you remember why you're here?"

"Well to be honest I don't entirely know where here is. The three of us were experimenting with a new transporter device and aren't really sure if it fired correctly." Ford replied as the the sensor ring moved up and down his body, searching his biological form for synthetic intrusion.

"Oh dear. Well, I can confirm you've gone far off course." Doctor Havrum replied. "Welcome to Rigel 7, a water logged, swamp choked moon of an unstable gas giant." he explained with resignation. "You're aboard Aqua-Pump 333, an industrial facility that collects gas products of the swamp below us and processes them for transport off world, operated by the Dralldak Mining and Munitions Company. The gasses produced by this environment, you see, are used as high quality ionizer for direct energy weapons by the military of over 100 member states of the Living Pact. As messy business as this place and its sister locations are, they do provide an invaluable tool for use against the Enemy."

Everyone's attention perked at the mention of this mysterious enemy once again. Ford however, quickly deduced that showing no knowledge of an enemy that over 100 galactic governments were working together against was the most suspicious thing possible, so instead he opted to move the conversation down the other avenue. "By, messy business do you mean Overseer Fex? He was quite heavy handed with us when we arrived."

The alien seemed caught in his own thoughts for a moment, muttering "Yes, Fex has been acting a little unusual lately, I should try to arrange a checkup for him..." Then he snapped to, and responded more directly with "No, I mean the trouble with the natives."

"What kind of natives and what kind of trouble, exactly?" Pacifica asked, derision creeping into her voice and memory of one of her ancestor's paintings into her head.

"The native Rigelians are one of the most interesting sapient species I have studied." Doctor Havrum explained. "They live as sapient, telepathic free floating masses of sea weed like organisms, surviving as ambush predators directly draining electrical energy from their prey in the murky, plant covered swamp bottoms. Fascinating biology, but they are, unfortunately, very primitive otherwise." Then, he seemed to catch is own words, then stumbled out a follow up: "No, primitive isn't the right word. Their grasp of tactics and the limited telepathic connections they've made with some of us show they're undeniably intelligent and it's absurd to think their technology would develop along the same lines as ours, but, but they just don't understand!" he cried out in frustration.

"What don't they understand exactly?" she asked again.

"They don't understand the threat the enemy poses to the galaxy, to life as a concept!" He exclaimed, then rubbed the plastic film over his head in a frustrated manner and spoke in a slower, more
regretful manner. "They don't want us on their planet, drawing resources out of their swamps, and under normal circumstances galactic law would respect that but the resources here are too vital to the war effort. Sure, blaster weapons with more 21.9% higher stopping power, 70% faster cooling efficiency and a 4-fold ammunition capacity isn't as dramatic or flashy as the Jaxal Cluster's Battlesphere but performance reviews prove they are game changers! When the mutual understanding programs reach fruition though, when they understand the danger they're in, I'm certain they'll cooperate with us."

"What kind of a program is that?" Dipper asked with genuine curiosity.

"It'd be much easier to show you actually." Doctor Havrum stated, then made a beckoning gesture across the lab, and to the surprise of all three earthlings, one of the tall, full body suited individuals they'd seen in the corridors surged into motion, having blended in perfectly with the rest of the lab equipment due to a total lack of prior movement.

"This is a Rigelian Cultural Exchange Suit." The local doctor explained. "Developed by people much better paid then I am to provide a comfortable means for the psychic, non-localized nervous system Rigelians to move among the instillation and hopefully learn to communicate." He then looked slightly distressed. "They understand us perfectly well, as they've responded to media recordings and psychoprojections about the Enemy by willingly assisting in the operation of the systems here, but none of them have managed to use the vocabulator to generate consistent speech."

"So how to you pick out people to be brought aboard and put in the suits?" Pacifica asked, her voice growing accusing at the idea. "You said yourself you can't really communicate with them very well even when they're in the suits, so how do you pick them out?"

"Well, we, just kind of collect the healthiest seeming ones of the bunch whenever we're looking to expand the number of operational suits." Havrum explained, sounding more uncomfortable with the idea the longer he discussed it. "Believe me, the idea we may accidentally be separating family members as they understand it from each other has occurred to us, but command assures when communication is achieved they'll all be put back together, it's for their own good in the long run."

Pacifica scowled, having heard her father use similar language regarding his business holdings in third world countries, but chose not to push the point while they were already under suspicion. Soon enough, all three had been scanned and were being shuffled off to a brig cell ("purely temporary, until the paperwork clears") while Doctor Havrum prepared to file his results: the three visitors were completely clean of infectious cybernetics.

Unfortunately, he was due for a visitor.

"Heya Coral, how's it hanging!?!" Overseer Fex practically yelled from a few inches away from the aquatic alien's head, sending him falling from his chair both from the noise and surprise. When did Fex get so soft footed. "I'm just dropping by to confirm the discovery of infiltration cybernetics in person, you know, cut out some paperwork!"

The medical expert collected himself on the floor, gathering up the papers he'd dropped and getting to his feet. "Well, sir, in that front I actually have some good news! They're completely clean of cybernetic implants! While I still don't know where they came from to start with, we can rule out..." He trailed off a Fex gently placed a finger over his lips, running it back and forth to smoosh the plastic film a little. The usually serious Overseer had been acting more whimsical than usual for a bit, but this was downright strange!

"That's really not what I wanted to hear doc." He spoke in a faux regretful tone. "What I needed you to tell me was that you'd successfully located the cybernetic implants that make them pre-
programmed agents of The Enemy, and are definitely willing to sign the execution order to have this threat neutralized as soon as possible!"

"Sir! I... I can't sign that, they're not enemy agents, that'd be murder!" He protested, growing afraid of his usually stern but reasonable boss.

"And this is war." Fex stated pointedly. "The most important war in the history of forever, and sometimes in war, people get murdered." He said in a mocking, baby talk tone. "It can either be the prisoners, or it can be some unfortunate civilians who simply had the bad luck of dwelling in well furnished coral house on depth level 39 on the north tide neighborhood of the city of Shragath."

Havrum's swim bladder felt like it was turning to stone, sending waves of dread as it knocked into the walls of his insides. That address was where he and his wife were tending to their collection of eggs, still in the very basic stage of life before they'd be collected and sent to School to grow in a great community of thousands. But though he talked about his wife and offspring as often as anyone else, he'd never said that address out loud, how did the increasingly manic looking Overseer know?

"I know lots of things!" Fex responded, practically reading his mind. "Now, do your job, report those implants, and sign their death warrants!" And with that, he clicked on his heels and walked out, leaving a shaking scientist behind. "I expect that termination notice on my personal computer in five minutes!"

Left shaking in panic and disbelief, Doctor Havrum disregarded lab protocol and ripped the protective film from his head before spraying himself with a bottle of mineral water mixed into a crude approximation of his homeworld's seas. All the stress had nearly dried out his skin.

"This is madness, this is murder!" He panicked to himself. "But, there's no way he could possibly threaten my family, they're three sectors away!" But as he thought more on his dilemma, the more fear grew inside the amphibious scientist. "Something about his eyes though... Those eyes, staring and burning into me. He meant every word of it. I have no idea how he'd do it, but the beast that used to be this base's Overseer would see my family dead, somehow."

"I need to alert, orbital, need to alert command the base commander has gone insane!" He spoke out loud, now talking to himself and pacing from terror. "But that will take time, I can't just let them..." His words trailed off as he looked over to the now completely still Rigelian lab assistant. "You, you can help them! Please, my faithful assistant, go to the brig and set those people free! Hopefully they can stay alive long enough for me to get Fex relieved of command and the order rescinded."

The strange, suited up being was silent for a moment, looking down on the alien with an inscrutable method. Then, without any noise, it lumbered out the door, hopefully down to the brig. When that was done, Doctor Havrum went to the nearest computer terminal and began typing the order.

Down the hallway, Bill Cipher was cheerily driving the body of Overseer Fex down an uninhabited hallway, the body's nerve receptors doing a poor job of translating Bill's sadistic happiness, and the consciousness of the Fex screaming at his own body every step of the way.

"WITH SIXER SENTENCED TO DEATH I THINK MY TIME ON THIS SCRAP HEAP IS COMING TO AN END!" Bill thought to himself, then said the following out loud so the real Fex could hear him. "So Fexy-boy, you made a deal with me because you wanted a way to make this swamp gas even more potent, and I've finally got an answer for you: Blow up an industrial refinery in the middle of a huge pocket of it!" He laughed a little, then added softly "I know it's not battlefield applicable right now, but the DARPA boys will sort that out."

Coming upon an abandoned break room, Bill drove the body to punch in the code for an empty
snack shelf on a snack machine. A moment later, the makeshift door slide back and Bill entered a secret space intended as a hidey hole in case of alien invasion. Inside the small chamber was one of the Rigelian Cultural Exchange Suit, cracked open, and it's occupant strewn out across the air of the place, the shifting cords of seaweed like substance pulled to their absolute tensest by a carefully arranged series of wall hooks.

"Ready to scream for mommy?" Bill asked mockingly before turning on the electricity.

Down in the brig, the three had been quickly searched so all weapons and tools could be confiscated and then shoved in a single room together. Dipper chose to break the silence by asking the question on everyone's mind. "Grunkle Ford, do you think "The Enemy" they were talking about are the same... whatever that wiped out that space station?"

"I'm certain of it." Ford replied. "We're in the same dimension and they've been described as a galactic level threat. It's the perfect background for Bill to worm his way in and acquire power, make deals with people who are scared of this enemy enough, desperate to survive." He was walking around the cell while he talked, looking for anything of interest in the simple, rectangular room.

"We need to get ready, I don't doubt Bill is gonna cut the red tape to take care of us." Pacifica stated while trying to fit herself sideways against the door. Dipper nodded, and also did his best to try and position himself. In the end, it was less than impressive: The utter simplicity of the perfectly flat walls, floor, ceiling and wall mounted cots proved difficult to set up an ambush in, and the most they'd accomplished was Ford discarding his coat for Dipper and Pacific to hide under while he stood right in the front of the door to catch attention. Still, if security guards had orders to just enter the room and spray them down, there was little they could do.

Fortunately, when the door slid open, it wasn't a heavily armed kill team behind it, simply a single suited up Rigelian, who then stood back from the entrance, seemingly to let them out. The three looked in confusion, until Pacifica noticed something distinguishing about it. "You're that one the doctor showed us, aren't you?" She asked. "You've got a little purple dye stain on your arm I noticed back when you were introduced to us."

The suited being didn't respond, but did begin to lumber after them when they took off down a corridor, retracing their steps to the confiscated gear.

Shortly after, the three were approaching a hallway checkpoint, where the hallways was cut across the center by iron bars, and the only way into and out of the brig was to pass through a transparent aluminum and force field protected security station, which had a door on one side of the bars, a door on the other, and all their confiscated gear inside. As they approach, a small compliment of the aquatic aliens in security uniforms were lounging about, looking bored.

"Okay, corporate security has two kinds of people in it." Pacifica whispered as they approached the post as quietly as possible down the narrow hallway. "The kind of people who want every day to have a fight in it, or the kind who'd like their work hours to have no fighting at all. Let's hope these guys are the second type."

Abruptly though, everyone at the station perked to attention as their personal comms lit up. A few of them turned to march down the hall, then stood slackjawed upon spotting the humans walking up to them. Shortly after, they eagerly drew weapons and began throwing sizzling energy bursts down the way. The humans' escape had been discovered.

"Always gotta be type ones." Pacifica groaned as she dove for cover. The three of them found temporary safety behind door frames and a full face water fountains. A small number of security troopers were advancing slowly, practicing undue caution with the idea the escapees might be
waiting to ambush them with concealed weapons.

"Grunkle Ford, catch!" Dipper shouted, tossing the older man a pocket weapon hidden in the sole of his foot, an absolutely pitiful hold out blaster that was nonetheless the only option available. Ford attempted returning fire with it, but couldn't even penetrate the rent-a-cop armor the attackers were wearing with it.

Suddenly though, the Rigelian, who'd locked up and stood stock still when the shooting began, animated once more and began advancing on the soldiers. "What the abyss is one of those stupid seaweeds going here?" One of the troops shouted in confusion and anger.

"Who cares, probably some delivery job it doesn't understand, keep firing!" Another responded, and in their attempts to shoot the earthlings, security landed several grazing blows on the suited alien, though they otherwise completely ignored his presence.

This changed when, in a moment where it seemed like the hulking suit would pass through the shooting squad without incident, it snapped with speed no one on base thought the suits were capable of and grabbed one of the soldiers by the legs and swung him once into the bulkhead, hard enough to dent his helmet and crumple his muscles. It dropped him to the floor before reaching for another.

"Damn thing's gone psycho, waste it!" A security officer called out, but the powerful suit was already inside their formation, letting it break apart the individual officers with simply, powerful movements while their shots burned into the material but could not stop it. The few remaining guards inside the post rushed out with electrical batons and did even worse against it. Within seconds it was over, the security complement beat either unconscious or into immobilizing pain as the earthlings walked through a pile of heavily breathing, unnaturally shaped humanoids.

"Hey thanks, uh, plant guy." Dipper said to it after retrieving his own gear, unsure how to thank the still totally silent alien towering before him, showing no other signs of aggression now that all company employees were thoroughly beaten. Then a crease formed on the boy's forehead. "Uh, looks like you sprung a leak. Grunkle Ford, you think we should fix this?"

The older scientist was actually troubled at this. "Based on what we were told of how these aliens function, it's very possible loss of properly chemically balanced water could be a sizable problem for them. We do have some quick seal material that could at least patch the suit up, but Bill will now we escaped by now and we need to catch up to him." He posited, while feeling the weight of a new model Memory Gun in his hands, tuning it to Bill Cipher ahead of time.

"I'll do it." Pacifica spoke up. "Give me the spray stuff and I'll patch this guy up. It's the least we owe him."

"I'm not leaving you behind Pacifica." Dipper said with determination, which made the blond smile, but she was quick to play it off.

"Don't worry dork, I got these remember?" She said while holding up one of her Fast Return Switches. "Once he's all patched up or if more security arrives, I'll portal out into the Shack's basement. I have complete confidence you two can stop Bill."

Though it weighed heavily on Dipper, he nodded and took off with Ford to hunt down Bill, while Pacifica set to work looking for softly leaking patches and sealing them with quick drying liquid plastic from a silver container.

The alien stood completely still as Pacifica patched him up, but abruptly stomped a foot against the
metal floor when she was done. The girl was slightly confused, but abruptly felt a feeling of energy flow from her feet to her head, and focusing in on the mindswimmer inside her sinus.

"HOME." She felt inside her head.

"You want to go back to the swamp, right?" Pacifica asked him. Though the psychic entity remained silent and physically immobile, she could feel affirmation rolling over her. Pacifica looked down at her disk mounted switch, then with a look of determination pocketed a security blaster. "Okay, I'll try to get you home."

Meanwhile, Ford and Dipper were racing down the metal corridors. They encountered little in resistance as almost everyone seemed to on duty. With no other idea how the facility was formed, the two opted to retrace their steps back to the medical laboratory and go from there.

Unfortunately, the laboratory was holding a grizzly sight: Doctor Havrum was laying over his computer desk, a smoking hole drilled into his head by an energy blaster. A second after spotting this, Dipper and Ford ducked low as Bill Cipher fired a blast at them from behind a table. "Don't you ever DIE Sixer!" Fex's voice screamed out Bill's frustration. He then fired a second blast to destroy the computer system, unsure if Havrum had sent out the report or not.

Ford returned fire against Bill, trying to aim for the knees so the possession victim could be exorcised via memory gun. Bill quickly ducked out the door, and the two humans ran off after him.

Pacifica meanwhile was following the massive animated suit deeper in the facility, with it having used several elevators flawlessly. She eventually found herself atop a series of maintenance walkways atop the water level, weaving between the great pipes sinking into the swamp. The surface of the water was choked by huge masses of what she knew at a glance was the native, psychic creatures, the great plant clumps possessing stem lumps that flashed various colors in strange patterns and filled the air with a heavy charge.

As she turned to ask a probably futile question to her companion, the charge that filled the air seemed to overwhelm her, as Pacifica's body grew heavy while her eyes dilated and began to glow. Every nerve ending in her body was telling her she was suddenly underwater, save the ones in the girl's chest that burned when oxygen levels were dangerously low. According to her eyes, she was floating in a murky void of some kind, and according to some other, inexplicable sense, the void was alive.

The Pines meanwhile had cornered Bill's host body on the edge of the landing platform they'd arrived on, still empty of a ship. The operated organic puppet came to a sliding stop just at the edge of the massive drop, and spun around to reveal Fex's own blaster was pointed at his chin as Ford approached, Dipper at his side and his own blaster aimed right at Bill's host.

"Aw come on Sixer, put the gun down will you?" Bill requested mockingly. "We both know you won't shoot a civilian just to get to me, and with this precarious drop behind me your kneecapping strategy is right out!" Ford didn't at all relax his grip, but did opt not to shoot, while Dipper had some uncomfortable memories brought back at the concept of Bill throwing a possessed body to its death. "Splendid! Now we can all have a little talk about how everyone on this scrap heap is going to die!"

"You are outsider pathogen. You function against the workings of the Metal Predator and were marked for phagocytosis. You are a separate individual. You have have shown help to an singed digit of our being." The Entity did not speak to her purely through words. The thought, the meaning the vast psychic intelligence opted to convey to Pacifica was carried through her watery realm in waves, and stimulated every nerve ending with its message. "You are to be spared."
"I've had less flattering descriptions of myself, but how about we talk about you?" Pacifica responded. When she spoke, all her sense told her water was filling her mouth and throat, save the ones that would warn her this is a bad thing, and she could still tell her words were understood. "What am I being spared from? What are you exactly?"

"We are the neuron cells of the world's dominant organism, prior to the arrival of the Metal Predators from the Driving Heat. The Metal Predators feed on our nutrient streams and consume our energy reserves, spreading sickness and death across the greater organism. The arrival of you and your fellow pathogens has coincided with our plan to end this suffering via mass destruction of Metal Predator body cells and nerve vessels."

"See, the psychic seaweed that evolved on this planet thinks each of the refineries are all just big single organisms eating them, so they plan to destroy them from the inside." Bill explained, taking great joy in his recollection of the conflict. "They don't really understand that the individual workers here all have personal intelligence, but hey when their only exposure to the idea is office workers, contractors and corporate rent a cops it isn't surprising they don't understand individuality!"

"We have grown inside the body of the Metal Predator, our interconnected network growing into the ducts and feeding tubes while disconnected parts have invaded heavy body cells and walked among the other body cells, engaging in retrovirus implantation inside the greater organism."

Understanding was beginning to dawn on Pacifica as well. "But how is that going to let you destroy the refinery?"

"The Metal Predator controls itself through an electrical nervous system, spreading out from a fuel inefficient central brain all over the body, delivering instructions to body cells via the glowing hormone dispensers." The Entity explained. "We have evolved the ability to release small chemical electrical discharges from out body sections for purpose of acquiring nutrients, but observation has shown that when the nerve system of the Metal Predator is giving too much electricity, body dysfunction and cell death occurs."

"They plan to use their electric eel trick to fry the electronics system coordinating the base after they wired their stems all over the place," Bill explained. "But, what they haven't counted on is a buildup of highly volatile waste gas a careless Overseer has allowed to reach critical mass," he continued with a malicious chuckle, "So when their electrical pulse goes off, the first blast will turn into a chain reaction, blasting this base to pieces! That'll leave you, your two brats, and everyone who worked here dead right away, while the burning, spewing remains of this base will be pumping hazardous chemicals into this lovely natural vista and poisoning the locals for far into the foreseeable future!"

"This action was not to be taken for some cycles, but aggression by the Metal Predator has accelerated out need." The Entity spoke to Pacifica. "It has begun deliberately damaging our nerve endings to send waves of suffering through the greater organism. We fear this means it has uncovered our scheme. Full saturation is not yet accomplished, but body cells that survive the electrical wave will be destroyed kinetically by the heavy cell infecting segments."

"You're planning to kill all them? All the workers!" Pacifica asked with growing horror. "Any surviving body cells would be conductive to regeneration of Metal Predator tissue. They are remarkably efficient in repair of self harm." The Void stated.

"You can't kill those people, the refinery doesn't work how you think it does!" Pacifica exclaimed. "Look, I understand you want to stop the attacks on your body, but you've misunderstood how these creatures work! The refinery itself isn't alive, it's just an object, like a rock or a pile of sand. Each and every one of those body cells has an individual mind, just like me and you, and you can't kill all of
them just for revenge against the ones that wronged you!" She explained, memories of a Lumberjack Ghost willing to murder an entire party of unrelated people coming to mind.

The Entity did not respond right away. "We... do not understand. The Metal Predator functions as a collective whole, all pieces of it working in perfect unison to accomplish the process of feeding upon us then expelling waste. The body cells do not display individual desires or functions, nor do they feed on one another."

"I mean, that's corporate culture for you." Pacifica snorted, then took on a tone of sincerity. "I know it's difficult to understand for something who is so different from them biologically, and I know I can't explain it as well as Dipper of Doctor Pines could, so I'm not going to bother trying. Instead, I'm going to ask you to trust me that every body cells inside the Metal Predator has a mind of its own, and not all of them deserve to be punished like this. Please, they don't all deserve to die."

"We... do not understand your proclamations. But, we understand you have helped us, we understand your physiology gives you greater insight into this matter than us, and we understand that those thoughts bear great sincerity. We shall abort the electrical wave." Then however, the flat and neutral tone all the thoughts had come in took a darker, heavier tone. "However, we demand that the minds responsible for our suffering be eliminated. They must be punished for their crimes. This we will not falter on."

"Bill Cipher." Pacifica thought, focusing every fiber of her mind on the dream demon she so loathed, letting the psychic get a good, long look at her memory of him. "He's the one you want to destroy."

"Well, cheers then!" The previously mentioned dream demon said before throwing his possessed shell off the side of the platform, cackling madly as the soul of Fex screamed at him in terror and hate and he himself gathered his essence for another psychic projection.

Bill gathered his energy, his memories, his power, all his essence together in the front lobe and cast himself into the astral sea to hunt a new mind weak to his manipulations, and after building energy to the mass and launching himself outward into the open, infinite void, he instead slammed into a brick wall.

The comically exaggerated pose of relaxation he'd bent his host body into became panicked flailing as the great mass of psychic seaweed below used Pacifica's memories to latch in on Bill Cipher inside Fex's mind, trapping him inside and slowly growing tendrils from through the shutting down brain to reach him.

Bill was throwing all his power into a single spot of the mental wall, attempting to break through, when the first root reached him. The mud breaking plant root drilled into his open eye, the perpetual symbol of his true being, ripping apart the outer shell and plunging deep. Cipher screamed in mental agony while Fex's soul laughed madly at this. Fighting through the pain, the dream demon continued to bombard a single point in the wall with all his psychic power, which was slowly being drunk away by the invading roots, digging through the lone eyeball, spreading tendrils and breaking the surface from below to sprout water lilies.

Finally, his strength draining every second, Bill punched a hole in the wall the size of a needle and though his essence drained through it, the roots got in one last win as segments of Bill ripped free by the drinking suction of the roots and were stuck behind. Cast into the astral sea, blinded by pain and severely weakened Bill's mind downloaded into the single most receptive thing in range, as he was desperately in need of any kind of harbor in this storm, not matter how ill-suited his new body would be...

Pacifica returned to reality, no longer surrounded by water and still standing on the maintenance
platform while her suited companion waded into the muk without acknowledgement. It took her a moment to regain her senses, and when she did the blond realized her walkie-talkie was crackling. "...cifica, Pacifica, can you hear me!? Grunkle Ford's computer says your Faster Return Switch hasn't flipped yet! We need to get out of here, this place is going to explode!"

Not realizing she herself has averted the threat Dipper was speaking of, her eyes widened. "I hear you Dipper, I can escape back at anytime, I'll explain everything back on earth. Are you guys clear to leave?"

"We are, though we lost Bill. He's probably halfway across the galaxy by now..." Dipper explained bitterly.

In spite of the imminent danger, Pacifica couldn't help but grow a satisfied smile. "Actually, I think I might have gotten him." She was still taken by surprise when his meat puppet hit the water, but brightened up when she felt a faint message on the edge of her brain from the native intelligence. "Again, I'll explain everything back on Earth. Let's get out of here."
Mabel was sitting by herself on the roof of the Mystery Shack. Following their heart to heart, Grunkle Stan had spent the rest of the day instructing her on less dangerous but just as useful things like lock picking, sleight of hand and lying. With her first day complete, she was left thinking about just how to put these skills to use.

A twinkling in the sky caught her eyes, and a small smile crossed the girl's face that rapidly became jittery concern as the twinkling star fell from the sky and crashed into a distant section of forest!

"Oh my gosh, a shooting star!" She exclaimed with wonder, then felt a bad taste in her mouth when the phrase brought back memories of Bill. Then however, Mabel's memory fired and she quickly opened up her smart phone and began scrolling her emails, specifically each and every one she'd received from Dipper since he'd remained in Gravity Falls, all meticulously saved.

Mabel soon found the one she was looking for, a bunch of pictures Dipper and Ford had taken of a meteor shower over the town about a year ago. Besides the regular discourse about how things have been going and other normal details, Dipper had talked a bit about meteors.

"Let's see: Although we get way more meteors in Gravity Falls then anywhere else in the world (it's a whole thing dealing with Alien Gravometrics, I'll email it all to you) this shower was exceedingly rare and beautiful, so I thought I'd send you some pictures. Tomorrow morning me and Grunkle Ford are going to see if we can gather some meteoroids, they can be used for some interesting arcane purposes..." She read aloud before pocketing the phone in resolution.

Soon after, Mabel Pines was clattering through the forest, pack full of supplies over her back and a rickety shopping cart she'd noticed sitting in a stream during her earlier forest outing with Dipper and fished out to haul the space rock back in. The sun was beginning to set, the fading orange light dimmed further by the thick tree canopy above. Though the girl had many good memories of running through these woods during that first summer, now the forest felt different: The pervading hum of life, both natural and supernatural, was dull and faded compared to her memories.

Mabel remembered back to her first weeks in alone in California, when Dipper and her had communicated constantly: Dipper had talked at length about how silent and lifeless the woods had become, after Bill Cipher had salted the earth with blood. Life was returning here, but the scar tissue would always remain.

The oppressive atmosphere of the place sent a chill down Mabel's spine and made her wince with each particularly heavy creaking noise her cart made, but she pressed on regardless of this disquiet. It took a pair of sharp yellow eyes opening from the darkness a mere five feet in front of her to finally bring Mabel to a frightened stop.

The creature had been there all along Mabel realized, as it's emergence from darkness more resembled a body growing in place around the yellow eyes, now recognizable as those of a large reptile. It was tall and musculously slim, green scales coating a human shaped form, arms and legs ending in long, webbed claws, while a whip-like tail slowly drew itself out of the undergrowth. Those yellow eyes split vertically and were crossed by swollen veins, and seemed to drill holes in Mabel as the reptilian creature extended to full height, towering over her. Then, it began to speak.

"Have you come to the deep, dark woods chasing falling stars, little human?" It whispered, voice like dripping oil on a carpet floor. "There are no stones from space here small mammal, only food and menace down here in the undergrowth."
"What are you talking about?" Mabel replied, discreetly feeling about her pockets to see what's there and trying not to show fear to the creature.

"Can't you taste the air!?" It asked harshly, before extending a long forked tongue into the air and whipping it around rapidly, drawing it back in with an exalted look on its face. "The scent so thick you can cut it with a knife and devour it by itself, the scent of food! And food from above means only one thing, a Rod egg sac has hit the earth!"

"And you want to eat it?" Mabel asked, carefully allowing more fear to enter her voice.

"Of course I want to eat it!" The lizard man snapped, gesturing with genuine anger. "Sizable prey has been damn near impossible to find in this forest since the fire and death scourged it, even all these years later, and the last time I tried hunting a unicorn I nearly got my lung popped!" But then, his anger faded as his eyes looked far away while his clawed fingers twitched in anticipation. "But if I get this motherload hidden nice and away, I'll be able to eat good for years! Yes, I'm going to eat it little mammal, and you're going to help me!"

"Why... why do you need my help?" Mabel asked while shivering in place. "You're such a big, scary monster and I'm just a human, how could I possibly help?"

"Oh, I'm not quite as strong as I look," the strange monster said with a creeping sarcasm to his voice, abruptly closing the distance between himself and Mabel in the blink of an eye, as if to prove himself wrong. "I'm nothing but scales and bones from these months of hunger fate has dealt me. You're going to go deeper into the forest and bring the egg sac back to me in your lunch wagon." Then, after extending his long tongue to wipe down every corner of his stubby, stunted snout, the lizard creature declared "I'm not leaving this forest on an empty stomach!"

Mabel burst off running, pushing the cart deeper into the woods in an attempt to get away from the threatening creature, mind scrambling for a solution to her situation and unsure if the lizard man had followed her or not. Fortunately though, instead of becoming lost, her sprinting put the girl in sight of an eerie glow radiating from deeper in the forest, white light mixed with dancing flames. Taking a moment to let her heart slow down and her head clear, Mabel then broke the treeline to find a small circle of destroyed earth where goal had landed.

The crater was not nearly as deep as one would expect and the fires of impact were almost extinguished from lack of fuel. Instead of a solid chunk of rock waiting in the earth dent, a mess of organic material was waiting, a single sheet of white, flexible tarp ripped and leaking fluid in some places, which when complete would wrap snugly around a mass of squishy, circular ovals that were stuck together with a similar looking biological fluid. As Mable drew closer, eyes wide in amazement, she was able to spot extremely small, thin squiggles occasionally wiggling around inside the oval eggs.

Mabel was dazzled by the eerie beauty of the site in front of her, fear of the reptilian hunter temporarily forgotten. She turned around to return to her dingy shopping cart, but felt her blood run cold when, as soon as she completed her turn to be able to see the cart, a dark figure dropped from the treeline and perched directly on the front metal bar, wings growing from the back of the human body shape seeming to shift into a voluminous cloak wrapping around the body. Despite being the size of an adult male human, the strange figure did not produce a single sound of movement from the shopping cart by landing on it.

The two stared each other down for a few moments, then the wings of the moth human began to twitch through the air, first slowly then quickly and erratically while the air around the crater swirled into motion, all the while the central body of the creature stayed perfectly still. The soft movements began to create a soft buzzing in the air, and the buzzing gradually gave way to words Mabel could
understand, in the air or inside her head she wasn't sure.

"Why are you here?" the Mothman asked her.

Mabel's breath caught in her throat as the question ran to her core. "I came here to help my brother. I want to win Dipper's trust back. I want to take this egg sac home to my family. I'm being chased by a hungry lizard monster. I hurt my family. My brother doesn't trust me. I have to outdo the Northwest girl. I don't know if my brother even loves me." Were all involuntary thoughts the question set off in her mind, but when control of her tongue returned, she stated simply that "I saw a meteor fall and was curious."

Buzzing filled the air again, and a response formed. "Curiosity then? A noble trait. I too have curious motives: I see visions of disaster and death, but never the outcome, so I arrive, curious why this things happen and if they can be changed." It explained, almost whimsically. "Tonight however, is no mission of curiosity, though it does depend of my visions of the future. No, for tonight is a mission of love."

"Love? Are these... are these your eggs?" the Pines asked.

"No, but perhaps they will be, my vision is unclear on the subject." The mothman responded. "These are the spawn of the great Mother Rod who dances across the highest edges of the sky, falling to earth to grow to maturity before joining her. I attempt to protect her spawn in hopes they carry word of my deeds to the sky, and that the Mother Rod may return my love." He stopped for a moment at her growing confusion. "Rods are like flying, silver fish you see, that dwell in the upper atmosphere..."

"Has an egg sac ever returned to the sky?" Mabel asked in blunt curiosity.

The air was still for a moment before the words returned quickly. "No." It admitted. "Though I can foresee the locations the egg sacs fall to, I am blind to the dangers that surround them, and have not yet succeeded on my mission." For the first time, the creature's body moved, its arms stretched and flexed. "Have you come here as an unforeseen disaster, or might you be an unexpected piece of fortune?"

"I came out here to collect this for myself, but I was thinking it was just a big dumb space rock." Mabel explained. "If you need it to impress your sky girlfriend though I'll help you out! I still got my matchmaking touch after all." She continued enthusiastically, then spoke with trepidation. "But, on my way in here I was chased for a little bit by a big scary lizard monster! I can show you a safe way out of the forest if you keep your eyes out for him."

"Agreed." The mothman said simply. "Lead the way, ground dweller."

A short while later, the two of them where retracing Mabel's path to the crater, egg sac loaded carefully into the shopping cart. Despite the mothman perched on the front of the cart like an insectoid gargoyle, Mabel has no additional trouble moving the shopping cart, as both it and the eggs seemed supremely light weight. The unlikely pair were totally silent, senses wide open for the predator lurking in the bush.

Though they'd not predicted the exact moment, the ambush came as expected, a snarling flash of a toothy line bursting from the undergrowth and ripping into the mothman, who protected his delicate looking wings by throwing a first into the oncoming snout. The lizard rebounded, slashing forward with his claws, spraying foul green liquid from the flying insect's abdomen, but in a moment the defender was using his wings to his advantage, floating into the sky to kick the lizard in the eye. Unfortunately, the reptilian hunter responded by clamping down on a leg with his toothy snout,
drawing more green fluid, and lashing his neck to slam the mothman into the dirt.

After watching for a few seconds to confirm the mothman had been driven to the ground and was being sliced into, Mabel took off into the woods, cart rattling in front of her as she ran from the fight for her life. Her flight was desperate and panicked, and Mabel very nearly ran the shopping cart into a tree a few times. She was always looking over her shoulders for a pursuer, but came to a screeching halt when, upon looking in front of her, she discovered a yellow pair of lizard eyes had materialized in front of her.

"I'm disappointed in you mammal. Nowhere in our agreement was there supposed to bring a bug freak for me to fight before dinner!" The creature expressed with angered disgust, advancing towards the shopping cart with heavy steps.

"It, I didn't have a choice!" Mabel began to bargain. "That thing was just some hopeless lovesick fool who was trying to impress a girl he had no chance with by some stupid scheme that I wanted no part of, and the girl in question happens to be the mother of these eggs! It was either let you ambush him or try and fight him myself, and I'm just a human, what would I do against something like that!?!"

The lizard monster was leaning against the shopping cart. It had a few scratched and busted off scales, as well as swelling around the eye the mothman had kicked him in, but had otherwise come out of the fight looking much better than his enemy did. It contemplated Mabel's words while licking its lips. "Hmm, even if you are lying to me, I suppose it doesn't matter, does it? That thing is dead and the egg sac is all mine. I could still eat you as well, but honestly, I don't want to spoil my appetite. Unless of course, you want to try and stop me for some reason?"

"Noooo, no no no no!" Mabel replied quickly, waving her hands back and forth in front of her chest, palms facing out. "Don't let me stop you from enjoying your dinner big guy! You're free to go!"

"Your permission means so much to me." the lizard hunter said sarcastically, then without further words, snatched the handle of the shopping cart and took off into the forest. Mabel stood in place for a few moments, shivering with fear, then turned to face the mothman emerging from the brush, badly wounded and dripping his green blood all over the place.

"You're just in time! He ran me down and stole the egg sac, but we can still catch him!" Mabel implored to the wounded figure.

"You, you're not surprised I'm still alive?" the mothman asked simply.

"Love can make you incredibly determined." the human girl replied, pulling out some emergency band aids she'd brought for her forest trip and began sticking them on the cryptid, to limited usefulness. "That lizard thing thinks he's got us beat, but we can still track him with the slowly emptying can of glitter I opened and stuck sideways on the bottom plate of the shopping cart!"

"I am... I am in no shape to fight that creature again." The mothman spoke, resignation and despair in his voice. "And so another tragedy comes to pass..."

"Hey, what kind of talk is that!?" Mabel admonished. "You said you were doing this for love, right? Well let me tell you something: Love never gives up, never gives in! Can you imagine how impressed sky lady will be if you get her eggs back from this ravenous beast!?" Then she began to grin. "Besides, I have a plan!"

The glitter trail followed the cart pushing lizard man to the edge of the lake, which he was walking along to reach his cave home. Given the circumstances, the hunter was traveling slower then he could have, taking his time to enjoy the night sky and embracing the pain of hunger that grew inside
him, knowing it will soon be satisfied ten fold. This relaxation ultimately cost the cryptid however, as his slow pace not only allowed the pair of pursuers to reach him, but allowed the mothman to glide from the nearby treeline and snatch the lizard into the air by sliding his own arms into the scaly armpits and traveling upwards, wings beating furiously to achieve vertical flight.

Stage 1 complete, Mabel herself came out from behind a tree, gripping her treasured grappling hook in hand. With careful aim, she used the silver glow of the moon to send the metal hook sinking into the leg of lizard man. After giving the line a shriek inducing tug to test that it holds, Mabel severed the rope using a pocket knife and tied the new free end around a heavy stone, which she then picked up and ran for the lake edge with. "DO IT NOW!" she screamed out.

Up above, the mothman had grappled with his adversary while trying to fly sideways to place him over as deep as possible water. When Mabel gave the signal, he released his captive, who plummeted towards the surface, soon to join the rock he was tied to in sinking below the water, as Mabel hurled it in. At the last second however, the lizard man sank his teeth into the mothman's leg, dragging him into the water as well.

Mabel stood tense on the lakeside, watching the patch of bubbles fade, until a moment later, the mothman alone surfaced, flailing his arms about. "My... wings!" The wind chattered, the projected speech getting weak and heavy. "They're too wet for me to fly, and I can't swim!"

"I'll save you!" The human cried out, throwing off her shoes for better swimming. "The heroine jumps to the water to save the love-struck loner, to ensure his egg quest succeeds!" she thought to herself, the idea of finally saving a life and doing a good deed hitting her like warm waves that would sustain her in the cold water.

Then she realized what that would mean: the mothman would take the eggs and guard them until the flying silverfish hatched and mindlessly fly to the sky. He'd fought so hard to protect this find from the lizard hunter, he'd do the same to keep it away from Dipper. Mabel could save a life and remove some of the blood off her hands along with completing a romance quest, but she'd have nothing to give to her brother. She took a long gaze out at the flailing mothman, slowly loosing energy, his damp wings unable to support him.

In a stark moment, Mabel realized she was in a position where she could either make herself happy, or make her twin happy.

As expressionless as his glowing red eyes were, Mabel thought she could she hope and desperation inside the eyes of her makeshift ally, a quiet confidence he'd quickly be saved and his quest would succeed.

With her eyes cast to the dirt, without a further word or fleeting thought, Mabel Pines slipped her shoes back on and began the haul back to the Mystery Shack, as another secret sank to the depths of Gravity Falls' lake.
Multiverse Chase: Chapter 5

The light faded again, and the trio found themselves standing in a dusty tunnel made of well chiseled stone, air stale and incredibly dark due to the lack of any illumination, natural or otherwise. Stanford produced a flashlight from his pocket and shed some light on the situation.

Though Pacifica had informed the Pines members of the psychic entity's attack on this sliver of Bill Cipher, the multiverse scanner was still detecting him, albeit damaged and weak. Everyone had an air of caution to them, knowing they were going to corner a wounded animal.

"This stone work seems borderline medieval..." The older scientist mused while pulling a pocket sized chemical analysis kit as the two younger explorers simply looked about.

"This feels like some kind of hidden passage running through the walls of a dark lord's castle." Dipper spoke up as he and Pacifica stayed close together. "Grunkle Ford, do you think we're on this dimension's earth?"

"No. These stones have been shaped and reinforced using advanced chemistry of alien origin. Someone simply wants this place to look antiquated, probably as a stylistic choice." He announced, analysis complete. "So children, which way shall we go?" he asked, the corridor stretching into darkness both directions.

Without waiting for either of the boys to say a word, Pacifica withdrew a coin from her pocket, flipped it, then pointed to the left. "As good as choice as any..." Dipper remarked, before the three walked off into the darkness. The stone walls stretched on for a difficult to determine amount of time, before finally ending in a flat stone wall, leaving no way forward but backwards.

Dipper however, studied the stone wall intently. "Check for hidden doors?" he asked in a nervous, jokey manner. Grunkle Ford took the suggestion seriously however, and used an electronic multi-tool to scan the area where the wall met the tunnels.

"Good call Dipper, there are electromagnets built into the walls here, the mechanisms of an inconspicuous door. And every door must have a handle..." He muttered, while reaching around in the dark until his hand caught on a lever that when pulled sent the stone wall rolling backwards into the tunnel side, briefly blinding the party of three as light flooded over them.

When the human eyes adjusted, they found the tunnel opening into a futuristic, well stocked hospital room where aliens of various sizes and shaped moved between and laid upon flat cots, tables and shelves stocked with various devices and everyone present wearing all covering, sterile uniforms.

"Oh, great, another contamination vector..." One of the aliens, a long legged fellow with waxy orange skin but otherwise very human looking, spoke. He was some kind of medical doctor, Ford guessed, based on long protective coat, face mask, syringe filled pockets and information displaying electronic tablet. "I mean, good work on finding another passage, always need more storage space, but that is not the ideal place for it to open to."

Quickly taking control of the situation, Stanford replied in a weary but understanding tone. "Yes, they'll probably have to wall this end up completely, we don't need foot traffic routed through here. But, speaking of which, I need to go report this, so excuse us." The mindswimmers the three had effecting their brains did their jobs, and the words were understood.

"Course, course." And with that, the three new arrivals slipped easily through the alien hospital.
room, not drawing a single second glance from the menagerie present. The three looked about as they made an exit, observing that this was some kind of long term care ward even with the unusual alien bodies about, as the patients lay in a state of faintly recognizable atrophied rest while being fed by tubes and monitored by machines.

When the three humans exited the room, they found themselves in a much more conventional hallway built in the style of an ancient stone castle, this one with windows overlooking the landscape. The younger two rushed over to the view port and gazed along the alien landscape. In contrast to the endless swamp of the last planet they had visited, this place seemed to be in some kind of dry mountain range, as cresting, snowless peaks covered in soft blue plant growth stretched in every direction. The two gasped in wonder, but then frowned as they looked into the valley stretching before their current point.

The valley below them was overrun by a large, dirty and ramshackle looking settlement made of a mixture of spread out tarp or fabric tents and blocky, flimsy looking identical prefabricated structures. Small patches of light and thin smoke columns rose irregularly from the dilapidated settlement.

The two teenagers were quickly called away from the window by Ford, who'd located an interesting feature of the place: a holographic information display being projected over the rough hewn ancient looking stonework.

"Based on this map, I think this place is some kind of converted hospital." The older scientist hypothesized. "The labeling on this map is indicative of specialty wards, chemical storage and examination rooms, but the floor plan is extremely restrictive, better inclined towards defensive fighting then medical logistics."

"That would make sense. If Bill's psychic essence was damaged and he needed a new body as quickly as possible a hospital would give him plenty of desperate people to make a deal with." Dipper thought aloud. "Is this place far enough in the future that Bill might be able to get himself directly repaired with psychic surgery?"

"Possible, but I can't be sure one way or the other yet." Ford answered. "The anachronistic construction makes it difficult to determine the exact technology level we're dealing with. Let's take a further look around, see what we find."

The three humans continued walking through the alien castle, the hospital section of their guessing confirmed by the several aliens they passed, transporting and being transported on stretchers, wheelchairs or more exotic shaped people movers for more exotic shaped lifeforms.

They eventually found themselves rounding a corner to discover a tall, six limbed simian dressed in much less protective clothing then the others they'd passed quickly working to clean up a crate of pill bottles that had fallen from a softly floating cargo cart stacked with similar boxes. Pacifica gestured towards the two boys to let her take the lead, then abruptly put on a furious face and stomped forwards.

"What is going on here!!?" she yelled in an outraged tone while approaching mess. The alien worker jolted in panic before beginning to mutter a series of lame excuses in a defensive, frustrated tone. Pacifica cut him off by demanding "Just where do you think you are exactly? Do you think we can afford slip ups like this!!?"

"Probably, considering you kept the cost of this big old castle retreat low by shoving all the war refugees into the valley below!" The alien worker snapped back, but instantly regretted his words and began backpedaling. "I mean, um, no, I'm sorry, I understand clean, climate controlled space is at a premium and the amount of supplies and long term patients was much higher then expected
when this whole project was set up, but I meant... oh damn it the student volunteer program never said there'd be this much talking..."

Pacifica's expression softened somewhat at the limited explanation of things, and she discreetly interrupted with "Look, I don't really like it either, but that's no excuse for slip up likes this! Just clean it up before anyone else comes by and I'll forget I saw anything."

While the alien worker bequeathed a slew of rushed apologies, Pacifica motioned for the other two to come with her down the halls, away from the situation. Once in the clear, the blond grimaced as if she'd swallowed something. "A little Northwest strategy for motivating the common help." She spat with distaste.

"Hey, I know you didn't mean any of it." Dipper said reassuringly to her, then turned to his great uncle. "That guy mentioned war refugees, do you think this is the same conflict that was touching the previous two places we chased this Bill section to?"

"It's... improbable, but we can't dismiss the possibility." Ford said hesitantly. "The previous two places we visited were in close stellar proximity to each other, but this planet is on the other side of the galaxy from those two. For a war to be fought on such a scale, burning the galaxy from one end to the other... it boggles the mind." he breathed, awestruck and fearful at the concept. "Still, that would be exactly the kind of thing Bill would try to dip his hands into."

The three soon found something out of the usual in the corridors, an advanced looking metal door bolted onto the stonework, currently sitting open on its hinges despite a very clear sign stating this door must be kept closed. Ford poked his head through the gap and grimaced, before stepping through and gesturing for the other two to join him inside. Upon passing the barrier, Dipper and Pacifica knew they were on the right track, because the hospital ward had been transformed into a graveyard.

Well organized lines of hospital beds were filled with alien corpses, and despite the varied physical differences between the species they all shared a withered, shriveled up physique, with some looking as though they would crumble to dust if poked too harshly. Besides the patients, a few hospital staff were scattered around the room, less shriveled and killed in obvious acts of violence.

Ford set to work examining the staff in detail, Dipper checked over the slain patients, and Pacifica began to assess the medical equipment stored in the room.

The younger man of the group pulled a pen light out of his pocket and began examining one of the victims at length. The alien in question had an uncanny similarity to earth house flies, albeit with feet to stand on and hands to operate things with. The body was hard, dry and brittle, badly dehydrated despite a well stocked IV sitting by its bed. Dipper soon found a unusual variable on the body, a fresh, perfectly circular puncture wound on the alien's side, distinguishable from the various injection and IV sites on the body due to its lack of bandaging and large size, as well as the fact that no natural healing had occurred on site, meaning it had been inflicted shortly before death.

Checking the other bodies, the puncture mark repeated itself on all of them, though in different places on different species. Settling on the most mammalian looking of the aliens, Dipper procured an advanced scalpel that had been knocked to the floor in the ruckus earlier and began cutting open the flesh around the insertion, revealing organic tubules similar to human veins, all of them still damp. "Grunkle Ford, I think we're dealing with an arcane vampire organism here. If I had to hypothesize, I'd guess Bill made a deal with someone in this ward for healing, and cast a spell to drink universal lifeforce from all these people. It can't be purely organic hematophagy since a wide variety of species have been drained, some of which had to have been biologically incompatible."
Pacifica was at that moment fiddling with a sealed, untouched drawer on the wall, one of the few containers in the room not thrown open and ransacked. Despite the advanced technology of the location, she quickly figured out it was sealed by what was essentially a baby lock, and disengaged it to find a container of sharp instruments. "Multiverse mystic who knows lots of things, except how to disable a child lock." She snarked while more closely examining an amputation knife.

"Bill must be wounded, mentally and physically." Ford remarked while examining the withered form of a medical worker. "His psychic form is breaking down and he needs to repair his physically decaying body of opportunity using vampire magic. He's in no state to use any of his normal tricks and manipulations, we've got him cornered!"

After taking another look at the perfectly circular puncture wound the drained bodies had suffered, Dipper began examining the IV drip propped up besides the only empty bed in the ward. "We might have a trail." Dipper remarked, but then the sound of sharp, clattering feet on stone began to fill the hear, soft and distant now but steadily growing stronger.

Ford narrowed his eyes and quickly gestured for Dipper and Pacifica to hide behind the cot dividing curtains while he abruptly ripped the lab coat off the medical worker who was the closest to Ford's size and rolled the body underneath a different cot. A moment after he'd completed the disguise, the ajar metal door was thrown all the way open as what was obviously the security staff: a squad of hunched but tall humanoids resembling flies, albeit flies with severely atrophied wings (insufficient muscle mass to propel the body in question) and third set of limbs (which protruded upwards from the shoulders) which were noticeably short, thin and ending in simple spikes instead of hands or clawed feet. The squad's red, bulbous compound eyes swept the room, taking in the carnage with calculated disgust.

Ford snapped at them right away. "Thank the stars you're here! We're in the middle of critical security breakdown, a patient has suffered a critical metastasis of their brain consuming prion disease that has aggravated their aggression centers and unlocked the subconscious limit controls of the skeletal muscle! Do any of you even know what that means!?” He yelled in his most commanding voice possible. When the security insects responded with blank looks and chittering to one another, Ford screamed "That means a super strong lunatic is running free in the hospital! Move out and apprehend him!"

Stanford's commanding tone of voice snapped the guards to attention, and the lead one chittered "Lead the way then! You know where he went!" To Ford, who seemed surprised by the sudden demand but complied after unconsciously casting a look to Dipper and Pacifica's hiding spot. He knew the two could look after each other, and he couldn't pass up an opportunity to surround Bill with a half dozen armed guards.

The teenagers waited until the sound of falling footsteps had faded before daring to breathe, and realized they were huddled quite close to each other in an attempt to stay still. Though both blushed slightly at this, neither felt the need to jump away suddenly, so instead the two simply stepped out from their hiding spot and discussed their options. "We can't let Doctor Pines face Bill alone Dipper, even if he's weakened."

"I agree, those security guards have no ides what they're getting into." Dipper remarked while crossing over to a medicine cabinet. "I have an idea though."

Down the corridor, Ford had taken up a position in the middle of the six insect squad, keeping his eyes out while the leader of the team followed an invisible trail using pathogen detecting goggles he'd slipped on to conduct the chase. The trail of sloughed off diseased flesh and rapidly reproducing bacteria lead to a large outdoor balcony, once able to comfortably fit over a dozen dancing nobles
watching the sunrise on this planet but now crammed full of solar panels that collect power for the hospital.

Once they confirmed via wrist mounted hologram maps of the facility that this balcony was a dead end, the guard at the back of the formation pocketed his heat sterilizer, a pen sized projector of heat energy and radiation waves designed to cleanse spaces of microorganisms and maintain hospital cleanliness kept in pocket by most hospital staff, which he'd been using to clean up the worst of the trail, and slung his security rifle off his back, setting it to stun setting.

The security insects, despite Ford's objections, split up and swept through the pathways created by the solar arrays, guns at the ready. The first sign of something wrong was one of the guards screaming in pain as electricity surged through him, having stepped in a recently poured out puddle of water which had been charged with a ripped loose electrical transmission wire from a nearby giant solar panel, electrocuting him with the full power of the sun.

The remaining guards tensed up at the death of one of their own, stepping slowly and switching their weapons to lethal settings. The next attack came from Bill directly, as he directed his puppet to rise up from under a rain tarp protecting a crate of spare parts and ram the blade of a stolen scalpel into the eye of a security guard who had the misfortune to place his back to the demon's hiding place. His screams of agony and panicked firing caught the attention of the rest of his squad, who hosed his general direction with laser fire, shredding apart the solar emplacements in the way and dousing the area with thick smoke from the ensuing electrical fires.

"Stop shooting, stop!" Ford demanded numerous times before the laser fire slowed to a stop as the chemical smoke rolled onto the guards. One of them soon vanished into the smoke, getting out not a single scream but instead a gurgling, wet crunching along wide the sound of a straw sucking the last few drops of liquid out of a cup.

Ford quickly snatched the sidearm and heat sterilizer from the choking guard next to him as the sound of a different guard screaming then falling silent with a wet crunch came from within the smoke, which he back away from, coming to a stop at the railing. The air was silent again, but only for a short moment before another unseen guard let out a long, trailing scream as he was tossed over the railing, plummeting to his death.

"Stay calm soldier." Ford tried to reassure the only security officer left, now shaking in panic and pointing his blaster into the thick smoke. "We're only going to get one shot at him. Make it count."

Unfortunately, when Bill struck, he struck too quickly. A lightning quick tendril struck from the ever closer smoke, a whip of yellow rubber skin snapping onto Ford's hand to send his pocketed blaster over the railing, as it whipped backwards, it turned and stuck fast onto the final security guard's head, and with a sick crunch caused the body to shrivel and crush.

"A proboscis feeder, a perfect body for vampire magic." Ford remarked, attempting to keep his cool while Bill's latest body stepped out of the smoke. The striking tendril was revealed to grow out of the alien's mouth-less face, showing the circular opening on the end to be lined with fresh, jagged, blood stained new teeth jutting from ripped membranes. The alien body itself was humanoid, though its torso and head seemed to mold together with no neck to separate them. The arms were long and thin while the legs thick and stocky. Its skin was yellow and rubber like in consistency, with bandages and wrappings in various places, on top of the standard hospital gown.

"So, you're finally inside a body appropriate to you, a blood sucking parasite!" Ford declared, refusing to show fear to the monster who'd terrorized his family for so long. "You're going to die out here Bill, die a broken fragment of your true self hiding in a diseased body!" Hoping his taunts were distracting Bill, Ford switched on the heat sterilizer he'd stolen, the only weapon in hand.
Bill's new body let out a wet hiss through its proboscis feeder before whipping the lamprey mouth into action towards Ford's exposed neck, but he'd prepared for the action and jammed the hot end of the sterilizer into the path of the blood drinking appendage, causing the alien to hiss and wrench back, clumsily reducing the precision blood drain into a hard slap.

With Stanford dazed as a result of the attack, Bill pushed his body forward, not caring that his stinging, blood drinking proboscis was dragging across the stone ground and shoved him over the railing, gurgling incoherent threats of death the entire time.

"GRUNKLE FORD!" Bill heard, causing him to spin around and miss his hated enemy splattering to bits across the distant rocks, to see Dipper and Pacifica had just burst onto the balcony in time to watch their mentor go plummeting to his death. Both looked horrified and despair stricken, though Pacifica adopted a look of anger the moment Bill took another step, and she hurled a pilfered scalpel into his shoulder.

Despite the blade sinking into his stolen flesh, Bill's new body quivered with mirth as he advanced on his two remaining enemies, proboscis quivering back into position as feeling returned to the feeder limb. Dipper to had gained an expression of anger and vengeance at this point, stepping in front of Pacifica and shielding her with his body as he walked toward's Bill, a furious expression peaking out from under his hat.

Bill stared down the most persistent thorn in his side he'd encountered in millennia, carefully examining the soft places of the body where blood vessels were close to the surface, savoring the thought of draining his form to a lifeless husk with sunken yellow eyes.

After what felt like an eternity, Dipper snapped his right into a vest pocket and pulled loose a surgical knife, bending his arm back as far as possible to try and hurl it at Bill. The puppet body however had repaired itself sufficiently to spring into action, and its thirsty lamprey mouth twitched with the speed of a practiced gunslinger, burying into Dipper's now exposed armpit.

Bill felt the freshly grown, unnatural teeth in his trunk cut through cloth, then skin, then dove into liquid, and began to drink.

On the underside of this balcony, Stanford Pines meanwhile was not as dead as Bill had hoped. Keeping cool and thinking quickly even when faced with a messy death, the experienced scientist quickly removed his stolen labcoat mid fall. The coat had five buttons on it, so he did up the bottom and top two, along with folding closed the sleeves, head and bottom opening, creating a pocket of air inside the cloth.

Then, he stuck the heat sterilizer into the only open gap of the think, switching it to the highest possible setting to rapidly heat the air pocket trapped inside. Though a crude construct at best, this end result was a rudimentary hot air balloon, which significantly slowed Ford's descent, as well as enabling a small amount of control over his flight path.

Now with a slow, steady but decaying method of flight, Ford turned his path towards the mountain hospital, looking for somewhere safe to land. The first opportunity to present itself was a stained glass window built into a stone facet of the mountain, and while Ford didn't love the idea of slamming through a glass depiction of what was probably a religious icon, he didn't want to risk not getting another chance. Once he was close enough, Ford jumped from the improvised balloon and latched on the window ledge. After finding purchase to place his feet onto, the old man reached inside his original coat and withdrew a handy multi-tool he keeps on him in order to be prepared.

"Please don't be a genuine historical artifact!" Ford begged quietly before throwing the tool through the window, shattering the glass an enabling him to climb through, albeit with a few nicks.
The room he found himself in was still recognizable as a hospital ward, but a strange one. The room was noticeably cold, and the only light in the place was a soft blue hue being projected by the lighting of the room, but disrupted by the now open hole in the wall. Ford would normally have taken quite a lot of time examining the room, but right now his wards were in danger and he had to get back to them. The only thing to slow him down was when weak throated yelling began coming from behind a square of privacy curtains, convincing Ford to briefly investigate to ensure he wasn't in danger.

Behind the curtain was a hospital bed where a strange alien was at rest. All that was visible of it was its head poking out from beneath the covers, a smooth sphere of dark gray stretch flesh, with large flat ears, bulging pure white eyes and a very small, toothy mouth. "Heeeeeelp, they returnrrrrm..." It groaned, too weak to make further noise despite the fear it was clearly feeling. Ford felt a moment of pity for the hospital patient, but quickly left it behind to help Dipper and Pacifica.

"The invaders from the bright return to break the ceiling of the world and consume us with their viruses! Help us!" The alien moaned deliriously in an increasingly loud and panicked room as Ford burst through the door out and began rushing ahead in search of a map.

Dipper grimaced and groaned in pain, throwing his head back while Pacifica looked away, unable to bear the sight. Bill was ecstatic and the precious fluids flowed down his proboscis in pumps, draining his enemy with every squeeze of the snout's muscle. Then, the first sweet drop hit the alien axial body.

Instantly, Bill knew something was wrong. The liquid wasn't exploding into his body with a burst of life and the gentle stinging of the meat sack repairing itself, in fact it burned on contact and sent his chest cavity reeling when it hit the bottom of the stomach like a rock. The mind demon knew for sure he'd been tricked when his snout stopped pumping automatically due to the liquid depleting, having drunk nowhere near the amount of liquid a human body contained. Bill ripped the scalpel Pacifica had thrown into his flesh free and attempted to advance on the two, but found his legs growing weak and uncoordinated, stumbling and eventually falling.

As soon as the puppet body had collapsed to its knees, Pacifica and Dipper's heads snapped back into view, both of them now grinning widely. "I knew you'd never be able to resist draining my life force Bill, even if it'd have been easier to just shoot me with a stolen security blaster," Dipper explained, reaching under his armpit and pulling out a now empty IV bag with a perfectly circular hole in it. "So me and Pacifica stuffed IV bags filled with random drugs over all our vital blood points for when you'd attack. I might not know anything about your new alien body or what any of these medicines are actually made of, but I see I was correct in assuming overdosing is still a hazard of medicine, especially when dealing with a wide range of radically different alien biologies!"

"You sadism is your undoing." Pacifica remarked with satisfaction while removing her own IV bags of drugs from underneath her clothes. By now, Bill had collapsed, shivering onto the floor and spitting up spurts of biological fluid out his trunk, which lay limp against the stone. Dipper advanced quickly but cautiously, readying a sleek white and boxy MK 3 Memory Gun, pre-programmed to seek and destroy all traces of Bill Cipher inside a psychic network. With a steady aim and a pull of the trigger, another fragment of Bill Cipher was erased from existence.

Dipper watched with pity as the demonic malice left the eyes of the alien hospital patient, replaced by rapidly dimming pain and confusion as the original mind regained his body and felt his wounds and internal injuries open back up as the ancient vampire magic that sustained him was burned out of his body, alongside the dream demon that gave it to him, on top of the incompatible drugs he'd been tricked into drinking. The boy from earth offered him a compassionate look and a soft, but sincere apology for being in the wrong place at the wrong time as the alien slowly died, then closed his eyes.
when the life had faded entirely.

After a quiet moment, Pacifica walked up to Dipper and took his hand, a downcast look on her face suddenly. "Dipper, what happened to Doctor Pines... what happened to Ford back there, I hope you don’t blame yourself because it..." Her attempts to be comforting were suddenly cut off when Dipper held up one finger, gesturing for silence as he held up and activated the personal communicators they all had.

"Kids, are you alright!?" Came the older man’s voice after a few moments of static, causing smiles to break out on both faces; Pacifica's a sudden outburst of relief that her fears had been dashed, and Dipper the soft smile of being proven correct.

"We're all clear on this end Grunkle Ford, mission accomplished. Bill has been eliminated." he reported with a smile and a proud tone of voice.

"Marvelous, well done, excellent work you two!" Ford praised over the radio. "I apologize if I gave you a scare when I fell over that railing, but I had full confidence in your ability to continue the fight!"

"Don't worry about it Grunkle Ford, I knew from the beginning it'd take more than a little push to kill someone as clever as you!" Dipper responded in a voice that was perfectly praising into the radio, but with a look on his face that was quietly teasing Pacifica for assuming his mentor's death so quickly.

"You can tell me all about how you finished the mission back on earth. For the moment, I think we should hit our fast return switches before security comes investigating. Grunkle Ford, over and out!" He finished speaking before the radio went silent. Dipper smiled a little at his signing off note, as while Stanford had taken to being called "Grunkle Ford" quite quickly, it had only been fairly late into Dipper's apprenticeship that he used the nickname to refer to himself.

Dipper fished around in his pockets and pulled out one of the several quantum entanglement devices he had packed that would transmit between dimensions to the new and improved portal device, activating it remotely and locking on to their coordinates. When he saw Pacifica had hers at the ready, the two smiled at one another and threw the switches, feeling the light overtake them as their bodies were jettisoned across a multiverse that was now just a little bit safer.
Down To Earth: Chapter 1

The three dimensional travelers stepped back into the familiar laboratory basement of the Mystery Shack, small smiles on all their faces despite the weariness to their steps. Once the portal was completely shut down, Dipper was the first to speak. "So, did we do it Grunkle Ford? Is one more piece of Bill gone forever?"

Stanford Pines was quiet for a long moment, carefully and attentively operating the dimension device's scanning function. Finally, he switched it off and smiled broadly at the two teenagers. "Yes. Thanks to you two, the multiverse has one less shred of Bill Cipher in it." he said warmly.

Dipper and Pacifica both smiled with relief at this, Dipper in particular beaming with happiness at the praise from his mentor, though he was somewhat flustered by being given so much credit. "Hey, we couldn't have done it without you too!"

The older scientist dismissed this remark with a wave of the hand though. "You two would have found a way to prevail, even without my help. I'm so proud of you."

"So what happens now?" Pacifica asked. "There's more of Bill out there, right? Are we going back out after him?"

A crease appeared on Ford's forehead as the reality of the situation was brought back up, and he began working the scanner controls. "Well, not right away, but you are correct that we must continue our war against Bill until all of reality is safe from him. It will, however, take some time for the scanner to locate the next Bill fragment, and from what I found inside Mabel's head before I cleared her, nine such fragments exist, and at the moment we've destroyed three and know the fourth is trapped in a dead skeleton buried in the desert of Arizona." He explained. "So, until we get a solid location, we all have a little downtime."

As good news as that was, Dipper's expression fell and he let out a worried sigh at the mention of his sister. "Mabel, right..." He breathed, knowing he can't avoid the difficult conversation any longer. "I... I need to go sort things out with Mabel. If you'll excuse me..." He said before making his way towards the elevator, leaving Pacifica and Ford alone.

Not wanting to walk out right behind Dipper when he clearly wanted to confront his sister alone, Pacifica was left standing kind of awkwardly in the room with the older Pines, neither really sure what to say. While the blond girl did greatly respect the seasoned scientist, both for his genius and for how immensely happy Dipper was be his apprentice, most of her conversations with him tended to be through Dipper.

"So, Doctor Pines..." she began to ask, only for the old scientist to hold up a hand.

"You can call me Ford if you'd like. You're a close enough friend of Dipper's that I don't mind." He interrupted.

"It's alright, I was raised to be very formal, and it's probably the least bad thing about my childhood." She dismissed before continuing her question. "So, once we defeat Bill once and for all, what's going to happen next? I mean as much as me and Dipper talk about the things you and him discover and how they could be applied, I don't know if we've ever talked about how, well, we're going to get things out there. Like, do you guys plan to publish your research, start making products, how's it going to happen? I mean what science publications would even accept papers about gnomes and size shifting crystals anyway? How could we get any of the medicines you guys have invented through
Ford's eyes seemed distant for a moment as he thought to himself, but in the end he smiled before speaking. "Well, we have talked a lot about how we're going to present our findings to the world, but I can see we've been doing a disservice by not including you in the discussions, you clearly have some insight into the matters of business and publication." He praised, before letting out a bit of a sigh. "Well, for the time being we've been getting by much how I did when I worked alone, patenting and publishing only the inventions which are grounded in accepted scientific fact, with the more arcane parts of their invention... edited out. It's not scientifically ethical by any means, but it's a necessary ethics violation."

Ford was quiet for a moment, turning to look at the portal device, the culmination of his life's work, a gamut of emotions running across his face that eventually settled on satisfaction. "As for how we'll put the more arcane aspects of what we've discovered into public acceptance, I'll admit we don't have a solid plan yet, aside from generally starting with the stuff that at least has fringe acceptance before working our way up, but no matter what we're doing we're waiting until Dipper's eighteen."

Pacifica seemed a little surprised by that last fact. "Dipper never really mentioned anything like that, why?"

"Well, I wanted it to be a surprise for him, so maybe I shouldn't have said anything, but you can keep a secret, right Pacifica?" Ford remarked before continuing before she answered. "I want to wait until Dipper's a legal adult before we begin really publishing in earnest because I want him to get all the credit he deserves for the work he's done alongside me, and by being a legal adult he'll be able to be the full controller of any patents we put out."

"You're giving him the patents?" Pacifica asked, genuine shock and surprise on her face. Intellectually, she had long since learned and internalized this kind of generosity as being possible in people, but it still surprised her when it actually happened.

Ford simply nodded. "I'm old Pacifica, it doesn't matter how many phoenix feather tonics me and Stanley take." He remarked with smiling weariness. "As much as neither of us like to think about it, Dipper is going to spend the majority of his scientific career without me. I want him to have full control of any patents we make, legally free and clear, so that he'll always have a foundation to pursue his goals from."

Pacifica looked at the elderly man with a look of pride. "That's so generous of you, Doctor Pines. I won't be able to access my father's remaining assets until I'm 18 myself, but I know for a fact when it gets out my parents have died distant Northswest are going to be coming out of the woodwork, plying me with false smiles to try and get it for themselves." She said, while growing a frown. "It's only two years though, so I guess I can last until then..."

"We could fake your death." Ford said without hesitation, in a blunt but helpful tone. "Make it look like died with them, then make a miraculous return at 18 or 19 years old to collect the fortune!" he explained, well meaning but deeply insensitive.

"I'll... uh, think about it."

Upstairs, Dipper found Mabel in short order, as the girl was simply relaxing on a living room chair, relaxing after a work out. "DIPPER, YOU'RE HOME!" She yelled in excitement, jumping up and giving him a hug of relief that he'd not been lost between dimensions. Dipper, despite the troubles with his sister that weighed on his mind, happily hugged her back.

"Okay, Dipper, don't say anything, I got a homecoming gift for you and everything!" Mabel said as
she disengaged the hug, before running to another room and coming back with the shopping cart full of eggs. "TA-DA! Eggs from the sky! I thought it was a meteor at first but turns out to be freaky sky eggs!"

Dipper was a little taken aback at the egg cluster, but none the less stepped forward and examined them. "Mabel, do you have any idea what these are?"

"They're freaky eggs from the sky, right? Originally I wanted to bring you back a fallen space rock since you emailed me a big thing about them before, but once I saw it was this figured, might as well not come back empty handed!" She explained with face paced, slightly nervous speech.

"Mabel these are Rod eggs, strange atmosphere dwelling cryptids that have defied all of Grunkle Ford's attempts to study them!" He explained excitedly. "We've found lone eggs falling and caught the occasional specimen, but never enough to make a sustainable domestic population. We have this idea to cross bread them with the mindswimmers to hopefully create free flying, atmosphere dwelling school fish that spread psychic understanding to everyone below them, creating pockets free of language divisions! This is great!"

Dipper did not know the emotional storm that was raging inside his sister, though if he were feeling it himself he would find it familiar. The drowning of the mothman who guarded these eggs still weighed heavily on her, another dark blot on her soul she added at a time when she was hoping to clean her soul of deathly guilt. Every moment she looked at the eggs reminded her of his red eyes sinking under the water.

But seeing Dipper so happy, so overjoyed at having a missing component of his dream handed to him... it vitalized her! Her brother's smile, such a rare thing when they were children, illuminated her whole being even if couldn't undo the price she'd paid. "So, this is why Dipper hurts himself for my benefit." She thought soberingly. Her own emotional pain was still there, gnawing at her, but the joy Dipper was clearly feeling flowed into her, the happiness she felt for his sake stronger then any joy derived from satisfying her own wants. With a guilty pit forming in her stomach, Mabel realized this was an extremely new sensation for her.

Soon however, the boy's face fell and he ceased his excited chattering, becoming tongue tied as he tried to speak. "No, wait, Mabel, we need to talk about this! I mean, no, I'm not saying you tried to bribe me with this, and I'm sorry I had to take off to fight Bill before we sorted this out, but we can't leave this hanging in the air!" Dipper babbled, trying to get all the anxiety, questions and disappointment out. Then, he simply swallowed, composed himself, and asked "Why'd you do it?"

"I... I didn't know it was Bill at the time Dipper, and I just figured, a little more time to..." Mabel began nervously before her brother cut her off.

"No, that's not what I'm talking about! Sure that was a stupid mistake but we've all made those! Why did you lie to us for so long!?" He demanded, frustration leaking into his tone of voice. "In that wretched bubble, while we were planning in the Shack, at the party afterwards, the YEARS of normal life afterwards! You had all the time in the world to come clean to us!"

Mabel was nervous now, shrinking in place and trying to force an air of casualness to her words. "There was, well, just never a good time I felt." She responded steadily. "Before the big fight I was worried the truth would mess the team spirit up, during the party I didn't want to risk killing the mood, and the years after, it just seemed so... unimportant, by that point? It wouldn't have helped anyone to bring it up, so I figured unless you guys asked..."

"Is that true?" Dipper asked pointedly. "If we'd really just asked out of the blue if you gave the Rift to Bill Cipher, were you really going to turn around on years of lying?" When Mabel didn't answer,
he continued. "What would have happened if Bill hadn't been bafflingly stupid and told us the truth instead, at a critical moment!? If you'd gotten things cleared up first, that wouldn't have been a threat!"

"Who cares though!?" Mabel burst out, speaking with desperate anger. "You're always going on about what could happen or what was possible, but it didn't happen! Everything worked out fine! Why did I need to tell the truth so badly when it just leads to us shouting at each other!?"

"Because of closure dammit!" Dipper burst out in anger, surprising himself when Mabel flinched at this, taking a moment to breath and steady himself in a still angry but composed manner. "People deserve to know why things happen, especially things like a demon bursting into the world and creating a living hell!"

"You're one to talk!" Mabel shot back, becoming somewhat aggressive as the argument grew in earnest. "The whole reason any of this happened is because you and Ford didn't just tell me about the Rift and what it could do!"

"Don't even bother going there," Dipper replied dismissively. "Even if you didn't know what that was, you had no right to steal it. Besides, we didn't tell you about the Rift because you clearly can't be depended on to sacrifice for the greater good, since you'd already risked destroying the universe once already!"

"I did that because I trusted Grunkle Stan!" She yelled back, getting defensive at the involvement of their great uncle in the argument.

"More then you trusted me!?" Dipper yelled out, long buried hurt exploding into his words. It was like a dam had broken, and a torrent of bottled up emotional hurt and sadness spilled out, extinguishing any angry fire Dipper had. "You trusted a creepy old criminal who was going to destroy the world over your twin brother! How could do that!?" He demanded to know, tears getting into the boy's eyes as the long buried feelings kept rushing out. "It gave us Ford back so I felt like I didn't have the right to complain but that HURT Mabel! Every time I put my trust in you about anything you use it to hurt me! When I liked Wendy, when I was trying to get over Wendy, when you replaced me with that... THING inside the bubble!"

Mabel felt like she was shrinking in place as Dipper let it all come out, frozen in place and unable to respond. She wished on some level that he'd kept just yelling at her in anger, but at this point her brother just seemed to be pouring out sadness, and she couldn't bring out an argument against that. By now, Dipper had stopped talking and collapsed into the closest chair, looking like he'd just run a marathon with onions under his eyes. After spending a moment to compose himself and wipe his tears off on his sleeve, Dipper picked up again, speaking now with a more controlled release of his feelings.

"That's how I decided I was going to stay here." He muttered, half informing Mabel of this and half realizing it for himself. "It's been there all my life and even when you slapped me in the face with a 'more supportive version' of myself that has nothing in common with me that I realized it but instantly went into denying it. You've never appreciated me for who I am, and the moment I stopped catering to your every whim you were ready to throw me away like trash. So, I figured if you thought so little of me, you'd be fine on your own."

Choking up now, the other twin needed a minute to put herself together, ugly silence reigning between them, Dipper slumped in a chair feeling defeated despite the cathartic liberation of long buried emotions he'd just undergone, while his sister stood up straight, looking at the floor and stewed in misery, trying to make sense of and justify her own behavior, even to herself. "Dipper, I, you... I realize I haven't been kind about it, but it's not that I don't love you for who you are, I just
want my brother to be happy!" Mabel replied, tears beginning to form and a creaky, uncertain tone to her voice. "You could lay alone in bed, completely away from anything or anyone that could possibly trouble you, and think yourself into a fit over nothing! I just wanted my brother to be happy, and the number one person who always made you unhappy was you!"

Dipper kept his head hung low for a moment, as if he wanted to bite his tongue, but felt the urge to argue back swelling inside him. "That was never your decision to make Mabel. I've always been supportive of you being you no matter how stupid you are, but you could never just let me be me. If you really wanted me to be happy, you would have let me pursue my dreams instead of doing everything in your power to hold me back." He stated, anger creeping back into his tone, but it was subdued, cold anger now. "That's the real reason you lied for so long, isn't it? You always wanted, always hoped I'd give up my dreams and go back to being miserable in normalcy alongside you, and you thought telling the truth would destroy that chance forever."

"Miserable? Dipper, what about the life you left behind!? What about growing up, making friends, our high school years, OUR PARENTS!? How were you able to just leave them behind without a second thought?" Mabel replied. "What kind of life are you living up here, in danger every day and growing old in a dark, underground laboratory?"

"Life back in Piedmont was terrible Mabel." Dipper replied bluntly. "If I'd gone back with you that first summer, I'd have abandoned the real friends I made here in Gravity Falls, and I'm honestly surprised our parents even know I'm gone." His last line drew a confused but hurt expression out of Mabel, so he elaborated. "Mom and dad always loved you more. They'd always give you whatever you wanted but never showed any support for any of my interests or desires. As far as I'm concerned, our great uncles are my parents."

Mabel seemed to deflate now, the fire going out on her arguing, and she now seemed resigned and exhausted, in a similar state to her twin. "So, is that it then? Your old life with me was terrible and you just want to cut ties entirely? If you want to do that, I'll get the novelty giant scissors." she remarked bitterly.

Dipper frowned a little, and seemed a little regretful with the next words he spoke. "I mean, there were some good times back then, the two of us, but these last three years I've spent in Gravity Falls have been the happiest times of my life. I always hoped you could have a place here someday and make things perfect, but now that I'm being honest with myself... If I have to choose between making you happy and making myself happy... I'm going to choose to make myself happy. I've done enough of the former."

Silence filled the air, as neither twin had anymore words to say or the energy to say them with. After almost a full minute of standing quietly and being unable to look at one another, Mabel broke the silence, muttering "Well, I can't blame you for that..." in a broken tone before shuffling out of the room, head hanging low.

With the argument over, Dipper sunk even deeper into the chair, emotionally exhausted and saddened over the massive argument he just had with his twin, but at the same time feeling lighter in the chest, having gotten some painful thoughts and ideas he'd not fully wanted to even acknowledge out in the open.
When Pacifica found Dipper after waiting what she had hoped was an appropriate amount of time down in the laboratory for him to talk to his sister, he was sinking into a living room chair while deep in thought, eyes listlessly wandering over the general TV region even though nothing was on. "So... I'm guessing it didn't go great?" Pacifica asked with uncertainty, really not trying to make Dipper feel worse.

The young scientist let out a sigh, roused from his deep thought, as he turned his head to reply. "It's... I don't know how it went. I mean on one hand I do feel like I got some stuff off my chest and I feel like, I guess misconceptions I had about my sister are cleared up, but otherwise? It hurts. It hurts a lot to know my own twin would hide things like that from me just to make herself happy, because she couldn't be happy for me! I mean, like Grunkle Ford always says, knowing is better then not knowing, but it's still painful." Then, after spilling his guts, Dipper's expression changed to shocked and he facepalmed. "Why am I sitting here complaining about my problems with my sister to you!? Pacifica, your parents are dead, you shouldn't have to listen to me..."

In a moment, Pacifica closed the distance between her and Dipper and got him to stop talking by putting two of her fingers on his lips. She looked up at him, a grateful expression on her face, then looked away with a heavy brow. "Hey, don't beat yourself up over that. I know it's probably because I'm still a bad person, but, well, you seem more broken up about my parents then I am." She confessed, self-doubt coursing through her. "I mean, I know that's a terrible thing for someone who lost their parents to say, but sometimes when I see how you interact with Doctor Pines and Stanley, I feel like I never had parents in comparison."

Dipper looked severely uncomfortable at this response, at a loss for a way to respond, but eventually settled on something he knew was true. "You're not a bad person Pacifica." He said with sincerity, and the two were quiet for a moment, not sure what to say next.

Eager to break the silence, the girl spoke up after a few second of silence. "Look, you wanna like, go do something fun?" She suggested, a small tone of insecurity leaking through. "Doctor Pines told us to relax while we can before we're back through the portal, so let's go relax. My treat."

Dipper was conflicted for a moment, then let out a small smile. "You know what, you have a point. Let's go do something fun."

Across town, Mabel was attempting that very thing, and having minimal success. Shortly after her argument with Dipper, the returning girl had gone out to meet her two old friends Grenda and Candy, having planned to reunite soon after returning to town, but that meeting was delayed by the zombie attack and ensuing emotional pain. Now though, the girl from California could think of no one else she wanted to turn to more.

The three were sitting at a booth in some restaurant in town, the two Gravity Falls natives on one side, Mabel on the other, and a whole bunch of empty milkshakes dividing them. Rather then go on as massive sugar rush as her friends remembered her to do, Mabel was simply sucking down her drinks with a morose expression and downcast demeanor.

"...and on top of everything else, Pacifica's really obviously putting the moves on Dipper and doesn't like me." She finished explaining to her two friends, who sported concerned looks, as they turned to each other for a moment.

"You... didn't know about Dipper and Pacifica?" Candy asked with concern. "We actually thought
they were dating for the last two years, with how often they're hanging out and being all touchy with each other. I figured you'd set them up remotely." Mabel just slammed her face into the table at this.

"You have been messaging Dipper, right?" Grenda asked abruptly with her consistently husky voice. "I mean if you message him as much as you message us, Dipper's got no excuse for getting all weird and emotionally distant on you! Just look at me and my Austrian future husband, long distance relationships can work!" which drew approving nods from Candy.

Mabel looked up in response, a slight frown on her face. "Looks, girls, it's really not Dipper's fault here. Sure we kept in touch but there was always gonna be some emotional distance there, especially since I don't really understand any of what he and Grunkle Ford are actually doing out here." Mabel defended, having not disclosed the origin of Weirdmageddon to her friends. "I'm sorry girls, but I can't lose anyone else at this point." she thought to herself.

"Then you have to connect to his interests girlfriend! Understand what he's doing out here!" Grenda replied while slamming both her fists on the table.

"Pacifica is always helping him operate his machines, here and out in the woods. If they bonded over that, surely you can get back in Dipper's good graces in no time with a mystery solved or two!" Candy added, and in response a small smile grew on the Pine twin's face.

"Okay girls, let's go solve a mystery." Mabel declared with determination, then frowned slightly. "Does anyone have any mysteries they currently need solving?"

"Can you solve the mystery of why my parents are always yelling at each other?" Candy asked abruptly with a hopeful tone, instantly making the air between the three awkward. Luckily, Grenda spoke up in short order.

"Things have actually been a lot less weird ever since reality was strangled with its own intestines then quickly put back together." She remarked. "Gravity Falls has been a borderline normal town these last few years."

Mabel's newfound guilt clawed at her once again. "Yeah... Dipper explained that Bill, well, wiped out a lot of the monsters that lived in the woods when he took over." However, she pushed this feeling down and acquired a cheery tone for his next declaration. "But hey, that just means everyone who is still alive probably has some kind of problem we can help solve! In fact, I know just where we need to go!"

Meanwhile, Dipper and Pacifica had ventured through the woods to the Meridian Fields, circular clearings in the forest resulting from Bill raining blue fire down across the landscape during his reign of terror. Though hearty grass had managed to grow back in the intervening years, the tall trees that once made this place a forest were long gone, and would likely not grow back for generations.

It was quiet here, an eerie and wonderful sort of quiet that Dipper enjoyed greatly. When challenged to "do something fun" he'd decided he'd let Pacifica in on this quiet little place he'd retreat to sometimes, having brought a small amount of food for a little picnic before they'd hike back to town. Now that they were out there though, he was little embarrassed at his choice of destination.

"Well, uh, here we are..." He tried to introduce awkwardly, sweeping his arm limply in gesture to the surroundings. "This is where I come sometimes to, you know, relax, hang out, do a little reading." He perked up for a moment while adding "Oh, and check on the bugs! Me and Grunkle Ford have been slowly introducing ant colonies and ladybug populations to the place, in hopes it will help the... environment recover... uh, quicker." He trailed off, finally pulling his hat over his face. "This was a terrible idea, wasn't it? What would someone as sociable as you possibly find fun about this place?"
Pacifica, in response, put her hand on Dipper's chin to make him look at her, while she gave him a reassuring but teasing smile. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do, Pines." She replied, before walking away a little bit to take in her surroundings. "I can certainly navigate a crowd better then you can, but truth be told I don't think I enjoy it anymore then you do. Parties, crowds, even one on one conversations... I was always taught, always trained, to go into them being whoever the other people wanted me to be, to give me the upper hand in mingling, or negotiating, or whatever it was about. Never to be myself. So, there was always something a little refreshing about quiet places, where no one else was around, where I could feel like myself..." She went silent for almost a minute, then turned back to Dipper. "It's very quiet here. Thank you for showing it to me."

"Hey, don't mention it." Dipper replied, a little flustered at Pacifica's warm response. After taking a little longer to sit in the stillness of the meadow, the two sat down the blanket Dipper had brought and quietly began to eat sandwiches.

With a mouth full of food, Pacifica was looking towards Dipper's face, trying to work out her feelings. "This... this feels big." She thought to herself with concern. "Someone as introverted as Dipper showing me somewhere so quiet and secret... Or that could be wishful thinking. He probably just wanted to talk about that insect project he and Doctor Pines are doing. He's not into you like that."

The blond girl swallowed her current bite of food while twiddling with her hair, trying not to let Dipper look at her face. "Love is just a psychological tool people use to get something for nothing. Only gullible idiots like Mabel actually believe in things like that and Dipper deserves better then to be manipulated like that. It's better we just stay friends... right?"

Dipper meanwhile had been eating his sandwich in quiet contemplation, content to let his mind across the silent meadow. The boy enjoyed rare times where he could simply get away from it all. At times like this, he could feel the knot that interacting with people built in his stomach unwind.

"Well, interacting with most people." Dipper thought to himself, owing credit to the small circle of people he felt completely comfortable around: Great Uncle Ford, whose guidance he treasured every second of, Wendy Courdy, who had become a firm and steady friend with the complete passing of Dipper's affection for her, Grunkle Stan, whose hardened facade of lies had slowly come down over the first summer to reveal someone Dipper could trust implicitly, and...

"Pacifica!?” Dipper thought to himself in sudden confusion. He'd expected to wandering mind to have saved his beloved twin sister Mabel as the last but not least entry on his list of people he felt comfortable around, but to his own surprise his thoughts drifted to the blond girl besides him.

"I feel comfortable around Mabel... don't I?" Dipper thought to himself, a crease growing on his eyebrows as he pondered the question. However, the look through his memories was filtered through the recent pain and betrayal he'd felt from his sister, and he was troubled by how few actual reasons he was finding to put trust in his twin.

"I mean, would I have brought her here?" He thought to himself involuntarily even though he knew the answer was no. "She wouldn't appreciate somewhere like this... Just like she doesn't appreciate the opportunity I had to take or the things I did for her."

Surprised at how cold a turn his own thoughts had taken, Dipper turned to look at Pacifica in an attempt to focus on anything around him. He brought his eyes to her just as she was fiddling with her hair, and abruptly caused Dipper's heart to skip a beat.

"She's really cute." Dipper thought to himself, before abruptly trying to crush that thought and remain composed. "Don't go there Dipper. If you start feeling this way about her, things will get
weird, you'll get all sweaty, make a huge mistake, and ruin things with a really good friend who
shares a lot of your interests. Don't get aggressive, just stay friends...

The two were now both trying to look at anything but each other, carefully sliding their hands away
from the other's on the blanket for fear of accidentally intertwining their fingers. They simply sat next
to each other, trying to stay focused on their sandwiches.

While all that was going on, Mabel had led her friends to the forest lair of the Manotaurs, confident
that her monster friends would be aware of something worth looking into. "They're actually really
nice once they open up about their feelings." Mabel explained while standing at the entrance to their
home, waiting for someone to greet them. When no one came after several minutes however, the
three girls frowned with concern and tentatively stepped inside.

"Uhhh, guys? It's me, Mabel! Remember, we met during the end of the world, knitted sweaters,
drove a big robot? Anyone home?" She called out while walking about the man cave. It was mess
inside, but more importantly, it was empty and silent. "Well, I suppose we found our mystery."

"And I found a clue!" Grenda yelled out, having been the first to spot a large hole in the wall of the
cavern, a massive gap blasted to the floor with tracks indicating a great deal of foot traffic went
through it.

Mabel went up to the gap and ran her fingers over the smelted edge of the rock. "Feels like... magic.
Hot magic." She concluded with a serious look on her face. The three girls proceeded to follow the
trail of devastation into the woods, a wide dragging path of uprooted soil and trampled, ripped up
undergrowth.

The trail wove a winding path deeper into the forest, though Mabel remained confident she could
follow the obvious path backwards to avoid getting lost. The path gradually led to the heart of the
forest, where the group of girls made a strange discovery: A wrought iron building assembled in the
middle of the forest, the kind of old timey mine looking building Mabel had imagined Old Man
McGucket lived in prior to discovering the heartbreaking truth about him.

The rough trail led directly to a large, vertical shudder door closing one side of the building, that
proved to be locked when Grenda attempted to throw it open. With that avenue closed, the three
instead walked through the a more normal though short regular door on the other side of the building
wall.

Through the door was a surprisingly grungy looking small waiting room, with bolted down chairs
against the wall and a limply panning fan plugged in nearby. The reception desk against the far wall
was staffed by what looked like a very tall human in a trench coat and wide brimmed hat.

"Hello, and welcome to the Freemana Crystal Exchange. Please draw a number and take a..." The
employee began speaking in a bored tone, not looking up from his magazine, but as soon as his eyes
flitted over the newcomers his tone of voice abruptly became more active and panicked. "Actually,
uh, look at the time, turns out we're closed! Please come back at between the hours of..."

The act ended when Mabel, having grown tall enough to reach over the counter during her few years
away from town, simply walked up and pushed the tall figure over, resulting in half a dozen gnomes
topping down from their improvised costume. "So, still using the zombie teenager disguise to prey
on little girls?" Mabel asked with a sharp tone.

"No no look, Mabel, we've gone legit!" Jeff the Gnome began to speak rapidly after climbing to the
top of the pile. "I'm got all of us jobs here at this mine so we could earn an honest living, then use it
to pay a queen to mate with all of us!" When this only intensified Mabel's glare, he held his hands in
front of his face in a gesture begging for mercy. "Please, you wouldn't kick an endangered species, would you?"

Mabel snorted in response to his plea. "What do you mean, endangered? There's like, a million of you little creeps!"

"Not since Bill happened." Jeff replied, and Mabel felt her righteous anger deflate inside her, fear of more guilt building in her throat. "That maniac and his goons took to playing darts during that crazy party of theirs. We were the darts, and the flaming maw of an all devouring horror from beyond time was the dartboard." He explained, while giving his red cap a little, regretful rub. "We haven't taken a queen since, what with our numbers being so low. We were on the verge of saving enough money, then all the mine worker gnomes got replaced by those brutes and I'm the only one getting a check."

"You mean the manotaurs? They work here now?" Mabel asked, before throwing her eyes all over the office. "What is this place, anyway?"

"They're a bunch of small, winged freaks calling themselves the Freemana Independent Mining Concern, showed up about a year ago and set this place up under your brother's nose." Jeff explained. "Thing is though, nobody and I mean nobody had ever heard of them up until now. Either they were hiding real low until Bill Cipher flushed them out, or they rode in with that guy. They're nasty enough to be his friends."

"Are these more of those horrible flying eyeballs that turn people to stone!?" Grenda asked up suddenly. "My neighbor still walks funny after he got was free from that."

"Nah, they're normal looking human fellas, just with wings and pointy hair," Jeff explained. "The training video they had me watch was something about unused magic coalescence being a harvestable resource for magical communication, but between you and me, they seem like they want to run this place under the radar. I know they're digging stuff up here, but I have no idea where it goes when the day's work is over."

"What about the manotaurs?" Mabel insisted to know.

"Right, those smelly jerks." Jeff spat. "They put us all out of work is what they did. They're not even taking money for their work, just weird vials of potion." Then, he got a sly look on his face. "Hey, what are you up to around here anyway? You trying to shut this place down?"

"All I want is the truth, where can I talk to the fairies or whatever who run this place?" Mabel replied, causing Jeff to grin widely before digging around under his desk.

"You'll want to go through the cargo door into the mines, they're all down there overseeing the work during the day. This office behind me is empty right now, all the paperwork happens when the work is done." He explained while rummaging about, throwing crumpled paper, small jewels and a rubber duck out behind him. "I just schedule meetings and take orders during the day."

Finally, he climbed up to the desk on the back of another gnome, key in hand. "Hey, break a leg down there, preferably one with a hoof on the end." Jeff wished well as he handed off the key. Then, he leaned an elbow on the desk and tried to shot the three a confident smile. "So, when this all over, anyone want to hit the deep woods? Mushrooms are on me."

A moment later, Jeff went flying through the glass window that provided the waiting room with a small amount of light. A moment later, Mabel, Grenda and Candy walked out the nearby door, passing by the downed gnome picking glass from his spinal region. "That loses a lot of impact when you walk by right after." Candy remarked as the three shuffled over to unlock the larger door.
Behind it lay a dark, stuffy room, where the walls were stuffed to the brim with shelves and racks of mining equipment while a mining cart sat on a set of rails leading into a dark depth.

More concerning was the fact a guard was present, a very small elf like figure bearing gossamer wings. They were perched upon a wall mounted oil lantern, but fortunately seemed to be asleep on the job, lazing about on the metal pole connecting the light source to the wall.

Mabel put her finger over her grinning lips, indicating for her friends to move silently. The three tip toed through the room, trying to get a closer look at the supplies, but disaster occurred when Grenda bumped into a storage unit of pickaxes, resulting in it tumbling from its spots on the wall.

The mining tools scattered across the ground with a raining clang of metal while the container itself tilted over into the one next to it, setting off a clattering chain reaction of collapsing containers and falling mining gear. The three girls stood shock still as the deafening cacophony rang out around them, only daring to breathe again when a few seconds of silence reigned.

Miraculously, the guard was still asleep after the raucous noise, and so with extreme trepidation Mabel took one step forward, only to bring her foot down a flaky, brittle ball of earth and dirt, which crackled apart with a soft noise underneath her foot.

The girls glanced up at the guard, who hadn't been roused from his slumber. "Okay girls," Mabel whispered as softly as possible. "Grab some of the safety gear."

They had large amount to choose from, so within moments the three were all wearing mining helmets and stuffed to the pockets with bits and tools. Now fully equipped, Mabel turned towards the darkness fed by the rail track, and clicked on the flashlight built into her helmet.

"Huh, what was that!? Did someone just turn on the light on one of those mining helmets, in the process of stealing it!?” The pixie guard was abruptly roused from his lazing, wings beginning to beat into action while eyes widened at the intruders.

"OH COME ON, THAT WAKES YOU UP!?” Mabel screams in frustration as her sneaky entrance finally comes to an end.

"Come on Mabes!” Grenda called out, having positioned herself behind the mining cart that Candy had already gotten inside. Mabel hoped in as well while the strong one of the group got the cart rolling, slowly building up speed while the angry guard buzzed overhead like a wasp. Grenda jumped in herself as the front two wheels slipped over the downward incline, and soon the three were being carried under the earth through the power of gravity.

"Multi-track drifting!” Candy yelled while rocking the sides of the cart, causing the wheels to spark against the rusty metal as the three raced into the unknown depths.

Back in the town of Gravity Falls Dipper was being led through the streets by Pacifica, who had elected to show him somewhere nice in return after their picnic had ended. As they walked through the town, Dipper was consistently greeted warmly by the passing townsfolk, with even the local officers Blubs and Durland giving him a top of the morning, at which point Dipper actually came to a stop to converse with them.

"Good morning sheriff, deputy." Dipper addressed. "Everything, you know, safe around here?"

"Safe as can be, Dipper, safe as can be, especially with you around to keep the weirdness in check.” Blubs responded. "Kid, are you sure we can't interest you in those detective academy booklets? You'd make an upstanding member of law enforcement!"
"Sorry guys, not really my calling." Dipper responded, closing his eyes and rubbing the back of his head with his hand. "Anyways, I'm a little busy right now, talk to you guys later."

"Alright, you kids stay out of trouble!" Durland called in a friendly tone as they continued their patrol. Once they were well out of sight, Dipper pulled a small notepad out of his pocket and scribbled a little on it.

"Dipper, I thought you said no work today." Pacifica replied lightly.

"Just a quick note taking." He replied, pocketing the tools soon after. "Pacifica, have you noticed people around town getting smarter?" he asked abruptly.

The girl arched at eyebrow at this question and looked back at Dipper with an incredulous face. It took her a moment, but she eventually responded with "Why yes Dipper, the town of Gravity Falls has transformed into a shinning beacon of wisdom and enlightenment since you have blessed it with your arrival."

Her tone was bitingly sarcastic, and the statement was accompanied by a gesturing sweep of the block, upon which was Manly Dan attempting to get a kitten out of a tree by hacking it down with an ax while the worried little girl stood on the other side of the trunk, some resident they didn't know was running out of a shop with a cart full of 50% off doorknobs yelling "IT'S FREE MONEY" and Tad Strange attempted to order egg cream from a man with an ice cream cart.

Dipper couldn't help but let out a small chuckle at this. "I mean, you're not wrong, but the reason everyone in this town is so out of it is because of all the years they'd been having their minds erased by the Society of the Blind Eye. Me and Grunkle Ford are always looking to observe how they recover from the deep rooted mental decay now that they're no longer suffering regular memory wipes."

With a more serious expression, Dipper looked down the street at the departing police car. "The cops are some of the more important people to keep an eye on. Grunkle Ford extrapolated that they've been memory wiped the most since the a lot of people would respond to a supernatural disturbance by calling the police, so they get caught up in a lot of Blind Eye secret keeping. As the most severe cases, they're very important to understanding the nature of the mental decay early versions of the memory gun caused."

Pacifica was listening intently during Dipper's explanation, but at the end couldn't help but add in with "That explains a lot about law enforcement in this town."

"Yeah, that's one way to put it." Dipper responded idly to her sarcasm. Then, he looked back at her with an apologetic look on his face. "Sorry, I know this was supposed to be a fun day away from work..."

"Hey, don't worry about that Dipper. I appreciate you for who you are, and part of who you are is a smart guy who is really enthusiastic about the things he works on. You don't have to change who you are around me." Pacifica cut in. "Anyways, enough standing around and talking, let's get moving."

"Yeah, let's keep going." Dipper responded, but stood behind for a moment when Pacifica began to step away. "Hey Paz?" He spoke up, causing her to stop. "I appreciate you for you are to. I know you're kinda insecure about being a good person or not, but I think you are. You just weren't given the opportunity to be yourself very often."

The blond was still for a moment, causing Dipper to worry he'd said something wrong, but soon
enough she glanced back at him, a sardonic expression on her face. "Paz?" she questioned in a deadpan tone.

Dipper immediately became flustered and defensive. "It was just, you know, a friendly nickname idea. I mean if you want to get technical you never call me by my real name..."

Pacifica burst into laughter at this, as despite her best efforts Dipper's awkward bouts were always a little comical. "Hey, don't feel bad, I kinda like it. But we can talk about this later, if we linger around for too long we won't have enough time where we're going."

The human carrying minecart rocketed into the depths, running down a winding tunnel off which small, unstable tunnels branched short distances. The deeper the three got, the more often they could see small specks of light stuck into the dirt and floating like dust. Also flying by were the angry faces of more winged guards.

Finally the ride came to an end, with the cart slamming into the the stopping pad at the end of the rail, causing all three girls to be hurled from the cart at high speeds. A second after the impact, a softly glowing winged human just like the surface guard flew out of the bit in a haste.

Mabel was yelling with excitement before she landed on something soft but scratchy, almost sinking into the unknown substance before a deep, booming voice revealed the nature of her landing pad.

"Hey! Who threw this piece of paper at my backhair!" A manotaur yelled out while turning around. This elicited giggles from Mabel.

"It's me you big silly, not a piece of paper!" When the creature's large hands plucked her free, she threw open her hands in gesture of introduction while adding "Mabel, remember? We met during the apocalypse, talked about our feelings, knitted sweaters..."

"Oh, Mabel, of course!" He answered in a softer tone while placing her on the ground. "These sweaters have actually come in very handy, as we labor down here in the cold, dank depths." He said, while pointing a massive finger to a different manotaur, wearing a large homemade sweater as he split stones with a pick-ax, taking a brief stop to smile and wave to Mabel

"I'm sure you remember my friends from the giant robot, right? Candy, Grenda, both of you alright?" She called out, quickly getting affirmative responses from the two.

"All good! Grenda don't crack!"

"I am fine as well, having missed this large crystal by 2.6 centimeters with my spine."

Having turned around to spot her friends, Mabel was finally able to take a wide look around the bottom of the mine shaft. It was much like you'd expect, a wide, smooth cave carved out of the ground, but from all surfaces poked crystal masses, strange shapes like glass with glowing blue light coming from within. The faint blue light was added by wall mounted torches to provide rather good lighting for a mine.

"What is going on here, anyway?" Mabel finally asked, turning back to the manotaur. "We came by the man cave in the forest and were worried you guys had all been kidnapped, given the hole in the wall."

"No, that was simply practice, practice for our new job as MANLY MINERS!" The large monster explained, before throwing a fist at the earthen walls. "Even the ground itself must yield before our muscles!"
"Right, great. Well, that solves our mystery at least." Mabel responded, putting her fist under her chin in contemplation of the anticlimactic ending to the plot she'd uncovered. "Say, can you tell us anything about the people running this place?"

"They're brave pixie miners who have come from far away to fight for the manly cause of INDEPENDENCE!" The manotaur explained, flexing his muscles at the emphasized word. "These crystals are what happens when magic energy hangs around and doesn't get used, combining together in a collectible form that can be shaped into whatever is needed! The kingdom of Pixtopia unfairly regulates the harvest and sale of these crystals, but the Freemana Independent Mining Concern is running wild on their rules and regulations!"

"And apparently they pay you in potions?" Mabel asked skeptically.

"Yes! Despite our training devoted lifestyle, we were still too weak to defeat Bill Cipher and his forces of evil during his invasion, in honorable hand to hand wrestling!" He yelled with despair in his voice, while retrieving a syringe filled with glowing green juice from a nearby lunchbox. "This magic potion triggers muscle growth even in the most swole of manotaurs, pushing us to even greater heights!" He screamed while jamming the sharp end into a bulging arm artery.

"Ooooh, magic drugs! Can I get a hit?" Mabel asked, put right after saying this the hum of flying insects and the shouting of high pitched, scratchy voices began to fill the room, coming from the mine shaft.

"Intruders in the mines! Take them down now!" They were shouting as the slightly less than a dozen pixie guards surged into cavern. On impulse, Mabel picked up a nearby shovel and slammed it into a pixie coming at her with a whip, splattering him against the broad metal head of the weapon.

"Get back to work!" A different one yelled, snapping at an un-involved manotaur with his glowing whip, and on contact, the worker abruptly seized up as an electrical current caused his massive muscles to cramp up agonizingly. As he fell to the floor in withering pile, the flying guard looked down at his own weapon with contemplation. "Maybe this isn't the best way of maximizing efficiency..."

His musing was interrupted when Candy knocked him out of the sky with a well thrown rock, resulting in a nearby Manotaur screaming "YEAH! WORKPLACE VIOLENCE!" and jumping into the fray.

Soon enough, the mine pit was a messy melee of manotaurs throwing tools and rocks at the faster but weaker pixie guards, who counterattacked with whips and batons. The three humans were lost in the fighting, crawling along the ground to stay hidden among the massive workers.

"Okay girls, mystery over, time to leave!" Mabel declared as they tried to get back to the mine cart. Upon reaching it though, they quickly realized a problem.

"Mabel, if you ask me to push this cart up for you I can try, but I can't guarantee we'll get very far." Grenda remarked. "I'm not a huge, steroid abusing monster after all. Sometimes I wish I was, but I'm not."

"No, you're right, we can't escape uphill in this thing!" Mabel groaned in exasperation, the three now hiding behind the cart to avoid notice. "Come on Mabel, what would Dipper do in this situation!?"

"He'd have thought things out better before just blindly charging in." She thought to herself sourly, but forced herself into a more positive train of thought. "He'd put together stuff established earlier in the adventure that he knows all about to conclude things on a logical and thematically appropriate
"Here goes nothing..." she said, while traveling over the ground towards the spike and attempting to snap the end off.

"Hands off the company property!" Came a high pitched yell, as a pixie guard charged right at Mabel. The crystal bent surprisingly easily in her hands and came free, giving her enough time to through a punch at the flying menace. The winged humanoid dodged it, swooping low to try and wretch the crystal free with surprising strength. "If I lose that, it comes out of my paycheck!"

"Well I need it for... stuff!" Mabel yelled back, the two struggling back and forth for a few moments before the human girl resorted to a wild punch in the face with her left hand, knocking the light weight body of the flying creature away from her with a dusty crunch.

Mabel ran back, gesturing for her friends to jump in the cart before joining them. She looked down at the crystal of raw magic in her hands, fingers feeling tingly, unsure of how to proceed.

The pixie guard meanwhile, had slammed into one of the wall mounted torches keeping this place illuminated, knocking it free with another bone crunching impact for the hollow boned humanoid. The still lit torch hit the ground of mine floor, rolling with the slight incline of the shaft towards a dangerously placed box of blasting equipment.

"Alakazam, presto-chango, alli-alli-oxenfree, please... COME ON CART, FLY LIKE THE WINDS!" Mabel was going through magic words to try and use the magic crystal, but it was with the final angered yelling that something began to happen. Almost as if responding to Mabel's imagination, whispy, dusty light began to flow out of the crystal in two streams, both of which coalesced on the sides of the cart into white feathered wings, which abruptly sprung into action, propelling the industrial tool uphill at breakneck speeds!

"WOO-HOO! NOW THIS IS MAGIC!" Mabel cheered, revealing her ability to draw mana from a stone. She didn't even notice right away the high speeds had slammed her and her friends into the back of the cart, but in a moment of thoughtfulness willed rainbow colored seat belts out of the stone for her and her friends.

"HOW DID YOU DO THAT MABEL!?!" Grenda yelled out of amazement and adrenaline.

"It just... responded to my imagination!" Mabel guessed. "I can't wait to show this to Dipper!"

"I am not sure if much will be left!" Candy remarked, as the crystal had indeed shrank since the first use, as the dusty light continued to flow out of the crystal in two streams, depleting like a gas tank.

"Don't worry, you saw the motherlode they had down, there will be plenty to go around!" Mabel replied confidently, putting her hands behind her head and leaning back to enjoy the ride. "We'll accomplish so much together using this, and it'll all be thanks to me!"

A moment later, at the bottom of the shaft the rolling torch had hit the blasting equipment, and in a hot second the wooden box caught fire, which ignited the fuses inside, resulting in one of the red sticks detonating and setting of a chain reaction, quickly consuming the bottom of the mine shaft in a thundering blast.

All three humans were startled by the massive noise echoing through the mine shaft, and peaked out of the back to look back into darkness. Even with their limited visibility up here, it was obvious the earth trail was collapsing behind them, the walls of fallen earth steadily gaining on them.

"FASTER FASTER FASTER!" Mabel turned around and yelled at the crystal, gripping it tight in
her hands. In response, more streams of light flowed out, both feeding the wings to make them beat faster and abruptly adding a rocket engine to the back which roared to life to add speed, and a wave of light which abruptly painted the mine cart red and added decals of flaming bunnies.

With the huge burst in speed, the mine cart slammed back into the equipment room in record time ahead of the collapse, and its three riders scrambled to get out of the building. They reached the outside just in time to watch the mining building collapse into the earth below it, splintering and shattering as the foundation gave way, scaring off birds for miles in every direction.

Eventually, the rumbling stopped, and the only sound left for miles was the sound of the three heavily panting teenagers, looking extremely disturbed and guilt stricken at what had happened. Mabel tried to crack a smile and remark that "Well, at least we still have..." only to notice the mana crystal had turned to dust upon holding up the hand it was in.

They were quiet for a few more minutes, with Grenda being the one to break the silence. "A wise man once told me 'There's no cops in the forest. We take this to our graves.' I propose we follow the advice of that wise, smelly man." While Candy nodded enthusiastically in agreement, Mabel simply gave the collapsed ruin worn out, regretful stare.

"Just another painful secret..."

Dipper, meanwhile, was trying to gently put a blue colored golf ball into an adorable miniature replica of an old timey mine, down at the Gravity Falls miniature golf course.

"You're gonna overshoot it with that posture, you're leaning to hard on the club and will put more energy then you mean to into the swing. You need a softer touch." Dipper gave Pacifica a friendly glare then swung anyway, and true to her word, the golf ball overshot the mining shaft entrance and was instead fell down a pipe leading to the civil war fort course, where it was launched out of a cannon into a pond with a humiliating plop sound. "Should've listened to the expert, Pines."

"I'm just surprised you still play this game, considering, well, you know..." Dipper responded with a bit of fluster, stepping back to give her the next swing.

"Lifetime membership means lifetime membership, no point in letting it go to waste," Pacifica explained while setting up her purple colored golf ball. "Besides, if I stayed away from every place I'd ever been threatened with death, I'd have had to skip down after... the incident."

Then, she lined her golf club up to make the hit Dipper had failed at, but abruptly picked it up and looked back at her opponent. "And I can already tell you're gearing up to apologize for the whole golf people thing, so I'm going to preemptively tell you not to worry about. You've apologized for it before and overwhelmingly made up for it."

Dipper was winded at having been cut off in such a manner, resorting to pulling his hat over his eyes and looking down. "You almost died Pacifica." he said softly.

"I was a cruel person who'd shown you no reason to feel any sympathy for me." Pacifica remarked offhandedly while going back to setting up her swing. "It's honestly kind of touching that you'd go so far to protect people you care about, and help them win at any cost." she explained, and a moment later, one perfect swing sent the ball right to its destination.

Dipper had been observing her technique as she lined up the put, working out how to replicate it exactly. When he stepped up, her mirrored her pose, readied his club, and was lined up for a perfect swing, and...
"Plus, a lot of girls like bad boys."

Dipper completely lost his footing as his knees gave out, turning his gentle tap into a wild swing that sent the ball flying into a little toy pirate ship floating in the middle of a water trap, smashing a hole in the side and sinking the vessel on the spot. He looked over at Pacifica, who couldn't help but giggle at his reaction.

"I'm... I'm really sorry Dipper. But you, your reaction to that..." She apologized in between laughs, though after a few moments, Dipper began giggling as well.

"Well, if that line was meant to imply I'm some kind of bad boy, that's the most bold face lie you've told yet!" Dipper shot back, walking to grab another blue golf ball from the small bag they'd come in as the laughing died down.

"Oh, I don't know about that. After all, Pacifica Northwest is no liar!" The blond girl responded. "You're kinda like... an intellectual bad boy, like a cross between a bad boy and a nerd." She continued while picking up the score sheet to update it. "Like, you're really smart and good at studying and researching, but you reject society's norms to pursue your ambition of learning about gnomes and ghosts instead of getting a normal job working in a hospital. You did things your way even when it was difficult and became really happy because of it."

After penciling down the last number she got up and walked closer to Dipper. "Plus you're a lot more ruthless and certain about your decisions and research, instead of constantly falling to your knees and screaming WHAT HAS SCIENCE DONEEEEEEE!" Then, after reaching their small collection of golfing equipment, she added "And you know what else you are?"

Dipper was actually getting a little sweaty under the polo shirt Pacifica had asked him to change into for their game of golf, while she had changed into an older version of her old golfing uniform. He really wasn't sure what direction this was going or what direction he WANTED it to go. "What else am I, Pacifica?"

"You're a whole 5 points higher then me on the golf score!" She declared teasingly, gathering up her half of the stuff and taking off towards the next hole down. "Catch up when you can, Pines!"

Dipper smiled as relief flowed over his body, bit did scowl at little at how badly he was doing at mini-golf. When she wasn't be sabotaged by nationalistic living golf balls, she lived up to her reputation at the game.

And just as quickly, Dipper was dour as his memories of the Liliputians washed over him. As petty and bloodthirsty as they had been, he couldn't help but feel a fleeting sense of sympathy for them.

After all, Bill Cipher's interpretation of their beloved game was a cruel, brutal and ultimately genocidal affair he wouldn't wish on anyone. His and Ford's attempt to help the few survivors who had reached the Mystery Shack rebuild their race was one of the two's few complete failures, as despite their best efforts and the Liliputians' fast breeding rate the bottleneck effect had depleted their genetic diversity, and the remainder off the species was wiped out when winter eventually came around.

Dipper let out a sigh, realizing his focus had been completely disrupted by Pacifica's teasing and his own propensity for brooding. Glancing from side to side to make sure no one was watching, Dipper opted to run up and drop his golf ball directly down the most difficult shot on the little model, spitting his ball out right into a hole in one so he could catch up with Pacifica and continue the game.

By the time night had fallen over the town, both Pines Twins' days had come to an end. Mabel had
returned to the Shack first and was sulking over the day's events in the kitchen with a 2-liter bottle of soda and a little paper cup to pour drinks into, and a little while later Dipper returned home with Pacifica, the two laughing about something the blond girl had said as they came through the door. As soon as the two groups came into contact, the air turned awkward.

"H... Hey Mabel." Dipper asked, not sure what to say.

"Hey bro-bro." Mabel responded despondently before downing a cup of soda. "How'd your day go?"

"It was actually really good." Dipper replied, a bit of a pleased smile crossing his face. "Pacifica and I just... spent the day relaxing after all the craziness recently. How have you been doing?"

Mabel did perk up at Dipper's obvious happiness, but was airy and vague when she responded. "Oh, you know. It was okay. Caught up with Grenda and Candy."

"Oh, that's good." Dipper responded, the conversation sort of petering out. The boy let out an exaggerated yawn to try and get away from the tense air, saying "Well, I'm exhausted, I'll just, uh, head underground and get ready for bed. Goodnight Mabel, goodnight Pacifica." before ducking out to the vending machine elevator.

The two girls were left alone together now, and the air got even more awkward. Pacifica ended up being the first one to speak, making a nervous gulp before addressing Mabel in a tone that was partially bossy and partially nervous. "Mabel, look, we need to talk about things. I know we have problems between us but I want to put those aside and ask you about..."

"The answer is no." Mabel replied bluntly, downing another whole cup of soda. "Whatever your argument is going to be, I do not give you my blessing to date my brother and will not give you any advice on doing so."

Pacifica was taken aback at Mabel's words, flustered and angry at the same time. That hadn't necessarily been what Pacifica wanted to talk about, but she was prepared for the idea to come up. "Besides the fact that was not at all what I was going to ask about, what gives you the right to dictate who your brother can and can't date?"

"I say so because you're no good for him!" Mabel accused back. "You'll push him further and further into this crazy, dangerous world he's picked out for himself in an attempt to rebuild your stupid fortune, and one day that's going to get Dipper hurt!"

"The only person hurting Dipper around here is you, with your obnoxious, possessive and selfish personality!" Pacifica shot back. "If you had gotten your way like you always did Dipper would be living his entire life in pain, far away from his dreams and his passions, suffocating in drudgery and stuck with you!"

"You two compliment each others worst personality traits!" Mabel argued back, becoming defensive. "And I think I know a little bit more about human relationships then some stuck up rich girl raised to manipulate people all her life!"

"That's a lot of talk coming from someone with no healthy relationships." Pacifica cut back, causing Mabel to visibly wince at the comment. "Forget this, talking to you is pointless." she added coldly before striding out of the room, leaving Mabel sitting alone under the lone kitchen
It had been several days since Mabel's adventure to the crystal mine, and she'd been in a funk for the entire time period. The days passed going about town to revisit familiar sights alongside some combination of Grunkle Stan, Candy or Grenda. Though she'd genuinely had fun during her times on the town, the newfound reality of her emotional distance from Dipper ate at her all the while.

It was now the beginning of afternoon on a day where Mabel had nothing really planned at the moment, and was just hanging about in her bedroom. She was roused from her careful examination of her recently raided knitting supplies by a knock at the door. "Come in!" She greeted cheerfully, and her mouth widened into genuine happiness when her twin brother opened the portal. Not even the fact that Pacifica Northwest was behind him could dampen her enthusiasm. "Hey bro-bro, what's up?"

"Hey Mabel." Dipper responded a little awkwardly. He shuffled into the room wearing one of his work outfits, a long multi-pocketed zipped closed vest over pocket laden cargo pants that were usually stuffed to the seams, the whole outfit inspired by Grunkle Ford. Pacifica was dressed with less carrying space but still practical, a women's polo shirt trucked into belt tightened, durable pants, both colored her usual mix of white and light purple.

Despite their argument with each other following the three's victorious return from the fight against Bill Cipher, the twins were still on speaking terms. They shared meals, made small talk, and Dipper had even joined Mabel in town a few times when he wasn't busy. There simply existed an emotional gap between the two that both were uncomfortable talking about. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to help us out with an expedition we're doing today?"

Mabel gasped with surprise, but was quickly on her feet, bouncing on her heels in front of the two. "Of course I'll help you Dipper! It'll be just like old times, solving mysteries together! So, what's the situation we're dealing with!?"

"Well, Grunkle Ford was going through his backlog of relaxing, non-threatening experiments and he found a geological survey of the town, which doesn't match the older surveys he collected before going into the portal. Based on the data he's collected, the town's rocky areas abruptly developed some kind of natural hot spring, even though none of the data he had collected indicated one was forming and thirty years is a blink of the eye in geological terms. He traced the flow of mineral rich water to an area covered in rock paintings we've always wanted to document." He explained at length, then smiled at Mabel while rubbing the back of his neck. "I figured you could help out by using those art skills to copy down the rock paintings while me and Pacifica investigate any water changes in the area."

"I'd be happy to! It sounds like a fun little trip!" Mabel exclaimed, before rushing towards the closet. "In fact, I've got the perfect thing for this!" She jumped all the way inside the wooden storage space, slamming the door behind her and rummaging about to the mystified looks of the two outside. Moments later, she fell out in a massive pile of clothes, most of them homemade.

Mabel soon burst out of the clothes pile, wearing her most ambitious creation yet, something she'd been working on since her disastrous adventure in the mine in an attempt to be more like Grunkle Ford. It was an imitation of his longcoat, but pieced together from Mabel's assorted knitting material and and few cannibalized sweaters she no longer fit into. From these disparate components and Mabel's own creative nature came a genuine Frankenstein's Monster of fashion: a knee length exploding rainbow of colors and designs, all roughly patched together in the shape of a coat with no
regard for color coding or visual composition, whose inner linings were ripped out for more pocket space. "What do you guys think? It's my own Mabel style science suit!" She asked, while doing a little twirl that showed the patchwork nature extended in 360 degrees. Upon further inspection, she managed to add mustard colored striped pants and an undershirt that was decorated with long rows of Mystery Shack brand question marks underneath it.

Pacifica's mouth was wide open, gurning with a mix of shock, incomprehension, disgust and disbelief as the outfit offended every bit of fashion knowledge she'd accumulated over her high society life. A confused gurgle came out of her throat as she tried to voice a reply, but Dipper cut her off by speaking comprehensibly first. "It's very you, Mabel." He said with a sincere grin, getting a little warm hearted over his sister's old wackiness. "I don't think anyone else in the world could pull it off, but I like it." Dipper was silent for a moment longer than was comfortable. "Well, glad to have you along then. Get all your sketching supplies together and anything else you want to bring, me and Pacifica still have some preparing to do." He finished, before heading downstairs to finalize preparations.

Pacifica followed him a moment later, after she composed herself and shot Mabel a glare, which the Pine Twin responded to with a satisfied smile. "That's right you bleach blond stereotype, the Mystery Twins are back in action!" The Pines remarked, before traveling over to his piles of luggage she still hadn't fully unpacked. Unlocking a smaller, metal box lined with the sparkly black fluff padding, Mabel was grinning ear to ear as the old grappling hook came into view.

About twenty minutes later, Mabel exited the Shack's back door, heading towards a ramshackle garage assembled behind the building. As time had gone on and Dipper had grown up in Gravity Falls, Grunkle Ford had acquired a surprisingly spacious inconspicuous white panel van that was stored back here, with a sizable science lab put in back, accessible from two sideways doors on the flanks and a pair of back doors. Mabel had been told once or twice during their corresponding that Dipper had been learning to drive out in Gravity Falls, but never had a picture of the vehicle sent to her or described. As a result, she was floored when it rolled out of the garage and into sight.

"Ah, good timing Mabel, we just need to load the last couple of things in and we'll be ready to go." Dipper remarked, getting out of the van but frowning and standing still when he saw his sister rooted in place. "What's wrong Mabel?"

The female twin was standing their with a look of shock, personal offense and bursting laughter. "Dipper, you... you're..." She breathed out, slowly being consumed by laughter. "You're driving a freaking diddler van!"

Dipper frowned and got a little huffy over his twin's statement. "It's a practical vehicle Mabel. We need to be able to move a lot of supplies to the field and carry samples back here. It has a very roomy back compartment that meets those needs."

"You lure those samples into the van with a bag of candy?" Mabel asked teasingly, leaning forward on her heels while making the joke. After a moment though, her smile became a bit weak when Dipper wasn't laughing with her. Now more cautious, she began to step forward towards the passenger door. "Uh, well, never mind, let's get going on the ro... oh my god you even tinted the windows!"

Soon enough the three of them were on the road, Dipper and Pacifica riding up front while Mabel took one of the driver's cabin's back seats, an aftermarket modification forced in by the vehicle's owners in hopes that the entire Pines family could ride together one day. From her somewhat cramped seating, Mabel spoke up after they'd been driving a short distance. "So, what's so special about this find we're investigating?"
"It's nothing too big honestly, this is should be a simple little check out." Dipper replied. "It's entirely possible this is perfectly normal geothermal activity, but anything related to water is worth looking into, seeing how issues related to it are some of the most preeminent of the modern world." He stopped the van for a moment, as they were at a red light, and had a thought while they waited for it to change. "Hmm, maybe once Bill is dead, it will be possible to use the portal to acquire potable water from other dimensions..."

Mabel was a little unnerved at Dipper's new musing. "I thought you guys were going to, you know, dismantle that portal when we didn't need it anymore? Go back to that interdimensional viewing you'd rejiggered it for, you know, without the risk of falling through?"

"Believe me Mabel, numerous safety features were implemented before we restructured the viewer back into the portal." Dipper replied. "With how useful the device has been against Bill, and the extremely high and stable performance we're seeing from it, we're probably going to keep it around and find new applications for the technology when this threat has passed. In particular, I think it'd be interesting to find alternate dimensions that we can siphon fresh water out of to alleviate Earth's water needs!"

Mabel blanched a little at this. "You mean, you'd turn the portal into a pump!?" she asked, a wary tone to her voice.

"Of course not Mabel, the original portal is completely structurally unsuitable to do that kind of job, water pressure would be a problem and it'd spill water all over the floor." Dipper explained, a bit of snark in his voice. "We'd have to build new portal devices."

The girl in the backseat was simply taken aback by this declaration. She flashed back to all the negative feelings the underground machine had caused her: fear of the gravity anomalies, conflict as she ignored Dipper's trust, ever increasing regret after she gave the rift it spawned to Bill Cipher, sympathy she felt for Grunkle Stan and a low seed of resentment she felt for the man who came through it. She didn't know how to process the idea Dipper was enthusiastic about building more of them.

Pacifica was the next to speak up, turning her head around the passenger seat to observe Mabel's expression while her own was very satisfied at the other girl's uncertainty. "Just imagine it Mabel. Your brother overseeing a massive facility where gallons of fresh water are pumped in from other worlds. It'll take a lot of time and a lot of work to make it happen, but I completely believe he can do it. I figured you'd be really happy about the idea, what with coming from California and all."

"But... but what about all the damage the portal can do? The gravity changes, the monsters from the other worlds?" Mabel asked, struggling with her own regret.

"No form of achievement comes without risk, but with careful research we can create safety systems which enables responsible use. You can't stop working on things simply because solvable problems arise." Dipper remarked back to her. "If everyone thought like that, we wouldn't have widespread satellite technology because of the Challenger disaster, we wouldn't have airplanes because of the death of Thomas Selfridge, we wouldn't have radioactive power because of the radiation poisoning the Curie family suffered and we wouldn't have boats because someone slipped off one and drowned." He was speaking passionately now, with a characteristic enthusiasm that Mabel had only rarely seen back when they were children.

Unsure what else to say in response, Mabel sank into her seat, folding up inside her long, colorful coat.

The rest of the drive passed in mostly silence, as Dipper quieted down with a smidgen of
embarrassment after his statements about scientific achievement. Small attempts to break the ice had been bandied back and forth after that, but none succeeded. Eventually, the vehicle came to a stop at clearing before an elevating rocky foothill. The three stepped out, and Dipper began unloading supplies from the back of the van. "I presume you brought all the needed art supplies Mabel, so here's the rest of the stuff you'll need." He explained before handing off a steady stream of supplies that his sister's homemade coat managed to swallow completely. "Contact radio, emergency flare gun, dusk mask, first aid kit, trail mix, Grunkle Ford's emergency medical stick, inflatable raft, flashlight..." this continued for about half a minute, until Dipper reached deeper into the van and struggled with an obtuse case, but immediately thought better of handing it off to Mabel when he realized what he was holding "...Actually, let's keep this in the van."

"Whatcha got in there?" Mabel asked, leaning over her brother's shoulder to get a good look. With a shrug, Dipper simply popped the case open to show her, revealing the container to be a lined transport case for a smooth, silver metal, two handed assembly with a nozzle on the end and a liquid tank receptacle on the top, with two matching containers also held in the box. The two glass cylinders held a soft, clear liquid inside them while being adorned with warning labels. "It's a stone cutting acid jet." Dipper explained, before closing the box up and putting it back in the van. "We could use it to cut the paintings out of the rock and haul the entire block back to the lab, but given that these things are likely cursed we're going to play it safe and just have you draw them."

Soon enough, the three had set off into the rocky hills, moving slowly but steadily through the height variable terrain. Dipper led Mabel and Pacifica through the series of rock paintings he needed copies of, stopping numerous times to scrape samples of stone and dust into small jars. Her eyes were wide as she took in the simple but beautiful works of art that adorned the stones, depicting patterns of the stars, human figures performing various actions in strange, primordial environments, and exaggerated, mythic figures of beasts. Eventually, they came to a cave mouth a few feet away from the latest find and Dipper began to set up equipment, as well as a collapsible table and a few folding chairs to use them on. "This will be our base of operations for the day. You can take breaks in-between drawings here, and I'll anchor our guiding rope to this spot." He explained, applying some of Grunkle Ford's nuclear attraction ultra glue to the ground before sticking a metal rod in it, firmly rooting in place, then tying off a rope to it.

"You got it bro-bro! I'll keep this place nice and secure, trust me! And I'll have your drawings ready for you as soon as you come back!" Mabel replied energetically, whipping out her craftsmen's pencils and paper pad and holding them up.

"Thank you Mabel, I'm sure you will." Dipper now had a long section of rope tied around his waist, other end connected to the metal rod, and Pacifica had done the same. His smile towards his sister was sincere, but awkward and a little cracked. He put a hand on the edge of his hat, seemingly wanting to say something, but couldn't find any words and simply descended into the cave, Pacifica right behind him, poignantly ignoring Mabel. Soon enough, the female twin was all alone in the basic base camp, and her smile withered. After only a moment of mopping however, she got a determined frown and took a deep, calming breath.

"Okay girl, this is your big chance to get Dipper back!" She spoke to herself. "I'm going to give him the best, most accurate traced artwork he's ever seen! Our twin bond will reestablish, Dipper will be back in my life, and maybe I can start protecting him from Pacifica..." Rather than sink into a trail of thought though, Mabel shook her head before spinning about to run towards a painting of stars, wool coat trailing behind her. "Time to get to work!" she declared, unaware she was soon going to being watched.

Deeper into the treeline, by the road the three had driven down to get to the site, time and space were
briefly cut apart in a neat, straight vertical line, splitting into a stable pathway through which a figure could step. Heavy boots stomped on the grass underfoot, as the fairly short but stocky figure was covered from head to toe in over sized hunter's garments, pocket covered and baggy clothes in a mix of dark green and earth tones. The face of the figure was obscured with an equally camouflaging floppy hat and a black, mesh hood obscuring their face. After a brief examination of their surroundings, the figure hefted two objects, one to each hand: a pair of binoculars in the left hand, and a long, curved sword in the right. Then, they set off down the road.

Meanwhile, the two other explorers found the cave getting dark very quickly, resulting in Dipper activating a flashlight to maintain visibility. Even with the mechanical assistance however, the rock cavern seemed to be getting darker the deeper they went, the air thicker and the walls a little further away. Unknowingly, Dipper and Pacifica found themselves nudging closer to each other every time the drop of water or a crumbling underfoot rock mildly startled one of them. Neither of them commented on it, but very soon they were exploring the cave with free hands clasped together and bodies close to one another.

Despite this, neither of them were truly afraid of the place they were exploring, rather they were determined to uncover anything unusual. Pacifica was using an air sampler Grunkle Ford had built out of a handheld vacuum cleaner to sample the atmosphere for later study, while Dipper scraped up more stone samples as well bottling up drops of water pooling on the floor or dripping down the walls. The cave was becoming increasingly damp the deeper they dove into it, though nothing resembling a stream or water flow existed. Rather, the water simply seemed to be in the air.

Dipper and Pacifica worked meticulously, collecting samples of water, rock, and everything else from every surface. Each sample was bustled into an empty test tube, which were distinguished by strips of tape and extensive documentation from the end of a black sharpie. They worked quietly, for the most part, Dipper finding the silence sort of comfortable to conduct his investigation in. He didn't feel nervous or embarrassed or defensive about his exploring his interests when Pacifica was around, though he wasn't sure if she enjoyed the silence as much as he did and felt obligated to talk about something to lighten the mood in the dark cave.

Dipper struggled to find a topic of conversation to spit out of his compacted throat, when to his relief Pacifica spoke up while removing her hand from his grip, with a motion suggesting she hadn't even realized she'd been holding his. "Uh, sorry about that. No offense, but the air in this cave is making both our hands clammy."

As the blond remarked this, she shook the hand about to send the moisture flying. Dipper, flustered, pulled his hat down with his other, equally sweaty hand, and turned his focus towards a rock wall.

"If there is an undiscovered water source around here, something must be turning into mist up here, since I don't see a flow source." He chattered somewhat nervously. "Either that, or atmospheric conditions are blowing air moisture into this cavern, which condenses it..."

"What are we going to do if we do find a water source down here?" Pacifica asked, also trying to not look directly at Dipper. "Pass it off to the infinite wisdom of the five people Mayor Cutebiker could trick into staffing his Water Resources Department branch?"

"Perhaps we'll have to. We'll need to examine them first, see if any kind of life forms down there are unique to this particular pool of underground water, provided there actually is one of course." Dipper replied. "Given how isolated this mountain range is, and how deep in a potential water source would need to be based on the fact we're only finding mist so far, the organisms down there could be completely unique, genetically incompatible with creatures from anywhere else in the world! And that's not even getting into the influence of an alien spaceship slamming through the mountain range might have had..."
"Completely unique lifeforms..." Pacifica chewed on the idea for a minute, really evaluating how she felt about the idea. "Well, if that's the case, we'd have to protect them, right? Make sure they're fully understood and discovered instead of being lost forever?"

"Right, gotta put them in the Journal so the knowledge is never truly lost." Dipper affirmed. "Of course, we are in Gravity Falls. A unique pool of blind cave fish is so normal a discovery that it becomes improbable. Allopatric speciation is crazy enough before you factor in literal magic and spaceships."

"Yeah, I'm sure we'll be running from a hand obsessed spirit of revenge made out of melted cotton candy by the time today is over; That's how every trip you take me on ends." Pacifica remarked dryly, but smiled at Dipper nonetheless. "C'mon, let's get this place sampled."

After a half hour of thorough work, they came to the end of the linear cave and discovered its most peculiar feature: a rocky extension of the cave floor, rising up like a stalagmite, but without a tapering into a point at the end. Rather, the rock shape was roughly cylindrical in shape, like a pipe, and upon looking at it from above one realized it was even more like a pipe as it had a smooth cut opening at the top that ran down the rock into darkness. "That hardly seems natural." Dipper remarked, curiosity piqued, and he swiftly brought his tools to bear, scrapping off dust samples and collecting water droplets, while Pacifica picked up a nearby loose stone and dropped it into the black, listening for a moment until the sound of a rock hitting water could be heard.

"Well, there's definitely water down there." Pacifica observed, before somewhat sarcastically adding "That would explain where all this hair curling humidity is coming from." while making a futile attempt to straighten a strand of her blond hair, which had gotten a bit curly during the time she'd spent exploring the cave.

"Yes, but what's heating it enough for it to vaporize and rise up through here? Our geothermal activity perhaps?" Dipper mused, but as he looked back to Pacifica, his expression became one of abject terror as he threw a pointing hand up and yelled "PACIFICA, BEHIND YOU!"

Outside, Mabel had been hard at work copying the rock drawings, having just completed a pinpoint sketch of her second one. She was holding it rather intently in front of her face, tilting it about in an attempt to find meaning, even holding it upside down at one point. Unknown to her, Mabel was being watched from the woods just as intently as she was watching the rock painting her front of her, though instead of instruments of art, her observer was holding a long, metal instrument of war. While her watcher lay almost motionlessly in the forest grass, Mabel lowered her upside down drawing to compare it to the original.

It was then that she spotted it.

"Hey there little guy!" she crooned gently to an insect that had appeared on the stone, crawling around the colored lines. The bug came to a stop on a blue dot and fluttered its shimmering, gossamer, almost see through green wings as the front two legs rubbed together. "A fellow art lover I see!" Mabel added appreciatively. "I betcha Dipper would love to meet you!" she spoke wistfully while digging around in her many pockets before slyly adding "But uh, you didn't hear this from me, probably better you don't hang out with one Pacifica Northwest. Trust me, you'll thank me later."

In moments, she had the bug catching supplies Dipper had gifted her at the ready: the telescopic butterfly net in one hand, a glass jar in the other. Mabel went to set the jar down in preparation for the catch, but found herself staring at its contents, mystified. "Filter paper, plaster, saw dust, and... are those little sugar crystals on the bottom? Salt maybe? Where are all the bugs supposed to go?!" she spoke to herself.
The watcher saw Mabel begin pulling equipment from her pockets, and briefly considered moving closer to wet the appetite of their weapon, but ultimately held back. They'd been ordered to get all three of them.

Mabel's immediate first impulse was to open the jar up and toss all this junk out to make more room for all the awesome insects she was sure she'd catch today, but as her hand went to the lid, the thoughts caught on something. She paused for a moment, then breathed out "I... I should just trust Dipper on this. He'd have put it together like this for a reason." while removing her hand from the lid to grip the net with both hands. She held it up in the air while hovering over the still radiant insect.

"OK my pretty, come to mama!"

Pacifica spun around as soon as Dipper pointed, letting out a short scream of surprise at the sight before her. It was a menacing, human shaped thing that loomed over Pacifica while reaching out at her, supported by swollen but spindly limbs and topped with a hairless gray head, whose facial expressions seemed to have melted out of conventional human locations while being painfully swollen. The distorted flesh obscured the humanoid's eyes, but from what little the two could see they were dark and sunken, and the mouth of the thing hung limply open.

The arms were coming down in an attempt to seize Pacifica, but she acted to quickly, backing away on impulse and slamming the atmosphere sampling device into the face of her attacker. The soft, rubbery skin offered no resistance to the metal tool, and a gout of pus burst about as the skin broke, causing Pacifica to let out an involuntary yell of disgust. Nonetheless, the blow proved effective, and the creature stumbled sideways and collapsed, its weak legs giving out and liquid dripped off its face and onto the floor.

However, his form collapsing away revealed a sizable pack of the creatures had snuck up on them, blocking the cave pathway. One of them bore a rough stone knife that had been used to sever the safety ropes, and towards that one Dipper charged in to try to clear the way, the moderate muscles and fighting experience he'd built up over a few years of field work and adventures going into action. He gained control of the knife using limb, trying to wrestle the weapon away, but Dipper was soon grabbed from behind by arms coming around his neck and pulling him backwards, though the boy's hold lasted longer than expected, resulting in the back pull dragging the knife user off his feet, resulting in his lanky, puffy arms unintentionally swinging the knife down to a position where his knee would land right on top of it. The creature wailed out in pain as their kneecap exploded and they collapsed, resulting in a splattering of thick fluid, foul smelling and multicolored.

Pacifica similarly tried to fight back, swinging her atmosphere sampler into the skull of one of the creatures menacing Dipper, but was quickly piled upon and restrained by the mob as well. The creatures had strong, solid grips despite their misshapen forms, and quickly had the two explorers subdued. Even as Dipper and Pacifica struggled against the tall figures holding onto them, they were shuffled a small distance down the cave, to a sunken section of wall where a rock had been rolled aside to allow entrance to a slopping, downward tunnel. "I can't believe I missed that..." Dipper remarked dishearteningly as the two were shuffled down to the darkness.

The party downward was soon joined by most of the creatures that had been wounded in the fighting, having picked themselves up and stemmed the fluid leaks as well as possible. The exception was the one with the exploded kneecap, who could not stand up and was abandoned by the others. After only about a minute of shuffled, struggling walking, Dipper and Pacifica were pushed into an underground chamber by the party of creatures. It was an extremely damp, high ceiling chamber with a large pool of what in the center, faintly illuminated by scattered piles of burning wood, over which skewered, eyeless fish were hung up.
A few more of the creatures were scattered about the room, but it was clear the majority of them had gone up to capture the intruders. Save the four that held Dipper and Pacifica in place, the creatures fanned out around the pool. A high pitched clicking filled the chamber for a sharp moment, after which movement could be seen under the water, which upon close examination was clearly very warm, indicated by the steam rising off it. As the movement ripples neared the rock shore, a figure emerged from the depths; Another one of the creature, but clad in a gray, stained robe that gave it an uncanny resemblance to a manta ray when their arms were spread out.

It stepped upon the shore and looked down at the two captured humans. "You have intruded upon our domain." It abruptly spoke, in a voice that was high pitched but sounded like the speaker had water in their throat, along with a certain wheeze to it.

"We are scientists, who came here to explore the mysteries of Gravity Falls when you attacked us!" Dipper stated with a strong tone, asserting the statement as true. He'd encountered many anomalies during his time studying under Grunkle Ford, and the older scientist taught him it was important to establish qualifications and authority early into such encounters.

"We didn't know anyone was down here though, we wanted to find out what was!" Pacifica interjected, attempting to add a diplomatic slant to their arrival. "We didn't come here looking to hurt anyone."

The leader of this underground group looked down at the two, then began to orate. "We are the shadows beneath your feet, the civilization below which you have built your world upon. All your achievements sit upon our foundation, and at any moment we may open the earth to swallow your works whole, plummeting to darkness."

Dipper cocked an eyebrow with a skeptical look on his face at this, looking aside to Pacifica who shared that expression. "Gravity Falls was the subject of years of brilliant research, and not once was any hint of an underground civilization of such scale and power discovered." He stated, narrowing his eyes at the leader figure. "I think you guys are a motley collection that's taken up residence here recently, probably having caused the unusual environmental readings we just discovered. So, why not explain who you really are?"

The creature leader looked at Dipper, then ran their eyes over its assembled kin ringing the pool of water. "I told you that story wouldn't work." He remarked bitterly, before turning back to focus on the humans. "Very well, children of the clean. You may refer to us as the Futurekind, for that is what we are to you."

Outside, Mabel was returning to the bare bones base camp to set down her recent drawings so as to not have to carry them around. She was moving around the camp doing so with her usual frantic energy, but after a thoughtless glance one direction she froze in place, a chill going down her spine, before she looked back again in hopes she had imagined it.

Sadly, she hadn't: Both safety ropes were loose against the floor, indicating they'd been cut. Mabel right away brought out the handheld radio she'd been given and activated it. "Dipper, Dipper are you okay bro bro!? The rope is cut out here!" she spoke into the device, having tugged the rope a few times to confirm it had no weight on the end. All that came over the line was static. With a worried expression on her face, Mabel charge right into the cave, following the loose rope down the tunnel and bringing her flashlight up and on to illuminate the way.

Outside, the hunter smiled.

Mabel had rushed down the cave in minutes, proceeding without any of the scientific caution that had slowed down Dipper and Pacifica. Midway through, she heard a distorted, gargling groan of
pain coming from deeper down the tunnel. "DIPPER!" She yelled, overcome by panic while rushing down even faster, stumbling over stones in a few places. The girl came to a cold halt however, almost shrinking in place as she cast her flashlight over the lumpy shaped, human like mound on the floor, doubled over and unable to stand due to its stabbed kneecap.

Mabel was still and cautious for just a moment, until a pitiful groan of pain came out of the creature and spurred Mabel into action, rushing forward and kneeling down besides the creature. "What... are you? Are you hurt?" she asked, and in a well meaning but somewhat clumsy move, flipped the wounded figure over to try and get a better look, bringing the stabbed kneecap into view but drawing another pained groan out of the creature. "SORRY! Sorry!"

Even without all of Dipper and Ford's fancy pants science knowledge, Mabel could figure out what had happened, what with the still damp knife sitting nearby, stained with the same foul smelling liquid that leaked out of the flesh wound. A thought crossed her mind, wondering how responsible for this injury her brother might have been, but she quickly forced it out of her brain. "Pacifica probably stabbed this guy." She snorted dismissively.

Another groan of pain came from the creature, knocking Mabel out of her spiteful contemplation. She stumbled for a moment, not sure what to do, but then an idea bulb went off over her head (or at least, she imagined one doing so) and she reached into her many pockets for one of the many tools Dipper had passed his sister when the day began: Grunkle Ford's Emergency Medical Stick!

"Now, how does this work again?" she pondered to herself. When it became clear a greater threat had arrived to Gravity Falls, Grunkle Ford had run Mabel down the list of inventions he had that she might find herself needing to use during the crisis. The laser guns and explosives had been interesting enough, but Mabel had started to lose focus by the end, and she could barely remember the long list of functions the medical instrument could perform using... cute icicle binders, Stan cells, quick work aesthetic and pixie dust?

"Still, I might not know how it works, but I know how to make it work!" Mabel said loudly while pointing the instrument towards the wound. "...That sounded better in my head."

The medical instrument is basically a wand, a black cylinder with an orange cap on one end and a sliding orange switch positioned near the similarly colored cap, so by comfortably fitting the instrument in your hand the thumb naturally falls upon the switch. "Here goes nothing." Mabel remarked with equal parts uncertainty and anticipation, before using her thumb to slide back the switch. A spurt of thick, light blue but opaque gel launched out of the end of the wand and pasted itself onto the dripping wound in front of it. Despite the graveness of the situation, Mabel was taken by surprise by the Freudian nature of the device and couldn't manage to stifle her dirty giggle.

On the wound however, the gel quickly molded into place, slipping across to cover the break in the skin and hardening into a cap while underneath... well, even if the conditions had better lighting it'd be difficult to tell what was happening on a microscopic level, but the patient wasn't screaming in agony, so Mabel was counting it as a success. "HA! Chalk one up for Doctor Mabel, PHD!" she cheered, jumping up to her feet and pumping her fists in the air in the process. "PHD stands for 'Pretty Hot Dame', by the way!" she added, directing it towards her impromptu patient, who was showing noticeable improvement right away: their body was less shaky, and they'd stopped groaning in pain. In about a minute, the creature was trying to climb to its feet, to which Mabel extended a helping hand. "Feeling better big guy?" she asked, once the anomaly had climbed back to full height.

After a moment of wobbly standing, the creature leaned forward and embraced Mabel, almost bowling her over with its heavy, angled hug. "WOAH WOAH WOAH! Slow down there buddy, ever hear of personal space!?" She yelled out, trying to push the slimy, slick creature off of her. "You
can't just go around shoving your affection onto other people and expect them to recip..." Mabel trailed off as the creature fumbled back from her, realizing it was favoring the healthy leg. "Ooooh, you still have trouble standing!" she said, comprehension dawning. "Well, uh, sorry about that."

After a moment of awkwardness, the Pines twin began digging around in her pockets, and quickly pulled out the telescopic butterfly net. "Here, use this as a crutch!" she offered, extending it to max length and doing a little pantomime crutch walk to demonstrate. The lumbering creature took it, and despite how much smaller the device looked next to it, managed to stabilize using the impromptu walking aid. Its face shifted, as if it was trying to smile through all the melt and deformity.

Mabel smiled back, a little grossed out by the full sight of the creature but genuinely happy she had made a friend. "...Can you, uh, speak? Can you tell me your name?" In response, the creature opened its mouth, and a noise that was simultaneously a hoarse whisper that danced on the edge of comprehension and a crashing, bubbling gurgle that brought to mind a polluted, sludge filled waterfall came out, echoing slightly in the cave walls. Mabel got that closed eyes, fake smile look on her face that came from watching someone try something and not succeed, one hand rubbing the back of her hair. "Well, that's alright, people tell me I have enough chatter for FOUR people!" she exclaimed, sounding confident and reassuring.

"Now, I'm looking for two other people who are... well, like me." Mabel asked, voice a little more serious now. "You know, shorter, lighter skin, hair, that kind of stuff?" The creature did seem to understand her, as its body language shifted into a withdrawn, more solemn state, but after a moment it nodded in confirmation. "Can you take me to them!?" She asked, suddenly more excited and desperate to find answers. After a moment's hesitation, her new friend nodded again, and began walking towards the still open passage in the wall, leading Mabel into the depths with its slow, hobbling gait.

"Pacifica, get ready for your first interaction with time travel, it's probably going to be confusing and ridiculous." Dipper whispered sideways to the blond girl in something of a weary tone, and Pacifica simply rolled her eyes and nodded.

"We come from a great distance forward away from this point in time." The Futurekind leader began to explain. "The world we come from is a harsh, brutal wasteland. We are the children of hot, corrosive seas which slowly wither our bodies away and are shared with monstrous, lurking predators."

Dipper was looking very closely at the Futurekind around him and nodded in comprehension. "Hairless sleek skin, bloated bodies that benefit from the support of water, and the wide collection of deformities... Yes, that makes sense, you come from warm, polluted oceans. I bet that loud clicking noise was echolocation, wasn't it?"

The speaker did not respond to Dipper's hypothesizing. "Records indicate the distant past possessed much more habitable conditions, and the means to travel the time vortex, via technology or sorcery, are potent and numerous in the world that spawned us." For the first time, the Futurekind speaker's voice intoned an emotion: rage. "But, the Time Baby and his cruel agents and lords control access to the vortex. The inhabitants of the squalid time are caged, forbidden from seeking better lives in the past or future zones. But that has changed!"

Dipper and Pacifica looked at each other, nervous understanding coming over both of their faces as they knew exactly what the Futurekind leader was speaking. "The Time Baby abruptly vanished one day in the future, its tyrannical society thrown to disarray. Our sorcery detected a great ripple traveling the vortex, indicating it had been killed in this time period. My people formed a great circle of magic to follow the ripple and arrive in a time location free of its oppression. Here, we will survive."
"What was so terrible about the future you needed to flee from it so badly?" Pacifica asked, genuine concern in her voice.

"The realm we have fled was scourged, toxic." The speaker described, though a notable stutter to his voice indicated he had context to contrast his time period with this one. "Poison leeches into the skin from water and air, and we must stifle our children to keep everyone fed. The light of the Red Orb scalds us, but it keeps away the withering death."

Curiosity peeked, Dipper looked around the room for any signs of a red orb. He finally noticed something when his eyes traveled across the body of water, as now that they had adjusted to the low light setting, he could see a spherical red light glowing from the bottom center of the underground pond.

"From what you've described, it sounds like the future has suffered a complete environmental collapse." Pacifica spoke up while Dipper was looking about. "But now that you're back in time, you can work to change that! We can work together to proliferate technologies that create a different future!" This was a particularly hitting concern for Pacifica, as one of her objectives in cleaning up the Northwest name was replacing the short sighted, wasteful industrial infrastructure they had used to squeeze out a few extra dollars with more sustainable technology.

"No." The speaker hissed. "The Futurekind are well versed in the duplicity and barbarity of outsiders, we will not become entangled in your kelp forest." He remarked, voice now much more threatening. "You will reveal to us how you came here, what is the nature of the "readings" which allowed you to discover us. You will show us how we may hide from the other inhabitants of this time location."

"And what happens when we tell you everything? You going to make us spill our guts figuratively and literally!?!" Pacifica asked with an angry tone and expression, trying to cove up the wave of fear she just felt.

"It doesn't have to go down this way!" Dipper implored. "This time is different than where you've come from! Not only do you have a chance to do great things here, you have a responsibility to do them! Even a sliver of scientific knowledge from that far in the future could let us steer history onto a better course! You can't just hide down here in your own little bubble while the rest of the world burns around you!" The last sentence was spat out with a sudden burst of contempt. Dipper was rapidly becoming unsympathetic to the community of time travelers.

"The poaching of fish unsettles the school." The speaker responded while looking directly at Pacifica, having ignored Dipper's platitudes. "When you have told us everything, you will inhale our arcane mists, and our magic will remove your memory of this encounter. You will be returned to the surface world, unaware of what you have seen. There will be no search swarms or future investigations."

Dipper's eyes narrowed and his lips pursed at the threat of memory erasure, his entire demeanor becoming cold in response. "Fine." He unexpectedly spat out, drawing a surprised look from Pacifica. "Let's get this over with as quickly as possible. I'll need papers and writing utensils to give you everything you want, like a map. You'd like a map of the surrounding area, right? Help you avoid the outside world?"

"Yes... that would be ideal." The speaker answered, voice hissing with reservation.

"Then, like I said, I'll needs paper and writing utensils to make it happen, some way to record all the information down, you won't be able to hold onto it all by word of mouth." Dipper repeated, speaking with a calculating edge. "And I want one more thing. Tell me about the Red Orb."
"Why do you bother asking? Soon your memory of all that is in the caverns will be lost to you!" The speaker asked, an accusing tone to their voice.

"I'm curious." Dipper replied with a light, flippant tone. "I'm so curious I got myself in trouble, after all. It's my nature as a scientist. Even if I'm going to be mind wiped, the me that exists in this brief location of time will have known, and the thought of that satisfies me." He explained, leaning into the unique time related lexicon he had heard the speaker of the Futurekind employ. "Besides, I won't draw the maps for you if you don't tell me. You have nothing to lose since you're going to mind wipe me, and something to gain. So why not tell me?"

The speaker was silent for a long moment, mulling over Dipper's request. As silence reigned in the cavern, Mabel and the Futurekind she had befriended stumbled into the room down the tunnel. Mabel's first instinct was to yell out to her brother, but sensing her sucking in oxygen for a shout, her friend clamped one of their large, webbed hands over Mabel's mouth, silencing her for the moment. Though momentarily upset at this to the point she considered biting the Futurekind, she quickly managed to take in the tense atmosphere of the confrontation and remained quiet, observing the whole thing from a dark little corner of the room.

"The Red Orb is what sustains us." The Futurekind leader finally spoke up, implicitly meeting Dipper's demands. "When it is given the proper ritual its become hot, extremely hot, hot enough to burn away the withering death and turn the toxic sea into pure mist. We bring it here as our greatest treasure, and it preserves us still: These waters of the past chilled us to the death when we first arrived, but with the Red Orb they come warm again, as hot as the present seas but without the toxin and the death."

"As long as you're not an indigenous fish." Pacifica remarked sarcastically under her breath, looking sideways at a cooked cave fish on a stick.

"What does it use for fuel though, how do you keep it powered? What are its operating limitations?" Dipper asked, slowly becoming curious and excited as the instrument was described to them.

"The holy orb requires no fuel, and can sustain itself indefinitely. We keep to the rituals on a cycle so that the water does not become too hot for even us to handle." The speaker explained, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "It has done so for the entirety of the Futurekind's existence, since the first speaker united us around it in our past but this time location's future."

Dipper was genuinely amazed a taken aback now. "Potentially infinite heat generation, using either magic or, or some kind of advanced power system they think is magic... Please, you must allow us to study it!" This statement caused the crowd to grow a little more hostile, in a way that was obvious to everyone but Dipper, resulting in Pacifica tugging on his sleeve in an ignored gesture to calm down.

"That kind of capacity for power generation, if reverse engineered, could avert the energy hunger of the human race that no doubt help create the future you fled from! Let us help you save your own future!"

"Outsiders will NEVER defile the Red Orb!" The Futurekind speaker spat back, true anger shining through their voice now. "We have safeguarded it against the kraken, the mutos and the time agents, and we will safeguard it from you as well!"

"What about the future!?" Dipper yelled back in exasperation. "I'm not asking you to sacrifice yourself and die down here! Bring the Red Orb to the surface, Grunkle Ford will find you a better home to live in while work out how your Orb works and how it can improve the world! You have an obligation to the world, to science, and the future! You can't just run away from tomorrow and hide in the dark, shortsightedly using something that could change the world for your petty personal benefit! That makes you no better than the people who destroyed the world you're feeling from!"
"TAKE THEM AWAY!" The speaker shouted, exploding into an open display of rage while wildly gesturing one arm towards a dark tunnel on the other side of the chamber, towards which Dipper and Pacifica's guards began shuffling them. "You are either very fortunate or very clever to have mentioned this... Grunkleford. If you have accomplices who would come looking for you, I have no choice but to employ the memory mist, no matter how much I would enjoy gutting you for your heresy. Of course, it is possible you are attempting to deceive me, but I cannot take the risk. You will uphold your end of the bargain, and then you will forget." As soon as the two known humans had been shuffled out of the room, the speaker turned to its followers. "Come, we must begin conjuring the energy for the memory ritual. We will retrieve the information implement needed by the outsiders when this is complete." At this command, the Futurekind began stepping into the pool of water and submerging themselves.

All except one, that is.

In the darkest, furthest corner of the cave room, the injured Futurekind and Mabel had watched the tense scene, Mabel in particular being prepared to leap into action against the mutants the moment they decided to hurt Dipper. However, with memory erasure remaining the strategy of choice for the Futurekind and the two humans being shuffled off unharmed for the moment, she calmed down slightly and was willing to indulge a more careful course of action. As the chamber filled with the splashing noises of the Futurekind submerging, Mabel looked up to her friend and spoke to him in a hushed tone. "I need you to take me to them." She whispered very softly. Though the Futurekind's alien, melted face was difficult to discern in the dark, Mabel could feel the reservation flowing off him. "Look, if you take me to them, I'll make sure they leave and never come back here, no fuss! That's what you all want, right?" After a moment of her giant friend remaining stock still, Mabel opened her eyes as wide as possible and put on her most adorable, pleading tone of voice. "Please?" she asked, using the magic word.

After a long moment, the Futurekind began to move, guiding her along the far walls of the cavern to avoid as much attention as possible. It would be slow, quiet going, and they'd probably have to wait for the four guards to double out and return to the pool, but Mabel was on her way to the rescue!

A ways down the tunnel, Dipper and Pacifica were shoved into an isolated rock chamber, barely big enough for the two of them, and then the guards shoved a large rock to block the entrance. They found themselves standing under a faint trickle of light, coming from above.

"They just... shoved a rock in front of the exit!" Dipper mused to himself in disbelief that something so simple had trapped him while pushing on the stone in a futile manner. It wasn't even a stone door, it was just a big rock that had been shoved into place by one of the guards! "I can even reach around this thing, there's just no door handle or keys to grab on the other side." The twin added while wiggling one of his arms through a gap in the stone walls. After a moment, he gave up and withdrew back to his prison, accidentally backing into Pacifica. "Sorry!" he squealed on reflex.

"It's alright Dipper, I know it was an accident." The blond responded rather kindly, though she was a little flustered at how small the cell they'd been shoved into was.

"No, I meant I'm sorry for getting you stuck here!" Dipper responded, but caught himself after a moment and tried to look away from Pacifica. "I mean, I am sorry I bumped into you like that, but I'm really sorry I got you stuck down here." he explained.

"Dipper, what have I said before about you blaming everything on yourself?" Pacifica responded. Before he could answer her, she continued on. "I know going on these adventures with you isn't always going to be pleasant, but I wouldn't trade them for anything. You've shown me amazing things, helped me do amazing things... good things that help people and will one day help the world,
instead of just taking from it like every other Northwest. To think we had owned this town for
generations and never even knew what was underneath it... and even worse, wouldn't have
appreciated the true value of what's underneath it. You changed that when you entered my life, and
you don't have to apologize to me for that."

They were very close now, not that they had much choice in the cramped cell, but Dipper was
looking back at Pacifica now, who had put her hands on Dipper's shoulders to help reassure him. He
looked back at her and smiled a very warm smile at her. "Thanks Pacifica." Dipper spoke, sounding
genuinely relieved. "I might not be great at expressing it, but that means a lot to me... you, mean a lot
to me." He was getting kind of nervous now, but also had an air of certainty to him, like he wanted
to say these words despite the trepidation they caused him. "You're... you're one of the most
supportive people I know in this town, in this world, right next to Great Uncle Ford. You never scoff
or deride my ideas and I like sharing them because of that. You always hear me out and you trust me
when I think something needs doing. There's... there's not a lot of people in the world like you,
Pacifica."

"Mmmm, that's because the world is full of idiots." Pacifica remarked, leaning her head into Dipper's
chest, causing him to unconsciously slide put his hand on the back of her head. "You made such a
strong impression on me that night at the mansion, when you fought the ghost haunting the place...
and the ghosts of the past, haunting me." Her face was getting warmer now, and her blond head
turned to look up at Dipper's face. "And you've lived up to that impression ever since. You're brave,
you're brilliant, and most of all, I think you're just." Pacifica explained, breathing admiration with
every word. "And, well, you know what makes me laugh." she added a little hesitantly.

The two were getting even closer at this point. Dipper wasn't sure what was about to happen, but he
felt calm and at ease despite the fact he was in a stone prison beneath the earth. He closed his eyes,
felt his body move without any intentional commands from his mind... then jarred back to reality
with lightning speed, whipping around to stand between Pacifica and the door when he heard the
stone begin to grind against the cave floor. His eyes confirmed his ears' suspicion: the door was
moving.

Acting on instinct, Dipper grabbed a nearby loose rock, gripping it tight and preparing to strike in
defense of the other human in the cell with him. The stone had ground a quarter of the way open,
suddenly caught on the floor, then heaved the rest of the way, clattering to the floor with a loud thud.
With the portal to the wider cavern now open, the two prisoners stared straight ahead... and saw
Mabel waiting for them on the other side, doing a sort of goofy "ta-da!" pose in that brightly colored
homespun coat of hers.

The tension in the cavern deflated right, as both Dipper and Pacifica exhaled in relief as the tension
relaxed out of their bodies. Mabel meanwhile yelled out "Dipper!" in excitement and jumped
forward to hug him, making the improvised prison cell even tighter and squishing Pacifica between
Dipper and the rock wall. The male twin took a moment to reciprocate the hug with his sibling, but
did push her away sooner than she would have liked. "Mabel, excellent timing on the save! How did
you know we were in trouble?"

"I went back to base camp and noticed both your safety ropes had been cut loose! That's when my
patented Mab-danger senses knew something was up, so I went in looking for you guys and found
this lovable lug!" Mabel explained, stepping back to let the healed Futurekind step into sight as she
held her arms up in introduction and it waved awkwardly at the two humans it had been stabbed
trying to capture earlier. Dipper grew a little apprehensive at the sight, while Pacifica was straight up
scowling at Mabel by now, trying to adjust her clothes and catch her breath after being pressed
against the rough rock wall.
"Mabel... why exactly is this Futurekind helping you?" Dipper asked cautiously.

Mabel tilted her head at a sharp angle in confusion over the name 'Futurekind' but figured Dipper couldn't be talking about anyone else, so she explained how she made her new friend. "Oh, I found him wounded at the end of the tunnel you two went down, and patched up his knee with Grunkle Ford's handy goo shooting gadget!" Near the end of the sentence, she whipped out the medical instrument in question to demonstrate.

Dipper had his eyes narrowed in analysis, tapping his chin while looking over the creature. It seemed a little bit nervous looking at him and Pacifica, but not nearly as nervous as you'd expect from someone who'd been stabbed in the kneecap and left to die by the same boy earlier that day.

"Mabel... can your new friend talk at all?" Dipper asked after a little silent thinking.

Mabel looked back and forth between the two of them, pondering that herself. "I don't... really know actually. Hey big guy, can you talk?" she asked, casting, an anticipatory look towards the Futurekind. It seemed a little confused for a moment, so Mabel made a really exaggerated motion of moving her jaw open and closed with a blocky, slow movement while pointing to her tongue and saying "Talk, like this!" After a moment, the Futurekind opened its mouth and let out a loud clicking noise that hurt the ears of all three present humans.

"Dipper, this guy clearly isn't on the same level as the cult leader looking mutant speaking to us earlier." Pacifica spoke up, and Dipper nodded in response.

"Maybe they have some kind caste system, work by schooling behavior..." Dipper hypothesized a little wildly for a few moments, before composing himself. "Whatever. All that matters for the moment is escaping out of here." He looked over a Mabel's new friend, and in an affected tone of kindness stated "Hey, uh, thank your for all your help... big guy, but it's probably best you get back to your group now, so you aren't missed or anything."

The Futurekind didn't respond, but a moment later Mabel added on "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Get back to your people friend, and make sure to go easy on the leg while it heals!" and the large mutant turned about and began to trudge down the tunnel, which seemed to fascinate Dipper. "It obeyed her right away... Either way, we need to figure out an escape."

"Way ahead of you bro-bro." Mabel remarked with a grin while pulling the tried and true grappling hook out of her coat, eliciting a look of pleasant surprise from Dipper.

"You kept that old thing!? More to the point, you brought it with you again on this summer's trip!?" He asked, more surprised rhetorical questions than actual inquiries.

"You kept that hat, didn't you?" Mabel snarked back. "And of course I brought it back to Gravity Falls with me! It wasn't seeing much use in Piedmont... well, there was one time I used it to climb the school roof, but then they called the cops. Had to steal it back from evidence and everything." She stepped into the cell while pushing the other two out of the way, her brother gently, Pacifica a little more roughly. "Aaaand, unless that healing goo Grunkle Ford made emits hallucinatory fumes, I can see a beam of light in this cell!" As she stepped in the cell and looked up to confirm what she'd been taking in since the rock slid back, the girl added "Thank goodness there is actually a gap letting in light up there, otherwise these would be the most boring hallucinations I've ever seen."

"Based on their choice of habitat and their sound based communication, I think the Futurekind might find light unpleasant, which explains why they made this their cell. It's impossible as an unassisted climb anyway." Dipper observed. "But, with the grappling hook, we can run a rope to the surface and make our escape!"
"Yep! Ain't that just amazing!?” Mabel asked, grinning at the two other humans. Her grin became slightly smug and she wiggled her eyebrows a little before asking Pacifica "Of course, that assumes Miss Priss here is able to rock climb?"

Dipper seemed embarrassed that Mabel would make such a statement at a time like this and was ready to speak up and chide her, but Pacifica spoke first, a bit of a growl to her voice as she said "Trust me Mabel, I've spent these last few years having all kinds of educational adventures all over this town, I've learned a bit about climbing by now. Learned it from the best!" That last line was delivered while looking back at Dipper, but seeing how uncomfortable he'd become at their arguing, forcefully swallowed her tone and added "And... thank you Mabel. For coming down here and saving us." with a voice full of forced calm.

Before further arguments could consume the group, Dipper took control of the conversation. "Alright. Mabel, you're the grappling gun expert, shot a line to the surface and climb up it when you think it's secure. After that, you follow her up Pacifica. By then, I should be back and good to go." As he was giving orders, Dipper was sliding a very thick pair of safety gloves onto his hands.

"Be back, what are you talking about Dipper?” Mabel remarked, confused and worried.

"I'm going back to steal the Red Orb." Dipper replied with determination in his eyes and voice.

Mabel was aghast at the suggestion and quickly tried to talk him out of it. "Dipper, c'mon bro, surely it's not worth it going back to that monster den, what are you talking about?"

"I'm afraid it is." He remarked in a self-assured tone. "If the power generation capabilities of that thing are anywhere near what the Futurekind's, albeit folklorish and superstition tinted story, suggest it is, we have to acquire it and find a way to apply it to large scale power production."

"But... but, don't the Futurekind need it? And why are they called the Futurekind!?" Mabel questioned back in exasperation.

"They're time travelers." Pacifica remarked flatly in response to Mabel's second question while Dipper answered her first.

"The world needs it more, we can't let such a discovery go to waste in an isolated cavern like this, held in the covetous hands of a small group of selfish religious fanatics!" he explained, becoming slightly vexed at the idea of being denied such a discovery.

"Dipper, I... we can't just..." Mabel was fumbling over her words. Every fiber of her being wanted the three of them to just escape this damp, dark cave, never think about this coven of weird mutants again, but Dipper wanted to charge right back into the lion's den. Pacifica spoke up a moment later, causing Mabel to turn her head and glare straight at her, disgust and contempt boiling inside at the blond's word choice.

"Dipper, if you think it has to be done... let's do it." Pacifica said, encouraging Dipper to continue this crusade of his. What hurt Mabel most however, was Dipper's reaction to this: The argumentative posture he held against his sister faded in response to Pacifica's words, becoming a sort of happily self-confident at her encouragement. The female twin's shoulder sagged in defeat, and with an exhaled sigh conceded to Dipper's wishes.

"Just, be safe back there, okay bro-bro?" Mabel asked of her brother, who in response shot her the most confident smile she'd ever seen from her twin in her entire life.

"Hey, if Bill couldn't kill me, I don't think these pinniped mutants stand a chance." He said simply,
before turning about a disappearing down the tunnel, leaving the girls to begin the escape.

Dipper moved slowly down the stone tunnel, stepping lightly both to avoid alerting anyone and give Mabel and Pacifica more time to escape. He had inferred the Futurekind probably couldn't see very well but he had to be wary of their hearing, though he wasn't sure how well it functioned above water. When he finally reached the pool room, it was empty at first glance, but after creeping closer to the water body, Dipper could see they were all submerged, standing rock still on the bottom of the cave pool. As he got closer, he began to hear it: a high pitched crackling, radiating weakly from the water's edge. It would actually be a short swim out to the orb, Dipper calculated, and so he removed his upper layers and stepped into the water.

The sound was so much louder in the water. Ritual chanting to prepare the memory mist, it had to be. The Futurekind continued to still rock still in their positions, mouths open in a perfectly circular shape as the clicking filled the water. They looked so much more natural submerged, Dipper thought to himself. He swam forward through the water, keeping the glowing red orb in the center of his vision, refusing to let his goal be compromised. Still, the clicking was so loud down here...

Dipper nearly screamed out as something floated past his vision, which would have cost him all his saved up breath. What was it? A floating corpse? No matter, don't stop, must complete the goal! The waters continued to darken, the clicking overwhelms, dark shapes swimming in the depths and crawling across the sea floor, which seemed so deep, lost in darkness...

Dipper caught himself gazing into the abyss, and endless darkness as the sea floor shrank out of sight. When he looked up again, the Red Orb was so close, just out of reach. Suddenly, the water blinked. The Red Orb was the iris of a great, singular eye glaring with hatred as the sea became awash with bright yellow light. Dipper refused to give in to fear. He stretched one arm out and ripped the eye apart, plundering his objective as the yellow light burned red in fury as the butchered eye leaked and bled across the ocean, soiling the depths and poisoning the riotous assembly of life that inhabited them. The ever-present clicking took a new, horrible sound sounding like a distorted scream of pain and rage.

Dipper swam from the corrupted depths as quickly as possible, life shifting into strange, toxic, wonderful and horrific shapes around him as he swam, the clicking being all he could hear now. He finally broke the water and it all went away, the silence of the bare, bleak cavern ringing in his ears. Dipper spent a moment catching his breath on the edge of the water before reaching for his discarded clothes, clutching the Red Orb (smaller than he expected) in one gloved hand. This proved a mistake, for by the time he went for the vest, a slimy hand reached from the water to grab his ankle.

The young man yelped in surprise, but his instincts took over. Pulling the vest closer to himself, the free hand went straight for the pocket he always kept his survival knife in. The hand from the depths was trying to drag him back in, having yanked him a few inches, but without hesitation Dipper plunged the survival knife into the hand. The blade sunk deep, spewing more foul smelling vital liquids across the cold stone, and the hand withdrew into the depths without a sound that Dipper could hear. Though he lost the knife, the boy didn't care; when he looked back to aim the blade, he could see the pool bubbling riotously, which could only mean one thing with the Red Orb in his hand, on dry land.

Hastily throwing the vest on, Dipper took off running down the tunnel.

Back at the cell, Mabel had completed her ascension and was watching Pacifica make her way up the rope, the two trading barbs all the while. As the blond reached about the halfway point, a horrible, unwanted thought entered Mabel's head: What if I cut her down, right here?

Mabel was immediately disgusted with herself, wondering how she could possibly think such a
thing, but the suggestion proved upsettingly difficult to banish from her mind. The survival knife she'd been given felt heavier and heavier in her pocket. Mental images of her rival turned friend turned rival plunging down and cracking her neck on the harsh stone played over and over, to the point Mabel lost track of her ongoing banter and simply shut her eyes to try and clear her head. "Then..." her subconscious seemed to be saying to her "You'll have Dipper all to yourself again..."

"Dipper!" Mabel screamed in her head. "If I cut the rope Dipper wouldn't be able to escape!" she thought to herself, repeating the idea of losing her twin over and over again to drive back the thoughts, successfully this time. By the time she opened her eyes, clear of the ruthless suggestion, Pacifica had reached the top of the rope and was extending a hand to be let up, which Mabel hastily grabbed with a forced smile. "Okay, so now we just wait for..."

The rope tugged and a grunt of effort came from down below, and when the two girls looked down Dipper was climbing straight up, in a display of physical skill that baffled Mabel. "Pull the rope up, they're right behind me!" He yelled up the rope, and after trading expressions, Pacifica and Mabel did so, speeding Dipper's ascent, but not fast enough to prevent a rough weight from catching on to the end. None of the three could see what the source of the weight was (the girls couldn't see past Dipper's body, and Dipper didn't have time to look down) but there was no doubt it was one of the creatures.

As Dipper climbed as fast as his arms could take him, Mabel had an idea. "Pacifica, get ready to grab him!" Mabel ordered, pulling one hand away from the rope to search her pockets. Pacifica looked like she wanted to scream at Mabel but stayed focused on the rope, transferring her angry strength into saving Dipper. When the male twin finally reached the top of the rope after what seemed like forever, Pacifica used both hands to pull him out of the hole into the sunlight while Mabel swiped the rope with the survival knife. Dipper climbed to safety while the rope fell into darkness. Moments later, a heavy, wet splattering noise of impact and crushing rose from the hole and sickened the ears of all three.

The final climber collapsed onto the hill, completely uncaring it was harsh rocks. "Ahhhhh, my arms burn so much..." he moaned, out of breath. "Pacifica, front left pocket, middle section please." In response to his request, the blond girl approached the downed boy and reached for his chest. "WAIT!" he suddenly yelled out, having forgot something. "Use the gloves." he added apologetically, and after transferring them from his hands to hers, Pacifica removed the Red Orb from his vest pocket. "Thank you Pacifica. Even with all the padding around that pocket, that thing was burning a hole in my nipple." He responded, somewhat deliriously.

Despite the dire situation they'd all just escaped from, the two girls broke into laughter at that statement after a few moments of being unable to process it, and Dipper joined them soon after. Somehow, after the absurdity of the whole day, that was the weirdest thing about all this, and that just cracked them up.

The three rested for some time on the hill, not even able to worry about the Futurekind coming after them, though in the back of his mind Dipper was pretty sure they wouldn't come out into such strong sunlight. After some laughing, resting, and canteen passing, the group set off for the van. The Red Orb had to be stored at the Shack right away, the rest of the base camp could be cleaned up on a later trip. However, after some conversation, the twins decided to visit base camp one last time to collect Mabel's drawings while Pacifica, still wearing the protective gloves, stored the Red Orb in the van. The group had split a short distance ago, and the twins were making small talk as they walked.

"So, this is a pretty normal day in the life of the new Dipper Pines?" Mabel was asking, a little awkwardly, but with a projected air of cheer and interest.
"This case was a little unusual." Dipper admitted. "I haven't seen time travel since... well, since the first summer here."

"Well, good thing you had your sister back for your battle against the time traveling mole people, eh Dippen-Dot?" Mabel asked, spinning the grappling hook (would need to be supplied with more rope, but was otherwise still functional) about and putting on her best radio announcer voice. "I'm surprised you don't get in trouble like this more often!"

"First off Mabel, they're not mole like in the slightest. More like some kind of humanoid pinniped..." Dipper responded, raising a finger in correction. "And secondly... yes, you did help me out quite a lot back there. The grappling hook made for a very effective escape rope out of there."

Mabel was feeling giddy at Dipper's praise. They were Mystery Twins again, but more importantly, Dipper needed her just as much as she needed him! "Yeah, maybe we should make a habit of..."

Whatever Mabel was going to suggest next was literally cut short as the two arrived back at the base camp, and the fully dressed tracker jumped out from behind a rock, slashing madly at the two with their sword, but cutting only the air between them, the bundle of nerves built up over hours of staking out having harmed their coordination. Mabel let out a surprised yelp while jumping away from the sword, while Dipper, despite being equally surprised, walked backwards at a slower pace, eyes scanning and hands feeling for a weapon.

"As if we haven't dealt with enough freaks today..." Dipper muttered under his breath.

"YOU ARE INTERRUPTING MYSTERY TWINS TIME!" Mabel screamed out in anger.

The assassin honed in on Dipper, driving him backwards towards a rock ledge, the blade getting closer all the time. Dipper attempted to jump sideways to escape being penned in but the flash of the sword followed him. His dodge fumbled as a slick of blood burst on his right leg and the young scientist hit the ground clumsily. The assassin drew closer, raising the blade for a killing plunge, but was rocked off balance as one of the fold up chairs slammed into their skull at damn near maximum force.

"STAY AWAY FROM MY BROTHER YOU BASTARD!" Mabel screamed, drawing back for another chair shot and landing it. She went for a third, but this time the sword was in action, slicing clean through the sword and destroying it, leaving Mabel holding to metal nubs.

"Okay that is NOT NORMAL!" Dipper yelled in surprise, mental state being worn down by the day. Without fear however, Mabel seamlessly continued her attack charging straight at the assassin and tackling them off the rocky edge it had tried to trap Dipper against, going down with him in the process. "MABEL!" Dipper screamed in shock, trying to climb to his feet but finding his fresh wound made the effort clumsy. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the bug catching kit while trying to hastily stabilize his legs.

Mabel and the assassin rolled down the rocky hill in a tumble of violence and punches, the metal blade fortunately dropped in the initial tackle. When they hit solid, grassy ground, Mabel was on top, and slammed a fist directly into the covered head below her, generating a satisfying crunch before she stood up and ran for the woods. The assassin, body language conveying anger, snatched up their sword, which had tumbled downhill shortly after the two fighters, and ran off after her.

Up at base camp, Dipper had moved to the bug catching jar and unscrewed the lid, and was slowly taking it apart. He stuffed the jar's filter paper into the upturned, unscrewed lid to create a little nest, and was carefully pouring the remaining contents on the ground, until all that was left was the crystals. The plaster, sawdust, and Mabel's lone insect catch, now long dead, crunched underfoot as
Dipper worked his science at the table. Once the crystals were carefully dumped into the paper nest, he brought up his water canteen up and gently sprinkled the remaining water on the white below him, causing a small burst of fumes, which was careful not to breathe, to rise up. Satisfied with his improvised weapon, Dipper set off, recklessly climbing down the slope on his wounded leg.

Meanwhile, the case had taken Mabel and the assassin into the forest. The girl had led the hunter on a merry chase, but even Mabel was starting to run out of energy after the long day she'd had, currently hiding behind a wide tree and trying to breathe as quietly as possible despite how much she needed more air. Then, a voice rang out through the forest. Having never hear him before, Mabel was slightly confused, until she realized it could only be the human.

"Your blood is warm, human, rich with salt! You cannot escape my blade, as it thirsts for the satisfying taste of someone so... established, so secure... so fattened!" They called out, voice getting closer with every moment.

Mabel bit her tongue to avoid yelling a rebuttal to the fattened comment, but with growing distress realized she was bleeding. Her heavy coat covered most of it up, but a small but steady trickle of blood was dripping down her left pant leg. "Knicks and scratches on that stupid rock hill." she thought to herself. "I just have to hope Dipper got back to the van okay." With a deep, calming breath, she pulled her survival knife from the pocket she'd stuck it in, gripped it with both hands, and breathed very deep. The footsteps were very close now, the menacing crunch of boots on foliage.

Having nothing else to depend on but sound, Mabel sprung to her feet and spun around the corner at what she hoped was the best possible moment, knife held up high in one hand and stabbing down. It sunk into flesh and elicited a high pitched scream ("Score one for me!" Mabel cheered in her head) but it was undercut somewhat by the fact she'd only managed to find purchase in her attacker's shoulder, though it did seem to be his right shoulder. It was hard for Mabel to tell, she was only able to see the results of her work for a moment before a gloved hand slammed into her face, punching her dead on and sending the human crashing to the floor as her eyes went unfocused and her teeth bit down on the sides of her mouth.

Even with her dazed senses, Mabel could tell the assassin was looming over her fallen form, sword raised to cleave him in two by all indications, but the most familiar scream of protective rage in the world soon filled her ears. Dipper came tearing up behind the would be killer, attacking from behind and using one hand to shove the metal lid of the insect jar under the hunter's cowl and into their face, while the other hand clamped down on their dominant hand, trying to hard to restrict the sword movements that his sinking nails drew small amounts of blood.

Dipper held an expression of absolute fury as he wrestled with the attacker, determined to hold the metal lid in place while the assassin tried to regain his sword arm and stab the boy to death. However, with every moment of the fight, the assassin seemed to be losing strength at a rapid pace, attempts to break free becoming clumsy, knees sagging and posture slipping. In what seemed like an incredibly short amount of time, the hunter seemed to lose all muscle strength whatsoever and collapsed to the forest floor. One the assassin was flat on his back, Dipper pulled his hand out from the mask and brought both hands to the top of the black cover, pressing down on the metal lid through the material. After another shockingly short amount of time, Dipper's breathing slowed and his expression relaxed from pure rage to intense worry, and he grabbed the hunter's wrist, holding a thumb in place to check for a pulse and finding none.

The two twins stared at each other, silently contemplating the act, taking longer than the actual killing did.

"This is becoming absurd." Mabel thought to herself, coming down from the adrenaline rush. "You
make ONE deal with the devil and all of sudden death stalks you at every turn! ...No, though. I can't blame myself for this one. He wanted to kill Dipper and me, this is the most reasonable death I'm partially responsible for. You hear that conscience, this one doesn't count!"

Dipper, meanwhile, had gone into full analytic mode rather than muse on the nature and responsibility of death. He was quickly feeling and checking all of the hunter's pockets, finding numerous trail provisions and survival equipment, but remained puzzled by the lack of a gun. Once every pocket was exhausted, Dipper moved to the still concealed face, preparing for the release of built up potassium cyanide fumes peeling back the mask would cause by stepping back and blocking his nose and mouth with a dusk mask he had prepared for the expedition. When the mask rolled back, he gaped with surprise, having entertained a number of possibilities but none like what was before him.

The creature that had hunted the Mystery Twins was a strange, bald skinned being with a lumpy but perfectly rounded head, making it strongly resemble a potato. Its skin, despite the lumpy shape caused but sub-dermal deformities, had the smooth texture of a human baby, and its mouth was without teeth. Of course, Dipper noticed those later, since its most obvious feature was the three eyes that adorned its face, the top most of which had the image of gold bricks tattooed into the skin around it, creating a crude depiction of Bill Cipher.
As soon as Dipper and Mabel stumbled back to the parked van, leaning on each other's shoulders, Pacifica instantly began dialing back to the Mystery Shack to call for help. Soon after that, the three teenagers stumbled into the vehicle and sealed the doors, taking shelter in the spacious cargo hold. A quick explanation was offered up while Dipper went digging for the emergency kit stored in the vehicle to staunch his and Mabel's bleeding.

Then, after what was a much shorter period of time than the time period it had taken the three to drive the van from the Mystery Shack to this location, Stan's automobile came to a skidding stop on the dirt road, throwing up huge amounts of rubble. The older pair of twins jumped out of the vehicle before the engine had even died, both with furious expressions on their faces and weapons on hand. However, the expressions softened and the weapons stowed when the three teenagers stepped out the van, replaced by a big group hug.

"Thank goodness you kids are safe!" Stan exclaimed as the hug broke up, genuine relief pouring out of his voice. "Now, where's the bastard who tried hurting you, I'm gonna make him wish he was getting killed by someone much less emotionally unstable than me!"

"It's... it's dead." Dipper breathed out, getting a surprised look from Pacifica and Stan. He had stood up to enter the hug, but sat down on the tailgate of the van after, his leg was still injured. "It had nearly killed me with a sword, but Mabel tackled it off a cliff and punched it all the way down..."

"...But it had me on the run right after that, until Dipper burst in out of nowhere and, uh, bro what exactly did you do to that thing anyway? I was too busy trying a sample mix of forest dirt and my own blood at the time to see exactly." Mabel cut in, talking excitedly about her brother's exploit.

"I had... gotten the cyanide crystals out of the insect catching jar and used some of the canteen water to vaporize them." He explained in a voice that suggested the whole chain of events hadn't fully set in with him yet. "After that, I stuck it under the veil it was wearing and let the fumes overpower it." After a particularly deep breath, he added "We got really lucky cyanide poisoned that thing as well as it would have a human."

"That was still some quick thinking Dipper." Pacifica complemented, rubbing her hands on his back to try and calm the boy down.

"I take it the attacker was some kind of creature then?" Ford asked with a concern, having picked up on Dipper's word choices. "Right, luckily I brought some scanning equipment that should help us figure out if there are more out there." With that, he began walking towards the car. "Assume we are still at risk!" He called back to the group in a cautioning tone.

Stan meanwhile, had gotten down on one knee and clasped a hand on Dipper's shoulder. "Hey, kid, look at me." He said, usual brusque tone severely cracked at this point. "Don't beat yourself up over what happened back there. You did what you had to do, to protect yourself, and more importantly, your family."

Dipper looked up at his Great Uncle, a small frown on his face that quickly turned into a small, grateful smile. "It's alright Grunkle Stan, I know that. I'm just a little wined up at this point, it's been a long day and I've lost some blood." He explained, while gesturing to the red stained wraps around his leg. "Whoops, time flies. Should probably change those..."

"I'll go get more!" Pacifica remarked eagerly, going over to the emergency kit while Grunkle Stan
knitted his eyebrows in concern and a little confusion. Dipper's tone was unexpectedly casual and accepting of the situation, and he didn't know what to make of that. Mabel had a similar look on her face, where her smile had seemingly frozen in place and become much more artificial for a sharp moment, before she adopted a much more neutral expression.

"Hmm, residual arcane radiation suggests trans-dimensional travel consistent with one arrival, and background levels are normal, but I still need to examine the attack." Ford cut the air with his explanation, having examined a large scanning tool in the back of Stan's car. "Stanley, I need you to stay here, guard Dipper, Pacifica, and our vehicles. Mabel, I need you to lead me back to the attacker and help me examine them."

"You got it Grunkle Ford!" The girl responses before anyone else objected, springing to her feet. She turned around and gave Stan a quick look. "And before you say anything, Dipper needs to stay off that foot and Pacifica doesn't know the way. Don't worry, Grunkle Ford will keep me safe!"

His argument melted off the old man's face, prompting Stan to simply remark "I'm counting on YOU to keep him safe pumpkin, don't mess that up!" with a sarcastic grin on his face before the two departed back into the woods, leaving him alone with Dipper and Pacifica.

The two disappeared into the treeline, leaving the three to recover behind them. The trip into the woods was quiet to begin with, Mabel only speaking up to provide directions, but soon enough Ford was asking her more about the adventure she, Dipper and Pacifica had just had, resulting in him receiving a concise but accurate recounting of the day's events. The two were becoming more relaxed and comfortable as they went further and further without discovering any opposition.

"...and Dipper most likely still has the sphere at the van. I kinda lost track of things after we were attacked but it isn't like him to lose things." Mabel concluded, having related the story at length.

"I concur, Dipper is an astute and organized young man, I'm sure he wouldn't misplace such an incredible find, even under these stressful circumstances." Grunkle Ford agreed. "This really is quite the find you all made, by the way. Very good work."

Things were quiet between them for a moment, Mabel looking at the forest floor while Ford pressed forward, eyes bright while she was downcast. After a moment, she spoke up. "Grunkle Ford, did we do the right thing stealing this? I mean, those cave dwellers were weird, but they really needed it..."

"Yes, but the world needs it more Mabel." Ford replied matter of factly. "However many people you might have hurt by acquiring this object and bringing it into the wider world will be greatly outdone by the benefits it stands to offer the entire human species. Imagine the sheer amount of cheap, clean energy we can generate by fully understanding a magical object seemingly able to produce heat out of the arcane, or even better, if we develop the means to replicate it!"

Mabel turned her head sideways at Grunkle Ford's explanation, a worried look still on her face. "Are you gonna make more neato light-bulbs out of that thing?" she asked after wrestling the question around in her throat. She regretted in instantly. "That was real brilliant sounding Mabel, good job." she thought to herself.

Ford took the question with a minimal reaction though, mentally chastising himself for getting ahead of the twin who hadn't been studying alongside him for a few years. "I won't go into all the fine technical details Mabel, but in short as long as you have a method of sustainability heating water you can create energy. Different types of fuel, from oil to nuclear material to natural gas, operate similar enough turbine mechanisms to generate electricity. All of them can be used to make water hot, hot water becomes steam, and then the steam turns a rotor to run a generator."
Mabel nodded her head in time with Grunkle Ford's explanation, getting the basic picture. "How does steam turn a whole generator though? All it does is cloud up the bathroom and mess with my hair." She thought to herself. "Still, basic picture, hot water equals electricity oooohhhh, this makes more sense now."

Ford smiled a little. "That's the look of the dawning of realization on your face, by the way." He said in a congratulatory tone. "So, different fuels have various downsides, with fossil fuels like coal and oil being the most deleterious to human health. Big picture environmental concerns aside, living within the waste output range of a fossil fuel power planet has severe, well documented negative health impacts on human beings, amounting to shorter, sicker lives and higher occurrence rates of cancers and other serious conditions. If the discovery you three made today is able to replace even one coal electrical plant, it will save upwards of thousands of people from early deaths and long term poor health, potentially reaching over generations." Ford came to stop at this point, leaning down to put a reassuring hand on Mabel's shoulder. "I hope that helped you feel better about your actions."

The female Pines twin didn't seem fully convinced however. "Well, that all makes sense Grunkle Ford, but it still seems like kind of a raw deal for the futurekind..."

Stanford got a bit of a steely expression, and while his tone hardened he did his best to remain warm sounding towards Mabel. "They should have come forward with their amazing technology." He said dispassionately. "If their description of the future they escaped from is accurate, they should know better than anyone the importance of building a better world, and they should have wanted to avert the fate that befalls mankind in their timeline!" He felt himself getting a little angry now, and stood up, turning his back to Mabel as he gazed into the deep forest. For her part, Mabel could tell immediately he wasn't angry at her, so she watched him with fearless interest.

"To have something of so much value to the world, to the human species, and to do nothing but selfishly cradle it to oneself in the dark, wasting its potential... it's deplorable." Ford spoke, an edge of disappointment getting into his voice. "Technology, resources, people, even raw knowledge... it has to be let free to achieve its full potential!"

Her great uncle's newest conversation train sent a rock sinking into Mabel's gut. "He... he's talking about Dipper, isn't he!?" she thought to herself, feeling guilt and anger boiling her in simultaneously. "I was never suffocating towards Dipper, I... I just..." Mabel's mind was scrambling to assemble a counterargument she could yell out loud, but the only thing she could hear in her head was her heart screaming out "I need my brother back for me! I don't care about the rest of the world!" which was something she knew she had to bury, keep away from her family.

However, Mabel's troubled silence prove fortuitous for her, as Grunkle Ford resumed speaking with something she hadn't anticipated. "And I lost sight of that." All of her inner turmoil went silent as she paid close attention to the old man, listening intently. "Bill filled me with such a terrible, all reaching paranoia that I fled into the depths, made my knowledge deliberately unhelpful and scattered it to the wind. I was ruled by fear, and in my fear I denied mankind what it rightfully deserved." He turned back to his great niece, a smile on his face. "That's why I'm so grateful to you and Dipper. You two dug up what I had thoughtlessly buried, and with Dipper's further help I'm able to pull my work out of the dust and the darkness, and have it carried into the light of the world."

"Maybe things should have stayed buried." The stray thought exploded into Mabel's mind without any of her own input, and she instantly put all her mental energy into strangling it, despite how well the ripples it left resonated over her mindscape. After what was an eternity in mental time, she put on a smile a moment later in the real world. "Is that going to include the mysterious attacker we came here to pick up?" she asked sweetly.
Ford's expression contorted into something resembling a surprised owl, as he suddenly expressed awareness of his surroundings. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry I went off on a bit of a tangent, we're still on course to its location, correct?"

Mabel just smiled wider and took the lead. "We're actually really close, it's just past this tangle of bushes!" she explained, finally letting the smile drop when she got ahead of her great uncle.

Back at the van, things had gone quiet after Mabel and Ford had left, Stan keeping his eyes peeled on the forest while Pacifica mildly fusses over Dipper's injury, even if nothing else could be done with it. Eventually, Stan's attention drifted to the two teenagers, focusing in on Dipper in particular. The kid, quite frankly, concerned him. As much as he intentionally left himself out of the loop in regards to his brother and great nephew's science adventures, he still noticed when Dipper came back from the woods with claw marks on his legs or emerged from the basement with mild electrical burns.

"Hey Dipper..." He spoke with a mildly uncertain tone, trying to pick his words carefully going forward. "When we get everything back to the Shack, how about you take a break from all this, at least until the leg heals? Me and Ford could go back into the portal instead, and I'll introduce these other worlds to the New Jersey school of boxing, eh!?" Stan had gained more confidence the longer he spoke, and ended his sentence by patting the pocket Dipper knew he kept his brass knuckles in.

Dipper looked up at his grunkle, a little surprised but appreciative. "That's great of you to offer Grunkle Stan, but I want to see this through to the end. Bill's done too much to me and the people I care about. I want to be the one to kill him." He spoke intensely, but lightened up a moment later and the rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. "Of course, it'll probably be Grunkle Ford who does him in eventually. I'll be happy just knowing he's gone."

Hearing something like that come from his great nephew actually made Stan balk a little, though he kept his expression well under control. "That's... that's a bit of a grim thing to say Dipper." he said in a soft tone, grappling with it himself.

"Well, it's just what you always tried to teach me: if the world hits me, hit back." Dipper replied starkly, causing Stan to wince a little.

"I'm not a good role model kid!" Stan blurted out, feeling a heavy mix of emotions as it struck him just how thoroughly Dipper had internalized his lessons from the very first summer. "And I was talking about, you know, real stuff! Like muggers or cheating bosses or cops or broads who just want your money! Not, you know, all of this!" He explained, while sweeping his hands about as if to hold all the mysteries of Gravity Falls in his hands as an example. "Dipper, why would you ever want to live the kind of lives me and Ford went through!?!"

Dipper seemed surprised that this was the direction the conversation had taken, but quickly composed an answer none the less. "I'm not living the kind of life you lived at all Grunkle Stan, and with Grunkle Ford's guidance I'm traveling down a much safer, better known version of his path, the path of working to improve mankind through uncovering knowledge."

The old conman rolled his eyes at Dipper's reasons, but quickly composed an answer none the less. "I'm not living the kind of life you lived at all Grunkle Stan, and with Grunkle Ford's guidance I'm traveling down a much safer, better known version of his path, the path of working to improve mankind through uncovering knowledge."

The old conman rolled his eyes at Dipper's reasons, but tried to do so below the young man's notice, an attempt he failed at. He then let out a defeated sigh and attempted to say in a nonchalant and dismissive tone. "Fine, fine! I'm only trying to keep the promise I made to your parents that first summer to keep you and your sister safe, but clearly you're a grown man at this point!"

It was at this point that Pacifica, who had until now stayed out of the conversation due to the general awkwardness of a non-family member entering into it, cut in with "That's a rich sentiment coming from someone who nearly killed Dipper and Mabel due to his own lack of reading comprehension!"
Dipper seemed surprised by Pacifica's sudden barb, but Grunkle Stan shot back before he could try to mediate. "This is a FAMILY discussion blondie, keep your stuck up nose out of it!"

"It's all about the family for you, isn't it? Except for the time you decided to risk killing every living member of your family with the original portal, on top of the rest of the world, just so you could clear your conscious of your own mistake!" Pacifica responded, quick as a whip. Dipper, who had turned his head towards the old man to say something to him, practically got whiplash turning back towards Pacifica to speak to her, but felt the words die in his throat as a chill went down his spine.

"How do you know about that?" Grunkle Stan asked in a low, cold voice that conveyed by tone alone he already knew the answer while narrowing his eyes. "Dipper, we all agreed that was to never leave the family."

The young Pines twin felt a flash of nervousness at his grunkle's uncharacteristic anger at this subject, but managed to swallow it within seconds in order to deliver a calm, straightforward defense of himself and his friend. "We did agree to that Grunkle Stan, but as the years went on, me and Ford resumed work on developing the portal technologies and Pacifica was becoming increasingly helpful to us. It was prudent for her to understand everything about the project." He explained curtly and calmly. Then, with a more sly tone of voice, added at the end "Come on Grunkle Stan, YOU of all people are going to get on someone's case for breaking a promise and dishonest behavior?"

That last one, admittedly, had been a minor fib. While many of the long and emotional conversations Dipper and Pacifica had had over the years he'd been in town as Ford's apprentice were about bringing her up to speed with the phenomenon of the two scientists' efforts to study them, the specific conversation about the opening of the portal and the return of the author had been a cathartic vent about Dipper's lingering fear of death and a deeply buried sense of betrayal towards his sister he always hated himself for carrying.

Stan had clearly been prepared to argue back, mouth open and index finger raised to pontificate, but Dipper's reference to his lack of any kind of moral high ground visibly deflated the old con artist. "Well, you got me there kid." he conceded graciously. Everyone sat in awkward silence for a few moments, not having any fresh arguments on hand, and further attempts to formulate more words were thankfully disrupted when Ford and Mabel emerged from the tree line hauling a corpse behind them, which fortunately defused the awkward conversation.

The laboratory beneath the shack was always kept cool to preserve the samples and experiments stored down there, but on this day the temperature was even lower than normal. Additional freezers had been carried into the general purpose room, a spacious square shaped chamber with a large, solid table built into the floor in the exact center upon which many things could be placed for whatever needed to be done that day. The extra freezer space was kept chill by the dizzying number of outlets along the walls, into which the devices were plugged. All of them sat on the floor however, as the objects which they'd been brought in to provide exclusive storage to were still deposited on the center slab, still assembled in the form of the now dead attacker from the woods.

While the three adventurers rested and recovered from the attack in the woods after a much safer drive back by the older twins, Ford had gone about prepping the body for dissection. Radiation scans had been carried into the general purpose room, a spacious square shaped chamber with a large, solid table built into the floor in the exact center upon which many things could be placed for whatever needed to be done that day. The extra freezer space was kept chill by the dizzying number of outlets along the walls, into which the devices were plugged. All of them sat on the floor however, as the objects which they'd been brought in to provide exclusive storage to were still deposited on the center slab, still assembled in the form of the now dead attacker from the woods.

While the three adventurers rested and recovered from the attack in the woods after a much safer drive back by the older twins, Ford had gone about prepping the body for dissection. Radiation scans had been run, the body had been bathed in anti-bacterial and anti-viral solutions, curse breakers were cast, and finally an X-Ray had been used on the corpse to ensure nothing explosive had been sewn into its guts. In the end, everything had come back clean, but even the slightest hint of Bill Cipher meant one must be prepared for all manner of nasty tricks.

Then, once the safety checks were done, the body had been laid out on the slab, and all needed supplies had been arranged around the general purpose room, Ford went upstairs and asked Dipper if
he'd like to assist him with the dissection.

"Sure thing Grunkle Ford, I'll be ready to assist in about twenty minutes." He responded simply, a hint of enthusiasm to his voice even, causing all the surprised and somewhat disgusted expressions in the room to shift from the older scientist to the younger one.

"Uh, bro-bro, does dissection mean something else around here?" Mabel had asked, trying to keep a jokey tone about her despite how unexpectedly uncomfortable Ford's blunt announcement had made her. "You know, something other than taking the pointy bits to a dead body and taking it apart like a LEGO kit you're done with?"

"That's a very crude description Mabel, but no, dissection doesn't mean anything unusual here. It still means taking apart a once living organism to learn more about it." Dipper answered her with a somewhat flat tone to his voice, having already gotten out of his bed to slip on a thick laboratory coat.

"The only thing you should be learning about right now is the other side of the pillow Dipper!" Grunkle Stan spoke up, concern managing to cut through his usual gruff tone. "It's... it's too soon for you to be running around doing science when you should be getting rest."

"I've been in bed for seven hours Grunkle Stan, I'm ready to get back out there by now." He responded, tone a little dismissive before hardening with resolve. "Besides, this could be the advance scout for another attack on us by Bill. We need to learn everything we can about the situation as quickly as possible."

Stan let out a sigh, sinking back into the chair he'd been sitting in, before waving and speaking dismissively. "Fine, you two go do whatever you got to do. Just remember not to dump those bloody lab coats in the main washing machine again!" He yelled, before mumbling "All those fancy college degrees and he never learned how to get out a good blood stain..." to himself.

Now, the two scientists were downstairs, fully kitted out in protective gear and looking over the anatomically posed, monstrous corpse. In the time since it's death the body had dried out, skin stretching tight over the bones as the sizable muscles beneath began to bubble or deflate from rot. Close examination revealed patches of thin scaling on the humanoid monster's body, the patches harder of composition but the same shade of color as the skin around them. The three eyes on the monster's round, bald head were drying out as well, creating an odd, spooky crease to the section of head tattooed to create a likeness of Bill Cipher.

First things first, an arcane radiation scanner was brought down to provide readings on the body. It was a clunky box with a tube on one side and various setting dials on the other, mounted over the table upon a maneuverable arm, just like the teeth viewing lamp used in a dentist's office. Ford moved the scanner up and down the monster's body while Dipper sat at a laptop, interpreting the data the scanner collected. "Arcane radiation is level across the body, fading at rates consistent with death. If he has any more tricks, they're too good for our equipment."

"We must press forward in that case." Ford replied, sliding protective goggles over his eyes while bringing a tray full of sharp instruments to bear. He began with sharp incisions across the scalp, carefully dissecting the layers of skin the Bill Cipher effigy had been branded into with ink. After a short series of cuts, the entire skin layer peeled away easily, and Ford place it in a jar full of preservative chemicals and a radiation proof seal to the lid. "One of the chemical tests we perform will be on the ink used to tattoo that, it could reveal valuable information about where this assassin came from." he explained.

Dipper nodded in easy understanding. He was wearing identical eye protection as his Great Uncle,
and had discarded his hat for the dissection, letting his birth mark shine free on his forehead. Starting at the feet, Dipper had been performing more preparatory work, making long incisions through the skin to divide it into sections that could easily be folded back to examine the anatomical structure beneath. He's prepped one entire muscular leg by the time Ford had removed the skin section.

Next, the senior scientist worked to delicately remove the specimen's eyes, scooping them out while preserving as much nervous tissue as possible and setting them inside smaller jars of preservative, helpfully labeled "left," "right" and "center" to keep clear which removed eye was which. Ford cut open the creature's large nose next, digging deep into its sinuses to both scoop out the slimy accumulation with, cut free tissue samples of the sinus lining, and used a pressure canister to suck air out of the creature's long silenced lungs, all useful tools to figure out what sort of atmosphere their native world had. Finally, he cracked open their mouth to examine their jaw composition and pluck a few teeth, key means to figure out what a creature had evolved to consume.

By the time Ford was done examining their specimen's head, Dipper had prepped the skin on the right leg, right arm and torso, and the two mutually decided to begin looking beneath. Despite being a heavy, thick sinew, the skin peeled back easily enough, and Dipper worked to clear accumulated yellow fat off the muscles of the arms, though he ultimately had little to do: the creature was extremely muscular.

"Musculature is well beyond the ability of a human being to develop." Dipper noted in a neutral, observational tone, jotting everything down in a notebook he kept in his inner coat pocket. After completing that observation, the young man seem poised to write further, but held the pencil in place with a small questioning look on his face, expression almost completely obscured by his safety goggles.

"Something wrong Dipper?" Ford asked, looking up from his task of sawing through the creature's ribcage. The older uncle was well tuned to the tics and expressions of his great nephew after all the time they'd spent together.

"Well, this sort of muscle mass doesn't seem consistent with how it attacked us in the forest. Something like this should have easily slipped out of my rag hold and ripped me in half." Dipper explained, absentmindedly tapping his pencil eraser in contemplation against the flayed corpse. "But then again, it was a stress situation and I hardly have any hard data to back that, so I'm not sure it was worth recording..."

"Dipper, it's always better to have too many notes than too few. You should never feel like you need to hold back ideas or observations you come up with. Worse comes to worst, we can edit the reports down a bit." Ford responded encouragingly, then gestured for him to come to his side of the table. "Besides, I think I might have an explanation for you..." The experienced scientist trailed off, but directed Dipper to help cut through to the specimen's digestive system. The degree of anatomy it shared with humans was curious but not really something they could dwell on at the moment.

It was an significant effort to reach the digestive system, as large slabs of bulky muscle tissue had to be cut apart, hauled out of the body and deposited in bins. When Dipper did eventually reach the target, he nearly punctured the object of their exploration due to not seeing it. "THAT'S the stomach!?" The apprentice asked, and would have scratched his head if his gloved hands weren't dripping with surgical gore. "This... doesn't make sense. Can the creature photosynthesize somehow?"

"Arcanosynthesis is what I think actually." Ford responded as he began to clear away more muscle to get a better look at the stomach and intestines, smaller than they'd be on an adult human, despite the creature's significantly larger bulk. "While I don't have enough evidence to call it a theory, I have
a hypothesis about magical creatures that several of my experiments have supported." He explained while carefully lifting the small intestine clear of the body with a hook for a better look. "On earth, all energy in the ecosystem comes from the sun, which is captured directly by plants, then the plants are eaten by herbivores and the herbivores are eaten by carnivores. The chemical reaction of the sun burning drives all life on earth, and we're all eating solar rays no matter our diet. The exception being the chemical vents of the extreme deep sea, but I digress."

"However, across the multiverse, magic, or arcane energy, flows in abundance, a curious free flowing energy without an identified source, like our sun. For whatever reason, Earth does not seem to possess any of this energy outside of the Gravity Falls geographic area, and even here levels are extremely low compared to the multiverse." Ford continued on, Dipper fiercely taking notes at this point. "Unlike solar energy, which requires specific organelles for a lifeform to interact with and harvest them, arcane rays interact with organic matter quite easily, entering the body non-harmfully and responding to mental wavelengths to some extent. Many of the magical creatures that I've dissected, which only live here in Gravity Falls, have similarly insufficient energy collection organ systems compared to the energy using structures of their bodies. I think magic is a sort of physiological shortcut, which allows organisms to develop physiques and body systems they could not normally sustain with their organ systems in an earth environment."

"So... if they guy was physically adapted to a very high magic environment, the reason he didn't rip me and Mabel in half is that he was cut off from his usual fuel source and his muscles were weaker?" Dipper deduced, asking his question with unburdened curiosity, a habit he developed due to Grunkle Ford always encouraging him to ask any questions he might have and always responding with sincerity.

"Spot on Dipper. Or at least, that is what my current hypothesis is." Ford responded proudly, but quickly amended his statement. "Keep in mind, a key trait for a scientific mind is an openness to being wrong. You cannot make true progress if you alter your results to match your hypothesis." However, after a moment of thought, he retrieved a larger box of sharp tools from a counter. "Of course, we're not working on my Arcane Radiation hypothesis and the potential application as a renewable energy source right now, we're trying to figure out where this thing came from and if Bill Cipher is waiting for us there, so we need to get cutting! I've prepared a chart of everything I need extracted for testing based on the x-rays I took earlier."

We that said, the two went to work fully dissecting the creature from another world, communicating minimally to transfer vital information, but both were invested fully in the work. When the job was done, at least four hours later, what was left on the table could only be called a corpse charitably: A gangly mix of narrow flesh strips and fatty muscle chunks hanging loose and patchwork over an incomplete skeleton. The numerous refrigerated storage units had been packed to the brims with sample jars containing every conceivable part of the assassin's body, from sections of skin to fully preserved bones that didn't quite line up to the human skeleton.

Ford and Dipper looked around in satisfaction, a job well done, but both knew the work was only beginning. Every collected sample would need to be analyzed to learn as much possible about whatever dimension this assassin had come from. Once as much data as possible was fully collected from their collection of samples, it could all be entered into the computers operating the portal's viewing functions, letting them filter through dimensions and locate the ones their assassin could potentially come from, and from there, they could perform a much more focused search for Bill.

"Well, looks like we've made a real pile of work for ourselves, huh Grunkle Ford?" Dipper asked in a jokey tone of voice to cover the fact he was rather tired.

"Yes Dipper, I think we have. I'm afraid game night is probably going to have to be cancelled for the
immediate future..." Ford replied, mentally weary after the large amounts of exacting fine detail work they'd just done, but still determined to continue the project forward. "Still, I think with the mountain of work we have ahead of us, it's time to call in the rest of the family."

"You need me to go do your shopping for you?"

One stock inventory later, Dipper had gone upstairs to ask the rest of the family for help while Stanford prepared the tests they did have the supplies for. Mabel was looking at her brother with a difficult to read expression in response to his request and the list of things he held in his hand. Inside of his mind, Dipper was trying to figure out if she was genuinely upset about something or was just making fun on him.

"Think of it as a supply run." Dipper replied to her. "We don't have all the stuff we need to carry out the tests that will tell us where Bill is, so it'd be very helpful if you could go out and get this stuff for us while we use the tests we are equipped for." When he was done explaining, the boy fished a set of keys out of his pants pocket. "You'll need to take the van though, you'll need the extra space to fit everything. I already cleared all my science equipment out of the back and left the money you'll need in the glove compartment."

Mabel's previously hard to read expression sunk to one of unambiguous nervousness and tension. She nervously tugged at her hair and was trying not to look at Dipper when he mentioned the van. "Mabes, what's wrong?"

"Dammit, he knows me too well. Curse my extremely expressive face!" Mabel thought to herself, realizing she had no option but to come clean. "Dipper... I don't have a drivers license." she explained, looking at her feet briefly. "But not for lack of trying though!" she added on quickly, perking up to express herself. "I took that test as many times as they'd let me bro, I just... never, uh... passed." Mabel's explanation trailed off as she realized her explanation might not be helping her case.

"Oh, that's so unfortunate. Don't worry Dipper, I can take care of this supply run for you." Cutting into the conversation, Pacifica entered the room and took the keys out of the boy's hand, before regarding Mabel with an expression that mixed pity with some gloating on top. Mabel, for her part, was instantly snapped out of her nervous funk by Pacifica's challenge and narrowed her eyes at the other girl in response.

"Actually, do you two think you could do this together?" Dipper asked, a request he wanted to make as soon as Mabel explained she couldn't drive, but was already starting to regret with the way the two were looking at each other. Both of them looked aghast at the idea of having to work together, but Dipper gave them both his most imploring look, adding "If you work together, we'll have everything we need back here sooner, and we'll be able to track Bill down even faster. Please, can you do this for me?"

The effect his request had on the two was instantaneous, both of them lightening up right away. "Sure thing bro-bro! You can count on your sister to bring back all your science stuff!" Mabel responded, brightening up while turning her eyesight completely on her brother and away from Pacifica.

The blond in question had a much less cheerful response, but besides a roll to her eyes relaxed her tense body language. "Alright, I'll take your sister out shopping with me. You're lucky you're cute when you beg like that Dipper..." While she had said those words while looking to the side and seeming dismissive, her eyes widened and she blushed a little when she realized she'd called Dipper cute.
Dipper, in turn, seemed taken aback by Pacifica's slip up, feeling his chest collapse like he'd had the wind knocked out him while his face lit up as well. "Wait, what!?"

Mabel on the other hand was as quick as ever, responding to the situation by wrapping both her arms around one of Pacifica's and dragging her towards the door. "Alright, girl's night out!... Girl's afternoon out, girl's... girl's shortly before midday, what time is it even, I kinda lost track of the day, need to draw my watch a new battery..." Her intentionally loud talking got fainter and fainter as the two moved through the Mystery Shack, and eventually became unintelligible when the front door shut behind them.
The unassuming white van used by the residents of the Mystery Shack glided softly through downtown traffic, Pacifica Northwest at the wheel with a sustained look of mortification on her face while Mabel Pines sat in the passenger seat, arms crossed and observing the passing town. They hadn't been driving for very long and hadn't said anything to each other so far. While stopped at a red light however, Pacifica took a deep breath in, and decided to break the silence between them.

"Mabel, could you please check the list and see where we're going first?" She asked the girl next to her, in a mildly distracted but otherwise normal tone of voice.

Looking away from the window towards the driver, Mabel remarked "What, little miss perfect doesn't have the whole list memorized?" in an unusually snide voice for her.

Pacifica scowled a little at this, but kept her eyes on the road and stayed calm. "Well Mabel, I just want to make sure we're going the right way, and a safe driver always keeps their eyes on the road and doesn't let her attention slip towards distractions." she explained in a measured tone, though the jab put in the words was not lost on the Pines Twin. "So please, help us both and check the list."

"Ugh, fine." Mabel snorted, before pulling the slightly crumpled shopping list out of the cup holder where it had been stored. "Let's see, item number one on Dipper's big list of science knick knacks is... Her somewhat bored reading of the list became more surprised as her widening eyes actually processed the first item on the list. "...A gallon of animal blood!?"

"Oh good, we're right by the butcher's shop on Woodpecker Street." Pacifica remarked with exaggerated casualness, getting a little grin at Mabel's grossed out reaction. The van began changing course for the mentioned business, making an abrupt but non-dangerous turn out of a lane Pacifica had originally intended to keep driving down. "There's a alley we can park in there, you can stay with the van while I go talk to the guy in front."

The casual reaction of the blond girl to the first item on the list only left Mabel more baffled. "Wha... wait, WHAT!? WHY DOES DIPPER NEED THIS MUCH BLOOD!?" She sputtered out, finding this a weird direction for Ford's apprenticeship to have taken. "Are you people, pa...painting hopscotch trains in animal blood to summon even more demons from hell!?" Then, a sudden, horrible realization crossed her face, and Mabel yelled out "IS THIS WHY I HAVEN'T SEEN GOMPERS ALL TRIP!?

"Mabel, don't be stupid." Pacifica responded, shifting her hands so she was steering with one while the other raised fingers to count out the points she soon explained, all while keeping her eyes on the road and not even looking at the girl she was talking to. "One: You summon DEVILS from Hell, that's just basic knowledge. Second: Gompers got eaten by a Chupacabra, like, two years ago. I didn't even know you guys had a goat until it happened actually, he never did much." Mabel recoiled a little at this unexpected revelation, but the majority of her distress was caused by a mental flash of the same fate befalling her beloved Waddles.

"Third: This animals blood has a lot of potential uses in bioscience, and this butcher would just throw the stuff out normally, we're not killing and extra animals for it." Pacifica explained. "It's used as a component of the nutrient beds in the petri dishes test bacteria are grown on, it works as a fertilizer for botanical projects, it can be processed into meal pellets for carnivorous aquatic specimens, plasma..."
protein works as an emulsifier, and of course it's just good planing to have some bags of it around in case you need vampire bait."

Mabel was about to respond to this lengthy explanation when Pacifica cut her off with "We're here." and began exiting the car without a moment's wait. Still buckled into her seat, Mabel quietly muttered "Yeah, well... YOU'RE an emulsifier..." before getting out herself.

The van had been driven into a fairly wide alley between to buildings that exited onto another street on the other end, allowing them to come and go without backing into a busy street. The butchery the two were here to visit had a study iron door atop a few steps that would open into the alleyway, but Pacifica had already walked towards the street to enter the establishment from the front, leaving Mabel behind, standing by a large dumpster that smelled exactly how you'd expect the dumpster outside a butcher shop to smell like.

After a minute Mabel was ready to ignore Pacifica's demand she stay with the van and enter the front of the business herself, but a sudden rattling from the dumpster spooked her. At first, Mabel looked mildly embarrassed, catching her breath right away and remarking "Calm down Mabes, probably just a stray cat." she said to herself to calm down, but very quickly, an eyebrow creasing look of worry got on her face. "Then again, I am back in Gravity Falls. That could very well be the noise of hundreds of animal entrails winding themselves together to rise up and take revenge on the humans who butchered them!" she spoke to herself, each word spilling out as soon as the idea it represented came into her head.

After a moment of holding her muscles absolutely tense to not make any noise that could alert the potential creature, Mabel's eyes widened in realization. "Oh my god is this what it's like to be Dipper all the time!?"

Soon enough though, both of her hypotheticals were proven false, when an adult man stood up inside the dumpster, revealing himself to be the source of the noise. His eyes, which held incredibly shrunken pupils, looked at Mabel like he hadn't expected her to be there, all while his body slowly uncurled itself from dumpster diving position to a more upright, though still somewhat crooked, posture. Every inch of the change of position was slow and heavy, and every creek of the muscles sent a noticeable jolt of pain through the man's body.

Mabel, for her part, simply stared at the dumpster diver with more surprise than anything else. The first thing she noticed about him was that he was incredibly sweaty, but for someone rooting around in trash he wasn't badly dressed. His outfit was rugged, a little worn and stained with blood and viscera of course, but underneath all that it looked to be in okay shape: An older set of more rugged clothes someone would put on to do hard work, rather than the worn down rags you'd see on someone who only owned one outfit and lived on the street in it.

Confused, surprised silence reigned between the two of them, Mabel not being sure what to say while the man in the dumpster was rolling his tightly closed mouth together with chewing motions, as if he had something to say but physically couldn't get the words out. After waiting for the stranger to speak a little longer than was comfortable, Mabel took the initiative. "Hello there! How are you doing today?" she asked, flashing her still new feeling braces-free smile.

The man in the dumpster smiled back at her, seemingly reflexively. This revealed the fact he was short a few teeth, and upon closer examination Mabel noticed a few lesions on the man's face, as well as an odd, sluggish limpnness to his facial muscles. Finally, he spoke, slurring out a short series of words: "Going alright little missy. I seem to have misplaced my... my wallet though, and can't pay the bus to go home. Could you help a guy out?"

Mabel froze in place as she processed the man's request. The only money she had on her right now
was what Dipper gave her and Pacifica to pick up supplies for him and Ford and Mabel really wanted to do a good job for them this time, but at the same time she was struck by how much this dumpster diver seemed to be in need of help, scrounging around in the trash for bus fare...

Her decision ended up being made for her however, as the side door to the butcher's shop opened up, Pacifica stepping out with a gallon sized bleach bottle that had been refilled with thick red liquid, followed by the butcher himself, a mildly portly, sweaty man in a stripped outfit beneath a wide white apron, though the most noticeable thing about him was the black eye-patch he had over his left eye. They seemed to be chatting amicably, but upon sighting the man inside his dumpster, the business owner began yelling at and attempting to chase the dumpster diver off.

Mabel found herself involuntarily flinching as the filthy man climbed out of the dumpster in her direction, but he ultimately ignored her completely to flee the alley, running with a heavy, shambling gait. For his part, the butcher didn't have any intention of pursuing, simply looking to scare him off. Once he was gone, he resumed speaking to Pacifica.

"I'm sorry about this Miss Northwest, I'm planning to put some locks on the dumpsters out here. This won't happen again, I promise." The butcher apologized, but Pacifica didn't seem too concerned with him. Then, the meat worker turned his attention to Mabel, looking at her with concern in his one visible eye. "You are, uh, unharmed, right?"

"I didn't realize Grunkle Stan's 'dashing eye-patch' thing was catching on around here." Mabel blurted out thoughtlessly. She'd found herself staring intently at the business owner, noticing that his one visible eye was similarly shrunken, and he had his own clumsy gait about him that couldn't be solely attributed to his weight.

Pacifica seemed mortified by Mabel's comment, while the butcher was more surprised, but after a moment realization dawned on his face. "You must be Mabel Pines, right? Dipper and that old rascal Stan talk about you a lot, welcome back to Gravity Falls. Your great uncle sold me this eye-patch as a matter of fact, kept me from needing to go to a doctor and get a bunch of questioned ask. After all, this would be a little tricky to explain to a medical professional..."

Then, without prompting, the butcher peeled the eye-patch back to reveal what's underneath: A fully formed human eyeball, fitted snug into its socket, but completely turned to stone, and presumably useless. Mabel gasped a little while Pacifica just tried subtly look away. "Yeah, after I got let out of the whole "throne of human suffering" thing, damn eyeball didn't change back from stone like the rest of me. It's easy to ignore most of the time, but sometimes it bounces around if I move my head too fast and a pointy bit catches on the inside. Gives me a migraine, but it could be worse! I know I guy three blocks down who got the mother of all kidney stones from that... in the sense one of his kidneys literally didn't turn back from stone, hehe." Despite the cheery air the butcher was expressing, there was something distinctly nervous and forced about his laugh at the end. His chattering came to an abrupt end as his brain seemed to catch up to his mouth, and the man quickly flipped the eye-patch back into place. "...I, uh, may have said too much there, I'm sorry. Please don't spread any of this around, okay?"

"It's no problem, thank you again for bottling this stuff for us. Dipper or I will probably be coming around for more sooner than usual, thank you again." she replied dismissively, and soon enough the two girls were alone in the alley again, putting the container of blood into the back of the vehicle and getting back in.

"What was that all about?" Mabel wondered aloud in confusion, thinking about the two strange men she'd encountered, casting her thoughts back to the dumpster diver. "I hope that guy finds enough bus money..."
"Mabel, that guy wanted money to buy drugs." Pacifica remarked bluntly before shutting the back doors to the van.

"Pacifica, that's a terrible thing to say! Not all poor people are drug addicts you snob!" Mabel shot back, crossing her arms and scowling at the rich girl's judgmental tone.

Pacifica raised a finger to argue back with Mabel, but stopped for a moment as she realized she had just sounded pretty insensitive out of context. Instead, the blond put her hand up to her face and sighed with annoyance, before trying to explain things. "Alright, look, no, I mean yes, not all poor people who ask for money are going to spend it on drugs. But, here in Gravity Falls, the odds are likely that they are, what with the opioid epidemic that's going on." When Mabel tilted her head in confusion at this statement, Pacifica sighed before mentally formulating an explanation. They were both inside the van and buckled up now, though the vehicle hadn't started yet.

"Well Mabel, because Mayor Cutebiker, in all his brilliance and capacity for forward planning..." Pacifica explained, sounding intensely grouchy and sarcastic while describing the honorable mayor, "...decided that we all just shouldn't talk about the time a mind demon entered the physical world and used it as toybox to fuel his own sadism, very few people in this town are receiving any kind of professional therapy for the trauma they've endured or sufficient medical attention for injuries they sustained. Most of them don't even talk about it with their family, and of course, we don't have the Society of the Blind Eye around to just, take the memories away anymore. So, in response to the deep rooted physical and emotional pain they're dealing with, they turn to pain medication, most of which they work to get without a prescription, since that would require answering questions. Then, well, things spiral out of control and most people end up dependent on the stuff."

Pacifica took a moment to let her contempt filled voice fade, and when she spoke again it was in a more morose tone of voice. "Be glad he only asked you for money though. It's getting more and more common for people like that to get found after they've overdosed."

Silence reigned in the cabin of the van, lasting some time as Pacifica waited for some kind of response from Mabel. After a long few minutes of though, which involved a bit of hair chewing, the female twin said her response, having chosen her words very carefully. "Does Dipper have these kinds of problems?" she asked gingerly, a lot of regret coloring her tone.

"More than you could ever imagine." Pacifica responded to her, a cold tone to her voice. After a moment though, she added on that "Not, not with drugs though, he's not on anything, if you meant it that way. Honestly I think Dipper is in a better position than a lot of people here, he has a pretty wide circle of people he can just... talk about things with, and that helps a lot. Your great uncles, Wendy, Soos of all people turned out to be an incredibly supportive conversationalist..."

Mabel involuntarily smiled at the description of the handyman, she could have told Pacifica that for free even! However, she was also sensing something going unsaid within Pacifica's listing. "...What about you? Does Dipper talk about his problems with you?" she asked, on the cusp of a revelation. Sure, Pacifica had mentioned she and the boy had conversations about his original adventures in Gravity Falls, and that they'd had a fairly emotionally charged one after the Cipher graffiti scare that ended with Dipper beating a mentally disturbed man with a shovel, but Pacifica was making it sound like they were... long term emotional confidants or something.

Mabel, as wrong as she knew this feeling was, found that prospect incredibly disturbing, because as far as her emails and phone calls with Dipper had told her, her twin had been having the time of his life out in Gravity Falls, not expressing an ounce of his mental trauma to his twin during their correspondence. "Or maybe he did Mabel." The girl's inner voice expressed, a harsh tone ringing in her head. "Maybe Dipper's always been crying for help and you've been too dense to listen to him."
Pacifica was quiet for awhile before expressing herself, simply stating that "Yes. We talk about things. A lot." The unspoken information there, that Pacifica discussed her problems with Dipper just as much as he did with her, was easily picked up on by Mabel. The brunette couldn't help but sink into her seat, deflating somewhat as the words sunk in.

The first cognizant thought she was able to forge with this information "No wonder they're so crazy for each other."

The blond driver of the car, on the other, had leaned over the wheel of the vehicle, tapping her fingers against it with a sudden annoyed expression on her face. Pacifica was absolutely certain Mabel was going to respond to her extreme moment of emotional vulnerability with some kind of childish non-sequitur or pouty mockery, and was fully prepared to bring out some venom in response. As such, she was utterly surprised when Mabel simply responded with "Thank you Pacifica. For taking care of my brother."

Blinking several times with a look of surprise on her face, the blond stuttered out "Oh... You're welcome." in a confused but completely non-malicious tone. After a few moments of awkward silence, shades of her usual attitude slipped on and she stated "Alright, enough with the sappy stuff, we've sat here doing nothing for long enough. We have supplies to collect after all! Mabel, what's the next item on the list?"

The girl in the passenger seat ended grinning a little at Pacifica's desire to change the subject, and at the fact that her dialogue towards herself was less loaded with disdain than normal. "Right, next item on the list is, uh... I had it around here somewhere..." This joy turned to distress quickly enough, as Mabel rapidly patted herself down to try and find the shopping list, quickly realizing she'd misplaced it.

Pacifica rolled her eyes at this, but it was a gentler roll than usual. She quickly reached into her own pocket and produced a second shopping list. "Don't worry, I made a few copies." Mabel took the list with a mild flush of embarrassment, but quickly read out the next goal.

"Next we need... Five bottles of industrial soap. The cheap ones, specifically."

"Right, we can get that at the nearest bulk goods store. Read the rest of the list and figure out what else we can get there."

Back at the Mystery Shack, the preliminary round of tests had been completed, and further progress into the origins of the assassin would have to wait until the supplies returned. With nothing better to do, both scientists decided it was time to clean themselves free of the general stench of dissection. It was an odd smell, subtle but pungent, and always stuck to a dissection worker no matter how well their protective clothing shielded them from blood splatter and residue.

Ford, perpetual workaholic that he was, had volunteered to clean himself off with the emergency shower down in the lab so that he could begin inputting existing data into the interdimensional scanner as soon as possible. Their data profile was far from complete, but as long as the machine was running they might get lucky. This would allow Dipper to go upstairs and use the Shack's actual bathroom to clean up, something he was in desperate need of, seeing as he was the only member of the underground spring expedition who hadn't taken a shower since returning from that, and the odor of dried sweat mixed pungently with the stench of death.

This was an offer Dipper was happy to accept, as the boy's adventures had left him filthy at a level even he was beginning to have trouble tolerating, but he also had more... personal reasons to look forward to a long, private shower.
He was, after all, a 16 year old teenager, grappling with the grueling endgame stages of puberty.

As the hot water relaxed Dipper's slowly developing muscles, and the sturdy lock on the bathroom door isolated him from the world, the young man could finally relax, and de-stress himself. Unlike most boys his age, Dipper did not enjoy the process. That is to say, while he experiences the expected pleasant rush that comes with release, he always felt dirty afterwards. It's why he preferred taking care of this in the shower.

"Alright, let's get this over with." Dipper thought to himself, closing his eyes and beginning to formulate mental images. "Time to pay a visit to my legally distinct, original character: Vendy the crimson haired fur trapper." Even when thinking to himself about such matters, Dipper's voice was tinged with sarcasm, albeit in this case growing from his disgust with himself.

With a groan, Dipper set to work, able to picture a well practiced visualization of himself speaking to Vendy with uncharacteristic confidence and charm, her being taken with him, and then things escalating. For most boys Dipper's age, it would not have not been enough, but it had been some time since he had last un-stressed himself like this, leading to a fairly extreme, quick response by his body.

"Even though all my previous practical experience with girls taught me this is wrong, I CANNOT let these feelings build up to the point they interfere with my work." Dipper's thoughts trailed away as he justified himself. "If I need to act like a sweaty creep to keep a clear, scientific head, then I'll act like a sweaty creep in the confines of my bathroom!"

Trying to get back on track from his mental distraction, Dipper returned to his fantasy, letting his feelings resume flowing for a moment, only to attempt to slam down on the brakes and throw his eyes open with a shocked, panicked tinge to his pupils. Things had been going simple enough, he was imagining a finger trailing gently along his shoulder as the object of his dreams walked around his back to face the boy, but when she entered Dipper's frame of view, the imagined female form had changed, having lost all her red hair.

Instead, it was a long, flowing waterfall of bright blond.

The spell was broken, Dipper's eyes were wide open with a sudden shot of panic, and he needed both hands to steady himself as his legs quivered with weakness against a slick, wet floor. The feeling of surprised passed shortly enough however, leaving Dipper with a worried expression. "Oh no. It's getting more frequent." The boy moaned in a defeated tone to himself, new, conflicting feelings wrestling around inside of him. "I shouldn't do that again, this is going to make me things weird and I can't ruin my friendship with Pacifica!" Inside his brain, Dipper was pouring over his relationship with the blond girl against his will, and how it had developed over his years working as Ford's apprentice. Outside of his sister, she was the first true friend he had ever made that was his own age, who respected and even shared many of his interests. He couldn't imagine losing her now, and to his own stupidity as well.

"Wendy was amazingly cool for still being willing to hang out and be friends with my after my... less than ideal behavior towards her." Dipper was contemplating now. "Would Pacifica be as forgiving, if she found out about... all this?"

Silence ran through Dipper's head for a long couple of moments, and to his disgust finally formatted itself into a coherent thought. "Pacifica is really, really pretty though, right?" After a frustrated sigh and a pinch to his brow of annoyance, the boy finally trailed his hand away from his face and resigned himself to the matter at hand. "If that's what it needs today, that's what it gets. C'mon Dipper, let's get this over with."

After a lot of thought on this subject and others, strength returned to Dipper's legs and he was able to
stand up straight and step out of the shower, dreams of a long session forgotten. "Well, as long as Pacifica doesn't find out, I'll never have to learn how she'd react, will I?" he thought to himself, and soon enough Dipper was dried off, all clean, and ready to return to work in the laboratory. "All I need to do is keep this up for the rest of my life!"

Meanwhile, Stanley Pines had unexpectedly found himself out on the town, having left the Mystery Shack a little bit after the two girls had. During a final overview of the laboratory and its supplies, Ford and Dipper had realized they'd neglected to add one more item to the list: Some manner of inorganic object "imbued" with Bill's presence, whatever that means. Stan was down in the lab helping them move things and get equipment out of storage while they were discussing it, and while the talk about using a resonance echo to compare the spiritual vibrations of the subject with Bill's own arcane wavelengths had gone over the con man's head, their mention of just what they needed to run that test caught his attention, and Stan quickly volunteered to go out and fetch it rather than give Mabel and Pacifica another thing to do.

"Of course, I wasn't being completely honest with them. I guess I just never am." Stan thought to himself, with a sort of muttering tone inside his head, as his beat up old car drove away from the Mystery Shack in a reckless fashion. "I mean, I do want to help Mabel out, but all their nerd talk was getting a little overwhelming."

Despite his desire to get away from it however, Stan's mind found itself naturally drifting back to the dynamic between his twin brother and great nephew, how easily they worked with each-other, and how casual they were despite the fact that they were surrounded on all sides by a living thing they'd meticulously disassembled and stored in jars. The younger boy had even cracked a joke about the monster needing "a leg up in life" while feeding its rough equivalent to a femur into a grinder.

"Gee Stan, someone threatens his family, so the kid does something crazy that's probably illegal. I wonder where he gets that from?" The old man said sarcastically to himself as realization struck him. With a sigh, he began to wonder. "Maybe I was too hard on him, back then. Maybe I ended up making the kid a little too tough..."

However, as this train of thought led to its logical destination, Stan slammed the breaks on it and backpedaled. "No, I did what I had to, toughening him up just like my dad toughened me up!" He yelled with put upon pride inside the otherwise empty care, then hit a bit of a depressed slump. "Besides, he really needed it. I'd rather have him like this then have turned up dead at some point." He said, with genuine sadness to his voice.

Stan drove his car silently for a few minutes, navigating the streets of Gravity Falls with unusual caution. His thoughts continually drifted in the direction of his long dead father, and the brutal life lessons he had inflicted on his children. "He... he wasn't the nicest guy, yeah, but he made me what I am! Made me strong enough to fight back against this rotten world!" Stan grappled in his head, trying to push down wordless, emotional resentment with arguments he used on himself hundreds of times. "He was right to throw me out of home, I deserved it! And I needed to pass those lessons onto Dipper!"

His inner conflict now on the verge of tearing down a significant portion of his internalized world view, Stan abruptly threw his thoughts towards his twin brother and away from their father, crossing three lanes of traffic unannounced in the real world. "I gotta get Ford to give the kid a vacation at some point." he said grumpily, but then snorted "As if Dipper would even take it! He loves this messed up world of hunting mummies and busting pixie drug dealers..."

Further ruminations would have to wait however, as Stan had arrived at his destination: The burned out remains of the city pool. During Weirdmageddon, Bill had evaporated the contents of the pool so
it could serve as a giant bowl for whatever alien booze he and his friends were getting wasted on. The fireball he'd dropped to do so had leveled the life guard posts and supply shed, and while the evaporated Oxygen and Hydrogen weren't too bad, the cloud of cleaning Chlorine that had come out of the pool had become an intelligent, hateful cloud that flew into town to reenact the Second Battle of Ypres.

After that, a pool full of alien liquor was one of the least crazy things about Weirdmageddon, at least until Bill and his friends decided to spice things up by serving up flaming drinks. Of course, as per their nature, they figured it'd make things more interesting to set the drinks on fire all the way at the source, and to get yourself a cup you had risk your hand to the green burning flames. And of course, to make it more interesting they threw some humans into the inferno mix.

Stan to this day believed the ones who didn't come out of that pool were the lucky ones.

The abandoned property had the front gate locked of course, but Stan had yet to meet a lock that he, a little elbow grease, and a big crowbar couldn't get past. Despite performing this break in during the middle of the day out in public, Stan made no attempt to be subtle. The Pines family had a lot of leeway in this town these days.

As he stepped onto the charred poolside, the old man took a minute to remember, thinking back to when he and the twins had come here for a relaxing day out. "To think that little snot Gideon was the worst we had to deal with back then..." he mused with a little grin to his face. Then, it was time to get to work.

During the cleanup of the town, it had been discovered that a giant shot glass had been dropped in this pool and shattered at some point during the end of the world party, and attempts to clean it up had been non-starters so far, workers claiming to see strange and frightening things in the reflection. Ford and Dipper had surveyed the area, and had detected a significant mana presence in the area, and decided to simply close the place off and ward it with runestones until the levels had dropped to safer levels and could be moved without paranormal occurrences. A piece of glass from the bottom of the pool, regardless of size, would fit their needs perfectly, and as long as Stan was in and out quickly, he should have nothing to worry about.

That didn't stop him from accepting the metallic tasting tablets Ford had offered his brother before leaving, of course.

After making sure it would hold, and work as a way out, Stan climbed down a slightly melted metal ladder into the bottom of the pool, complaining about his back all the while. Instantly, he was suspicious. Even with his cataracts, Stan could tell there was more sitting on the bottom of this drained pool than broken glass, massive amounts of scattered trash, the kind that builds up with homeless habitation. In addition, the walls of the pool had been covered with multi-colored graffiti.

His suspicions were confirmed moments later when human figures rose from the trash heaps in response to Stan's shoes clattering against the pool bottom. Stan tensed up, but didn't back down. "Alright you otherworldly freaks, come and get some! I'm gonna send you back to whatever hell you crawled out of, then after you die from your internal bleeding there, you'll die and get sent to whatever super hell is waiting underneath that!" He threatened while slipping on his reliable pair of brass knuckles. Then, as the number of shapes got bigger, he discreetly began feeling for the handgun he'd holstered behind his back.

When the entire population of trash covered, lanky humanoids had stood up and directed their attention to the intruder, one of them spoke. "Wait, dude, are you Stan Pines?"

The squeaky, nasally tone of voice the question was asked in set Stan back, and after a moment of
looking closer at the figures, who were shedding more and more of the trash they'd been sleeping in, he realized they were just a bunch of skinny, dirty looking teenagers.

"Yeah, whose asking zitface?" Stan responded aggressively, taking note of the deep acne scars the teenage boy had on his face, hidden by long, stringy blond hair that covered his face. However, the boy barely seemed to register the insult.

"Yooooooo! It's Stan Pines my dudes!" He remarked, admiration dripping from every word. In a moment, he surged forward and threw a hand on Stan's shoulder. "Stan the man! Yo I've heard all about you man, I mean, the entire town has heard all about the famous Pines family, but I always thought you sounded the dopest!"

"Uh... really?" Stan asked, a little confused but definitely flattered. Feeling it a little, he added on "Well, I always was the one with all the personality between me and Stanford."

"Yeah dude, your thuggery is off the charts!" He complimented, and this caught Stan off guard again. "You shoplift, you counterfeit money, you flee the cops, you drive wherever you want and some people even say you beat up a bunch of CIA pigs with your bare hands!"

"I mean, well, I suppose most of that is true, but, uh..." Stan was very unused to being praised for his criminal activities, and cast his eyes around the group to see if the praise was universal, and to a strange sense of alarm inside him, it seemed it was. All around him were filthy, rail thin teenagers with glossy expressions, limp muscles, and an expression of admiration aimed right at him. Before he could respond though, his tour guide shoved an open palm under his nose.

"You want some pop man? This is the real good stuff, I promise! Straight from the pharmacy, no cut down or homebrew!" He explained, and Stan noticed he was being offered a handful of pills. "You can mix this with, uh, whatever we've got to smoke at the moment, then you look into the glass around here, and you can see forever man! You can see other worlds man!"

Gently pushing the hand away, Stan stepped back from the teenager and made a show of scanning the ground for a usable piece of glass. "I've had enough of other worlds to last me a second lifetime kid. I just need a piece of glass and then I'm out of here."

The teenager let out a low whistle at this. "Oh, I getcha! Don't get high on your own supply! That's why you're so cool old man! You're smart! You've been in this game so long you know ALL the tricks!" he praised, then looked side to side while seemingly not noticing all the others were still there. "Look man, if you're selling, I've got a fresh thirty or something bucks over in my sleeping bag over there."

Stan was beginning to get uncomfortable now. He'd left this kind of business behind decades ago. "Look, kid, if you think I'm so cool, take some advice from me: Go home, and take a shower! You keep laying around like this you'll all end up with mullets!"

At this point, the laid back teenager seemed to become agitated, shivering with limp, heavy muscles. "I ain't got no home man, I ain't got no home! Rules suck and homework's whack, and mom just spends all day screaming at the walls man! This place ain't home any more, my home is in hell!"

Every muscle in Stan's body was telling him to deck the increasingly jittery junkie and take off, but something about his young face, buried beneath layers of grime and stringy hair, stayed his knuckles. Instead, the old con artist cracked his back to bend down and grab a glass shard, then took off running for the ladder out.

The pool dwellers were growing increasingly loud and agitated, but their weary, heavy muscles were
no match for Stan's old man agility and they didn't seem to be actively chasing him yet. However, Stan quickly realized one had been standing behind him all along, and the filth crusted man was blocking the way to the ladder. Acting on instinct, Stan let loose a haymaker, feeling his fist sink into the crackling skin of the teen's face.

The strung out boy collapsed to the ground, spurting blood from several locations on his face, and Stan looked down at his fists with horror. "I forgot I put the knuckles on!" He cursed himself, and while a pang of remorse flowed over the old man's body, it was drowned out by his survival instincts, honed over almost a complete lifetime of shady living, which were screaming at him to escape. The one obstacle out of his way, Stan was easily able to climb the ladder and escape the pool, leaving the strange gang of youths behind.

He fumbled his way back inside his car and hit the gas, driving a few blocks away from the pool before coming to a stop and trying to calm down. Finally exhaling a long sigh, Stan's head collapsed onto the steering wheel. His car horn would be blaring right now if it hadn't been broken for at least two years. After a bit of depressed waiting, Stan abruptly checked his pockets to make sure he didn't have to go back to the pool: fortunately, a glass shard sat inside his suit pocket, safe and secure. The old man briefly caught sight of his face in the reflection, and wished he hadn't, quickly changing his view towards the picture of Dipper and Mabel her kept in the car.

"What are you doing to these kids Stanley?" He asked himself in a daze.

"And if you look to your left, dudes and dudettes, you can see the famous Gravity Falls face rock. Is it a rock, or is it a face? These are important questions!"

Outside the Mystery Shack, Soos was performing his duties as Mr. Mystery with aplomb, leading a thoroughly entranced crowd through the outside exhibits as the last leg of a tour. Once interest in the current attraction had faded, it was time to wrap things up. "That's the last of the attractions for today folks, but we're always uncovering new secrets here at the Mystery Shack! Make a second stop on your way back home and maybe you'll see something new! Or you might not..."

With the crowd dispersing back to either their cars of the gift shop, Soos didn't notice one man walking towards him instead until the group had mostly cleared away. "Oh, hello Mister Pines... uh, 2? Is it okay if I call you that, cause I've been calling your brother Mister Pines for a large section of my adult life..."

"You can call me Ford, if that makes things any easier." The old researcher replied, sounding a little formal in his conversation with the handyman, but still friendly enough. His professional demeanor did break for a moment though, as thoughts rushed behind Stanford's eyes, leading him to distractedly mention that "You know I don't think I've actually interacted with you before now. How has that not happened yet...?" In a tone of voice that implied he hadn't been asking anyone in particular.

"Don't worry about that Mister Pines, I understand you and Dipper are really bust, uh, "paving the way to tomorrow" as he said once." Soos replied dismissively. "I just run the front desk."

"You sell yourself short Soos." Ford returned, an unexpectedly warm compliment coming from him. "Stanley explained to me you worked as a general purpose repairman around the Shack, and during the additions I've made to the building I've been able to observe your workmanship first hand." His voice suddenly became more clinical and analytic. "It all obviously still shows signs of its amateur nature of course, lacking the application of more advanced engineering or architectural principals, and the quality of the materials you had access to goes without saying, but despite all that your repairs to the building show a large amount creative thinking, problem solving capacity and all possess an enduring durability you wouldn't have guessed from cursory examination." Ford's
eyebrows creased a little as his view got a little distant. "It's a shame this was the only outlet you've had for your talents all your life, you would benefit greatly from formal education as an engineer I think..."

Soos seemed like he was mustering a response, but Ford had a quick response to his own question he cut him off with. "Still, Dipper thinks very highly of you, and Dipper's seal of approval is the only one a person needs in my book. How are things going up here? Is the front business finding success?"

"It's pretty good dude." Soos replied, easing into the conversation despite his unfamiliarity with the other twin. "I mean, general numbers have been dropping off for awhile now, but the people who do come are still buying merch. The new Mystery Shack question mark brand umbrellas we put in recently are a big seller, it rains way more often up here than the TV shows would have people believe."

"Yes, I had hypothesized something like this might happen. This town was bound to amass a reputation after Bill's invasion, as much as the people try to fight it. The ugly scars spoil that scenic tourist amusement aesthetic, even when they're beneath the surface." Ford replied somewhat spaciously, having clearly not listened to Soos' complete sentence, though the second generation Mister Mystery didn't mind. After a moment of brooding, which Soos let him have, recognizing it as a behavior Dipper had displayed even before meeting his other great uncle, Ford snapped back to reality. "Yes, well, anyways I've come to help with that. I have a new tourist attraction for you!"

Soos lite up at this announcement, genuinely pleased at the prospect of a gift from the other Pines brother. "That's great Mister Pines, is it some kind of super science gadget that the kids can ride for a quarter?"

"Even better!" Ford announced, twisted around so he could remove the object from his coat without Soos seeing it early. With a theatrical, GM mode voice, he stated "BEHOLD!" while twisting around and revealing he had a blue colored, reptilian eyeball in his hand, about twice the size of a human eye and with the optical nerves still attached. "The prophetic eye of the dream warlock!" he announced with gravitas. Waiting for a reply with a cheesy smile on his face, Ford finally noticed Soos looked mildly disgusted and confused at the object, prompting him to hastily add "Don't worry, it was gouged out when I found it!"

"Oh, well, that makes it okay, I think." Soos responded, taking a much more relaxed tone. "You, uh, think it'll bring in tourists?"

"I'm certain of it!" Ford announced, turning the eyeball around to show Soos the individual nerve endings, not noticing his mild squirming at the sensitive tissue being handled by Ford's six calloused fingers. "I had discovered that, if you stimulate the nerve endings here with, oh, an 18 volt battery will do, it projects dimensional energy rays that let you create windows into other dimensions, if you project the wavelengths onto a specially treated canvas screen!" He explained excitedly, then frowned after a moment. "Well, it did. All the cones in this are burned out, so now all it does is X-ray anyone caught in the projection. I figured the kids could pay a dollar or so to get a picture with their skeleton visible."

At this point, Ford was offering the gouged eyeball for Soos to take, and it was obvious to everyone but Ford the former handyman didn't really want to touch it. "Uh, this is a great gift dude, that sounds awesome, but don't you need this for your research?"

"Think nothing of it my dear boy," He replied dismissively. "You'd be helping us by taking it, honestly. The recent necrotic analysis of our mystery attacker requires us to clear a lot of space out of the basement, so we're getting rid of a lot of exhausted samples, dead end research, failed prototypes,
etc. I'm sure this will generate a little extra money around the Shack."

At this point, Soos felt privately obligated to take the eyeball, and while it wasn't as slimy to touch as he expected, holding it between his fingers generated a discomfiting feelings of pressure on his own eyeballs, of which Soos was very protective. "I... appreciate the gesture, Mister Pines."

"Like I said, it's no problem." Ford dismissed with a wave of his hand. "Dipper got together everything else you'd need to make it a proper exhibit, so, if you'd like, you can show us exactly where to set things up."

"Oh okay. Thanks again." He responded while following Ford back into the building. "How's he doing, by the way? Dipper I mean."

"Prodigiously." Ford responded, voice brimming to full with pride in his student. "During out series of tests this afternoon, he conducted them to perfection with far less explanation than I had projected, and as a matter of fact, managed to refine as few of my ideas. You see, to look for comparative isotope levels, we normally..."

"That's great to hear, I mean, Dipper was always a smart dude, so no surprise there." Soos gently interrupted. "But I meant more like, how's he doing? Like, up here man." He elaborated, while poking his own head.

"Ah, yes. I see what you mean." Ford replied, with a bit of shuffle to his tone of voice. "Your concern is touching, thank you." he replied sincerely, before elaborating "We all undergo deep cortex mental scans upon returning through the portal, and Dipper's mind is completely free of Bill's influence every time. In addition, the psychic scrambler I've built into the Mystery Shack is active 24/7 until the battle against Bill is over."

"Is that why I feel fuzz inside my ear when I do this?" Soos asked absentmindedly in response to the mention of the psychic scrambler, before attempting to lick his own elbow.

"...No, I think that sensation might be purely psychosomatic." Ford responded slowly, genuinely puzzled at this.

"Right, I'll keep that in mind, thanks dude." The second Mister Mystery responded with idle content, before getting a little more serious again. "But, didn't Dipper, like kill someone recently? I hear Mabel mention that, but she once also said Dipper was going to kill her when he was threatening to take away her sewing needles after one landed in his arm."

At this point, Ford came to a stop in front of a door, taking off his glasses and rubbing the inside clean. "Yes, well, in this case you heard correctly. Dipper did recently dispatch an interdimensional assassin with lethal force. Purely self-defense, I assure you. More than self-defense even, as he protected his sister and Miss Northwest in the process."

Soos felt his feelings about this matter, and Ford's stark manner of speaking about it, roll around inside him, but before he spoke up again, the scientist had another thing to say. "I understand it's not the easiest thing to come to terms to, but make no mistake, we are at war will Bill Cipher. If he is successful, he'll kill us, and sooner or later everyone on earth. We have no other real choice in this matter, if I may be frank."

Soos was quiet for a minute, thinking back to his days as a wandering folk her during the end of the world. "I saw what Bill did to the world Mister Pines, what he did to people." The wise handyman remarked after breathing out a deep breath. "If there's anyone in this world I won't mourn, it's him and his cronies."
"Good man Soos." Ford replied, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. It was a rare gesture that Soos had always prized when Stan gave it to him, but the other twin's grip felt different, beyond just his extra finger. Ford, however, had cracked an earnest little smile now. "Now, let's get this object of interdimensional knowledge and power set up as a cheap tourist attraction!" The door was open now, and Ford was walking through. "Dipper, is everything set up?"

Following him through, Soos felt his doubts begin to recede but never vanish as he took in Dipper working alongside Ford, carrying the electrical wires, hanging up the screen and positioning the large batteries, looking so happy and content the entire time. "I once told Stan my only mission in life is protecting these kids..." he thought to himself. "...But where does that leave me when they stop being kids? Or stop wanting to be protected?"

It was much later in the day now, and the supply run was long over. Mabel had helped everyone unload the contents of the van and headed off to her upstairs bedroom, claiming she was worn out, while Dipper and Ford stayed underground to continue testing. Sitting flat on her bed, wide awake, the girl attempted to sort out her own thoughts.

She was trying to figure out her brother, specifically. "I never knew he takes all this stuff so hard..." Mabel muttered to herself, throwing her memories back to the first summer in Gravity Falls. Almost all of the ones she revisited brought a smile to her face, or at the very least she was indifferent to. Sure, the final battle against Bill had been kinda scary, but for the most part her memories of that incident were colored by her overwhelming dread that Bill would reveal she had given him the rift. She even chuckled a little while remembering how she tossed glitter in his big, stupid eye. "Hehe, guess he wasn't that tough after all." She said after a little more thought. "Couldn't even kill the Shack-tron with a muda barrage..."

"No, I think Bill was at his scariest when he had possessed Dipper..." Mabel's mind had wandered, and now she was frowning. She'd tried very hard to put that incident, and the note she'd discovered afterwards, out of her mind. It was one of the few times from that summer Mabel could remember being genuinely frightened and guilt stricken, and even now, this many years later, she could feel her well buried regret and fear from the incident boiling up inside her, threatening to flood every nerve ending and strike them hot with emotional pain...

"Stupid Pacifica! Why does she gotta be picking at that!?!" Mabel shouted abruptly, flushing the building feelings of hurt out of her with a white hot flash of anger towards the blond girl, and the dressing down she'd given her days ago about her treatment of her brother. At this point, the brunette sprung out of bed, beginning to pace around the room with a flustered gait to release some of the energy she felt building in her. "She has no right to make fun of me for that incident! She's part of the reason Dipper stays here, in this whack land of drug addicts and scary monsters!"

At that point, Mabel stopped talking because she felt an overwhelming need to breathe come over her. The anger inside her had built up to the point she felt like she was physically burning up at that point. With panting breath, Mabel walked over to an ice cold glass of lemonade she'd brought up with her and chugged it down, before reaching for a bag of gummy worms and swallowing a handful. Instantly, she felt the cool waves radiate across her body and the sugar sweetness explode in her mouth, overwhelming her as she chewed the candy into a rainbow paste.

Calmer now, Mabel sat back down on the bed, collapsing sideways on it this time. The anger had flushed out of her at this point, the tingling joy of her sweets filling in every nerve ending, giving her a gentle, enjoyable feeling of wholeness. "Good old sugar, I can always count on you when the blue feelings get a little too smothering!"

"Okay, right, got all that over with. Right, what was I thinking about again?" Mabel was musing to
herself, trying to figure out where her train of thought had derailed. "Pacifica, yeah! She and Dipper apparently 'talk' about all their problems. Why do they bother doing that!? That just keeps the pain fresh!" She figured. While Mabel did look back at her memories of the summer with mostly joy, she did have a few points of sorrow, with the potential loss of Waddles and both times she'd lost Mermando, ("Oh god I haven't thought about him for YEARS!" Mabel realized with a jolt) ranking highest, though both of them ended up paling in comparison to the loss she'd felt these last three years, at the absence of her twin brother.

Sitting in bed, the girl struggled against her painful memories, trying to push them back into the part of her brain that didn't think about things, but this time it was different. Instead of sliding into the closet so she could slam the door shut and lock it, Mabel's memories stuck fast and squirmed against her. Trying to push them down with her hands only resulted in the digits getting stuck and the bubbling, sticky material she internalized bad memories as crawling up arms.

A rare moment of self-reflection overwhelmed the twin, painful memories now demanding to be see and reviewed, like the sprout of a flower fighting against the dirt to reach the sun. As hard as Mabel tried to push them away and hide in sweater town, they broke through to her, replaying in front of her eyes over and over. Every moment where she felt bad about something overwhelming her. Then, as if the memories were content that they'd gotten to say what they wanted, they abruptly stopped sticking and fell back into Mabel's Mental Closet without resistance, and she slammed the door shut and locked it.

The girl had collapsed back on her own bed at this point, eyes widened and even sweating a little. "That was the most intense emotional rush of my life." Mabel thought to herself. "That strongest sadness was stronger than the happiest happiness I'd ever felt, which was... what is my happiest memory?" She found herself wondering. "Was it all the way back when Dipper shaved his head to be alongside me...? NO! That memory hurt, I've never thought back to that memory before and I'm not doing it again!" Mabel scolded herself, adding an iron bar to her memory closet. "Was it when I saw a unicorn for the first time? Such a bright rush overwhelming me... but no, that moment is retroactively ruined."

Mabel frowned, sorting through her memories. All her moments of great, overwhelming happiness were inevitably tinged with some kind of sadness, either in the moment or some later spoiling of it. "I think if you'd asked me this before I'd have said the day I got Waddles, but now I can't help but feel a little bit bad for Dipper at the time."

As she ran through her memories, the revelation gradually dawned on Mabel that there were times of pure emotional happiness, the ones she'd always reflect upon, purely good memories without any sad Sting to poison them with. Material moments, like drinking Mabel Juice, winning a poker game against Grunkle Stan, hanging out with Grenda and Candy, teasing Dipper about his voice...

But, there was an edge to those memories now, Mabel realized. The happiness she felt when recalling those was different than the happiness that came intertwined with pain. That happiness, for the brief, glorious moment Mabel could feel it before the pain drowned it, was a boiling inner light that left her feeling glowing and alive, before the sharp dagger of unhappiness carved holes in her body the light shined out of and escaped through, leaving in her in awful memories. This unambiguous happiness, the one with no strings attached, was a pleasant numb that fell upon her body from the outside, blocking out everything cold and hurtful from reality so her natural inner flame, healthy but reasonable, could be all she felt.

"That's what the bubble did to me..." she breathed involuntarily, the revelation overtaking her. Mabel's eyes widened, and she began to flail about against nothing. "No wait! Don't think about that, back inside thoughts!" But it was too late, understanding was overtaking her. Every good,
unambiguous memory, where she got everything she wanted and enjoyed herself without any personal drawbacks, was poisoned by her newfound, self-reflective discovery about the illusion bubble and the true depth, the true depravity of Bill Cipher's ultimate trap for her.

"I've been in that bubble my whole life." Mabel thought to herself, a sobering realization settling into her bones. "That bubble, that trap, was truly perfect. A tailor made, perfect reflection of my life. I NEVER would have escaped from it on my own, that thing could have held me prisoner until the sun exploded, if Dipper hadn't thought I was worth saving..."

Mabel's body language was becoming morose and despondent as she sunk into the bed. "Dipper..." she breathed out, taking a long moment to really think about her brother. "Is this what he's like all the time?" she wondered. As Mabel reviewed everything she had on her twin, she realized that while she had a lot of knowledge of his habits, his history and his actions, she actually knew very little about who he was inside, what made him tic. She had never expected him to stay in Gravity Falls, after all.

"No, I know my own brother perfectly well! Let's count his deep personal traits out!" Mabel thought to herself, defiant look on her face. "He's smart, and that's because... uh, because he is! He doesn't like to talk to people, somehow? I mean it's super easy, why does he gotta be so rude about it!? Dipper is, well, he's always wanted to grow up super fast, I guess because he just hates fun? ...He certainly got that wish..."

Try as she might, Mabel was gradually learning she had very little insight into who Dipper actually was, even before their separation.

"Mom and dad always told me that as long as I was happy, Dipper would be happy." She said to herself, and like a pile of bricks the absurdity of that statement came crashing down on her. "What have I done? What have I done?" Mabel breathed out, with far more confusion than most people who use that line carry. "I had the greatest, most supportive brother in the world and I never even tried to understand him. I... I don't know the first thing about who Dipper is!" she admitted with a tone of despair, before being overcome with a feeling of determination and jumping off her bed.

"Well, that changes today!" Mabel challenged, standing up tall. "From this day forward I'm going to be the most supportive, most loving twin sister on the planet!" She took one step towards the door, and stopped. As much as it was just a figure of speech, Mabel suddenly felt like every step of her ways weighed down by the pain that now infested all of her memories. The girl took a deep breath, and thought to herself "Maybe I'll even learn to live like this in the process." before taking another step forward.

"This is the key, I'm certain! If I can do this, I'll get my brother back!"

It was evening now, the last quarter of the sun barely peeking over the horizon. Dipper and Ford had gone below ground with their supplies to continue their work, while Soos had gone home with Melody, Stan had sat down to watch TV, Pacifica was reviewing the field supplies they had above ground, and Mabel had thrown herself into a flurry of activity, the first step in her self-proclaimed journey of re-integration to Dipper's life: She was attempting to make him and Ford some surprise dinner.

The idea had come to her during a chance encounter with Grunkle Stan, the two passing each other on the stairs. "Mabel..." the old man had brought her to a stop, tone of concern in his voice. "I... geez, this isn't easy to say, but I'm worried about your brother..."

Mabel let out a sharp, surprised gasp, putting her hands to the bottom of her mouth in shock. "Grunkle Stan, that's amazing! I'm worried about Dipper too!"
Stan seemed relieved to hear that, but he kept on a grim, troubled look about the subject while Mabel seemed eager and cheerful. "Look, I know the whole thing with Bill Cipher is a real threat or whatever, but do you think it would kill them to come up and eat dinner with us, as a family for one night?" he asked. "I'm not being unreasonable there, am I?"

"Does Dipper typically eat his dinner down in the lab?" Mabel asked, genuine curiosity on her face.

"I hope so, since I rarely see him eating up here..." Stan remarked sarcastically. "Look, do you think you could..."

"Way ahead of you Grunkle Stan!" Mabel bubbled over, able to reach up and place a finger on Stan's lips to quiet him after her growth spurt. "I'll do you one better even, and make sure Dipper gets something to eat tonight!" she declared, before taking off down the stairs.

And so, a little over an hour, as night was falling on the town, Mabel's masterpiece was complete, a three-course culinary construction created from the mismatched scraps and ends accumulated by three people who barely knew how to take care of themselves under one roof, and then to make it better, she'd created a second plate of food to feed Grunkle Ford as well. Each dish centered around an impromptu hamburger, make by pressing ground up beef and turkey into a patty squeezed between two slices of toast and topped with the remains of an apple, a banana, some cheese and few bacon strips Mabel had sent through a cheese grater. Added as sides were a scrambled egg to each plate, as well as a small pile of frosted cookies she'd flash cooked by turning the oven way past the recommended safety levels and putting in small cups of pancake batter. The kitchen had been left a dirty mess, but Mabel was satisfied with her creation.

The vending machine elevator dinged and Mabel stepped out, balancing one plate in her left hand while the other sat on her head. "Hey guys! I figured you might be hungry so I brought some dinner down!"

"Mabel, it that you!?!" She could hear Dipper call from deeper in the basement. "Set it down in the DD&MD room, I'll be right with you!" Mabel giggled and did so, laying both plates down, and abruptly realized, as she heard Dipper's footsteps approach her, that they had expanded down here over the years.

"Wow, I hadn't noticed how much space they've added down here the last few times I came here." She muttered to herself, only to brighten up and put a smile on when Dipper appeared in the doorway.

"Hey Mabel." he remarked somewhat uncertainly. "You made us dinner then? Uh, thank you, did Great Uncle Ford ask you to do this because I don't really remember asking..." Dipper rambled, keeping his distance to the entrance of the game room.

"NOPE!" Mabel cut off, closing the distance between them by herself to give her brother a hug, which he subtly stiffened at. "I decided to do this entirely on my own, as a gift for you two! It's almost 8 PM you know, surely you guys can take a little dinner break?"

Dipper's rumbling stomach ended up betraying him, and after carefully extracting himself from Mabel's grip, was able to talk Ford into taking a break from active experimentation to running data entry while they all ate. Soon enough, the two scientists were seated at the game table, laptop computer and two plates spread out in front of them while various piles of paper stacked here and there.

"So, what do you guys think?" Mabel asked hopefully after they'd both taken a bite.
"It's quite good actually." Ford remarked, speaking with his mouth full. "But if I'm being fully honest with you Mabel, everything on earth tastes good to me. Surviving on downed star spawn you'd shot down with acid blasters and the fungus scrapping to life on a chunk of rock floating through the ethereal plane will give you quite the appreciation for earth food." He hadn't meant it as an insult to what he was eating, it was simply the old scientist's nature to give someone all the relevant information when answering a question.

"Well, I've never done any of that, and I agree it's very good." Dipper added on, chewing and swallowing before he spoke. "Thank you Mabel." he added, but after a somewhat awkward moment of the two twins starting at each other while Ford simply typed away at the laptop while sometimes reaching for a fresh bite, he added "...Uh, you can go now, if you'd like? I'll bring the plates up when we're done."

"Can I stay and watch?" she asked unexpectedly. "Whatever you guys are doing, it looks interesting!"

Dipper responded to his twin with visual skepticism, but Ford simply beckoned the other twin over to take a seat. "You're quite right, it is! This singular portable computer is fully capable of operating the portal control systems, letting us run and program it from anywhere in the house! Amazing where computers have gone while I was away..."

"And so that is what let's us find Bill Cipher and hunt him down?" Mabel asked.

"Exactly!" Ford answered. "However, given that the multiverse is functionally infinite, we need some kind of trace to start narrowing down results by to look for him. The fragment of him we erased from your mind recently was a good lead on the first Bill fragment, but with that gone, it's fortunate we have a new sample to analyze. Otherwise, with all the recent interference, it could take us some time to lock onto him. You see, all energy flow in the multiverse..." While he was talking, Ford had reached for another charts result to type into the computer, only to realize it was the last one. "Dipper, please take over for a moment, I'm going to get more of our results."

Soon, Ford was out of the room, leaving Dipper to type away on the keyboard as Mabel scooted her seat a little closer to his. "So, what's this about interference Grunkle Ford mentioned?"

Dipper stopped typing for a second to compose his explanation before he began talking to his sister. "Well, you see Mabel, as we've researched things here, we've discovered that Great Uncle Ford's initial hypothesis was mostly correct, once we'd sorted out the lies Bill had initially told him. As it turns out, there's another dimension out there that is the source of the weirdness in Gravity Falls! But, it's more than that, as we've researched, we figured out it's the source of all the weirdness in the multiverse! Well, weirdness isn't quite the right word, more like it's a source of energy..."

"What does this have to do with finding Bill?" Mabel asked, genuinely confused.

"Mabel, let me explain everything or things won't make sense." Dipper answered her curtly. "So, like I said, there's something at the... center, is more or less the best way to describe it. An extremely alternate dimension that seemingly "flows" into every other, feeding them arcane psyco-radiation..." Dipper stopped, realizing he'd dropped a fairly technical term on Mabel. "...Which is magic. Basically there's one world where all the magic comes from, and it has... pipes, more or less going off of it that deliver magic to everywhere else in the multiverse. We can't actually see or travel to this "Arcane Dynamo" as Ford has named it, but all our readings know it's there, like how you can tell if something's underwater even if you can't see it."

The longer he spoke for, the more excited and invested Dipper seemed to get, Mabel noticed. "So, this center world is what makes Gravity Falls weird?" she asked. "Didn't Grunkle Ford talk about
"Yes, but that was an earlier hypothesis. Nowadays, we believe that anomalies develop here in Gravity Falls, and then a very limited number of them adapt to be able to survive outside and find environments in the rest of the world. The spell lattice of the planet Earth is wrong compared to the other dimensions and planets we've observed Mabel. For some reason, instead of flowing to the entire world, magic only flows here to Gravity Falls, making it the only place most "weird" beings could survive. Bill wasn't trapped by some kind of barrier, he was contained because his own power could not expand further beyond the source without exhausting itself." Dipper explained succinctly, fingers flying across the keyboard all the while.

Mabel blinked at her brother a few times, trying to process things. "So... earth has a magic pipe going to it, but someone put a manhole cover on top of it, but the manhole cover has a little loose spot where magic comes to Gravity Falls from?" she asked herself just as much as she was asking Dipper.

The question actually gave the boy pause, and he stopped typing to answer it. "You've... got the gist of it, essentially Mabel. Though in all our projections the system is significantly less euclidean than what you described."

Not understanding what that actually meant, Mabel pressed forward and asked "So what's with these disruptions you mentioned?"

"Something happened awhile ago on all our scanners, weird fluxes across the multiverse." Dipper answered, a dark look of contemplation settling across his face. "It was impossible for us to tell, since we can't actually see the source, but based on the readings we had from regularly observed dimensions, something was going on there, some kind of... decay or sublimation." He guessed with a frustrated sigh. "None of our equipment was calibrated to work with those settings, and it severely set back our search efforts. Whatever it was though, it seems to have passed. Luckily we have all this data to hunt Bill down with..."

Mabel was quiet for a long while as Dipper kept working, hoping he'd resume the conversation with her. He never did, and just as she was about to open her mouth to get them talking again, Ford came back into the room, a full batch of test results they could enter into the computer. Dipper instantly seemed to brighten up, engaging in vigorous conversation with Ford that Mabel could barely keep up with. Eventually, she excused herself from the room, and while the two did take the time to thank her again for bringing dinner in, she felt a bit of a hole in her heart.

"Tomorrow." Mabel thought with certainty, mopping around the vending machine and realizing how late it was right now. "Tomorrow, I'll figure something out to get some time with Dipper. Maybe I can convince everyone to take a trip to the city pool, then work out some kind of "distraction" for Pacifica after she "motivates" him to come along..."

But the twin's new, still formulating plan would never come to pass. Not because of the abandoned state of the city pool, which she was so far unaware of, but because by morning, she would discover the Mystery Shack was once again absent three people.

Early in the morning, the automated scanning equipment found a 100% match, and the three travelers were through the portal before Mabel woke up.
This was, from my experience writing it at least, a fairly heavy chapter, so in an unusual turn of events I feel the need to explain myself and some of the ideas I am putting into this fanfiction.

First, bringing a drug angle into this story. I understand it might seem like a sudden bit of cheap sensationalism to bring into the story, but ever since the show's finale I disliked the idea of the townsfolk simply attempting to cover up and not discuss the horrifying hell on earth they'd all gone through, viewing it as an insultingly comical ignoring of the real damage trying to suppress trauma and just "get over it" can do to people. It's a horrible thing to encourage people to do and should provoke appropriately horrible consequences.

Secondly, Dipper's alone section here. This scene was not written for titillation, instead meant to explore more of his psychology. A large part of my intent with this story is to explore the damage the events of Gravity Falls would inflict on people, and this was meant to explore one of Dipper's many, many issues. While not as flashy or traumatic as his brushes with death or his unhealthy relationship with his sister, I do believe Dipper had a number of unfortunate incidents relating to his exploration of his developing feelings towards the opposite sex, that could have left him with an unhealthy view of relationships and his role in them. Chief among these is a certain waste of airtime from Season 2B, but little moments exist all over the show. Also, it helps explain how they aren't already dating.

Finally, Mabel's mental exploration. This was my attempt to get inside her head a little, and provide a reasonable explanation (not an excuse) for her many questionable actions over the show and her lack of any real character growth, while still leaving her at least a little sympathetic and open to development. Mabel experiences EVERYTHING incredibly strongly, so when she's happy, she's a creative little ball of energy that generates endless internet memes, but becomes completely morose and despondent when experiencing sadness, for which I cite "Time Traveler's Pig." As a result of this, whenever Mabel is upset, she instantly goes to work suppressing this feelings and getting her joy back, and this is why she canonically has no self-reflection and can't learn any lessons from her experiences: Her character development in "Sock Opera" didn't stick because she refused to think about the events of that episode after it happened. Of course, this lack of self-reflection is not helped by the fact that no one in-universe ever puts her to task for her behavior. This was the most sympathetic explanation I could think of for Mabel's numerous emotionally hurtful actions and poor character development.

Anyways, I hope you have all enjoyed this chapter despite, or perhaps because of, these heavy elements, and I welcome any feedback you may have on them.
"Alright, wellness check! Are either of you experiencing any portal sickness?"

"I'm feeling great Doctor Pines. Dipper, are you okay?"

"Feeling great, thank you Pacifica. Great Uncle Ford, are we where we're meant to be?"

"...Yes. All environmental conditions match the projections the scanner made within 98%. That means we're going to need the anti-arcane radiation pills. One moment. After taking them, initiate weapons check."

"Ugh, I hate those things. Tastes like horseradish and goes down like a marble."

"Here Pacifica, take it with a little water, goes down easier."

"Right, that's mine, one for you Dipper, and here's yours Pacifica. I'm going to survey the area from that hill while you two get these down."

"Yes Doctor Pines."

GULP

"Thanks Dipper, that made them a lot more palatable."

"You're welcome Paz. Now, let's see what's going on here... Hey Great Uncle Ford! ...Oh no."

"What is it Dipper?"

"Based on that expression on your face and the fact that you didn't put the binoculars down to answer me, I'm guessing we have company?"

"Astute as always Dipper."

"So, what is it this times boys? Angry natives with spears, more bug aliens with lasers, or has Bill Cipher decided to just cut to the chase and drop a building on us this time?"

"...None of the above. Everyone brace yourselves!"

"Ack, my hat!"

"If anything's broken I'm suing!"

"Hi there!"

"Oh geez, Paz I think I hit my head because I'm seeing double..."

"I saw the portal you guys came through a mile away, you must be interdimensional travelers! So, who are you, where'd you come from!?"

"Great Uncle Ford?!"
"I... think we can give a little information, we are the visitors here. Hello young lady, my name is Stanford Pines, and these are my research assistants, Dipper and Pacifica. We've traveled to your world from a place called Earth. We would appreciate it if you could tellUUGGGGHHH!"

"Great Uncle Ford!"

"Personal space mean anything to you lady?"

"YOU'RE FROM EARTH!? Oh my goodness I didn't think that was possible, this is amazing!"

"Hey, crazy girl, could you let go of the old guy before you break his spine?"

"Oh, hehe, sorry, of course! I'm just so excited!"

"Doctor Pines, are you alright?"

"I can see the light Dipper..."

"Can... can you tell us who you are, exactly?"

"Oh, right, I should introduce myself. Mom always tried to teach that was an important courtesy..."

"I'm a magical princess from another dimension!"

Chapter End Notes

Yep, we're going there.

I'll admit, when I started writing this story, I didn't really have an endgoal to it. I was intrigued by the possibility the actual ending to the show shot down, so I figured I'd write a story about it. That being said, I didn't really have an end point to it, outside of the Pines Family fighting the Bill fragments over and over. This partially accounts for why it took me so long to update at certain points. However, while I was writing this, I was also trying to fill the Gravity Falls shaped hole in my heart with Star Vs The Forces of Evil, and at some point it just seemed natural that the next step of the story was to visit Mewni and inject my versions of the GF characters into that show's season 3.

If anyone dislikes this as a direction to take the story in, I understand and realize I probably could have foreshadowed this better, and hope you have enjoyed yourself up until now. I can only ask that you give these further adventures a try and hope that you've enjoyed yourselves so far. Thank you for reading.
The Pines Come to Mewni

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three humans stood in surprised shock at the blond girl in front of them, arms spread wide and a
rainbow that had somehow burst into flames arcing above her head. Dipper was the first to regain his
senses, going over to help Grunkle Ford up from the bone crushing hug she'd given him at mention
of their home dimension. His hands were squirming around underneath his coat, which Dipper
recognized as the older scientist trying to remember where his concealed holster was.

"Easy there Great Uncle Ford, I don't think she's a threat. Here, let me help you up..." he said, while
offering his hands to his mentor and getting Ford's six fingered ones in turn. "Easy does it." he said
softly, while gingerly assisting his old relative back to his feet.

The inhabitant of this world seemed enraptured by the sight of Dipper carefully and gently helping
Ford to his feet, so Pacifica was left the only one watching her, which she did with something of a
scowl. "Hey, rainbow girl." she asked, not quite hostile in town but certainly guarded and not exactly
friendly. "Is 'A Magical Princess From Another Dimension' what passes for a name around here or
do you have something less stupid we could call you?"

"Oh, right, I'm sorry." The native responded, turning her attention back to Pacifica, seemingly
embarrassed that she'd been watching the other two. "My name is Star Butterfly!"

It was obvious she expected them to have heard of her, which only made Pacifica crack her eyebrow
even higher. Fortunately, Dipper stepped up to the plate to initiate diplomacy.

"Right, thank you for introducing yourself." He stated. "My name is Dipper Pines, this is Stanford
Pines, and she's Pacifica Northwest. Could you, uh tell us a little more about where we are?"

Suddenly, Star Butterfly narrowed her eyes at the human boy a little, getting a look of mild suspicion
on her face as her lower lip seemed to swallow her upper one in contemplation. "Maybe I could, but
I want you to answer a question for me first!" Before anyone from the group could respond, she
continued on. "You say you're from Earth, but what if you're not from the Earth I'm thinking of? Tell
me what a nacho, a california, and a toilet are, and then maybe we'll be a little more clear."

"Well, nachos are triangle food, dipped in cheese usually, I'm not a fan of them but I could identify
one if you put it in front of me..." Dipper responded, getting into the flow of conversation despite the
looks of disbelief Pacifica and Ford were giving him and Star. "California is a political region within
the Earth dimension, I actually grew up in California believe it or not, funny coincidence, and a
toilet, well, that's, uh..."

Just as well that the awkward conversation about waste reciprocals went no further, because Star
lepta forward and gave Dipper a crushing hug as soon as he'd explained his place of birth, causing
the other two humans to look even more surprised. "This is AMAZING! You guys are really from
exactly where I hoped you were! Oh my goodness you have to tell me what's going on back on
Earth, is everything..."

"Oh boy, we've got a clingy one on our hands..." Pacifica remarked under her breath.

"Lady, I need you to get off of me okay!" Dipper stated brusquely, words mumbled by a lack of
oxygen, which caused Star to abruptly draw back with a sheepish look on her face. Taking in deep
breaths, he remarked "I'm sorry, but I'm carrying some fairly delicate scientific equipment on my person right now as well as a few weapons, and it's not really safe for you to keep hugging me."

All three of the humans from Earth were dressed for adventure, Star abruptly noticed. The old man had a long, tough looking coat that she could tell was bulging with full interior pockets and heavy boots over his feet, the younger boy had a full torso tan cargo vest and matching pants, whose pockets were also filled to brim and was topped with a blue cap, while the blond girl was dressed a little nicer, having a durable but smooth pair of black pants matched with a purple zip up jacket, material slick rather than fuzzy. Each of them either had a backpack or a courier bag slung over their shoulders as well.

The travelers from Earth in turn were all collectively thinking that this person looked nothing like a princess, wearing a flimsy looking, dirty and frequently stitched on dress, spiky purple boots and a devil headband. The princess line was even less convincing when she pulled out what seemed to be a child's toy and began mindlessly nibbling on it while looking at Dipper.

"You sound like someone who takes safety pretty seriously, huh? That's so nice of you." She mumbled through her chewing action, not really directing the question at anyone in particular, even though it was loud enough for all of them to hear.

"Uh... thank you?" Dipper responded, wanting to feel like he was insulted, but something about the mannerisms of this Star Butterfly made it hard to think she was intentionally putting him down. "That's just part of being a scientist. We buy our right to experiment with responsibility and rigorous safety protocols."

"You're welcome!" Star said back with smile, before looking at the three a little more seriously. "So, travelers from Earth, what brings you all to Mewni?" she asked, more inquisitive and even a little coy.

From the back of the group, Grunkle Ford seemed to startle slightly at the name of the dimension, but Dipper was quick to speak in response, keeping Star's attention on him, and as a result she didn't notice. "We're on the trail of, well, a mind demon alien abomination that calls himself Bill Cipher. He's not native to our dimension, but he attacked it, well, recently, and as some of the only people on Earth able to chase after him, we've taken up the responsibility of hunting Bill down and destroying him, before he can hurt anyone else."

Star seemed enraptured by this explanation, while Pacifica shot Dipper a look of surprise, though she kept it hidden well enough. Outside of his family and close friends, like her and Soos, Dipper was always a fairly secretive, cards close to the chest kind of guy. "He sure is opening up to this weird, so called princess really quickly." she wondered to herself.

Ford seemed similarly concerned about Dipper's openness, but before he could interject Star spoke up again, a notably troubled look getting on her usually cheerful face, which the boy from Earth seemed to mirror unconsciously. "This Bill Cipher sounds like a pretty bad guy." She said with dawning trepidation.

Star seemed even more concerned after this response, and her big blue eyes shimmered with a sudden burst of pity and understanding for the boy. "Well, he certainly sounds like a threat, and the Kingdom of Mewni can ill afford more threats in this troubled time!" she responded, puffing herself up with a little pseudo-heroic sounding grandiose vocabulary. "As the Princess of Mewni, it is my duty to respond to such a threat, and since you three seem to be the experts, I formally invite you to
the Royal Castle to further discuss this threat with her majesty the queen!" By now, the spiel had
gotten over the top and a little mocking, as Star assumed an overly stiff heroic posture, complete with
finger pointed to the sky.

Then, just as easily as she'd gotten serious, the princess of Mewni relaxed her body, slinking down
and grabbing one of Dipper's arms with a wide smile. "C'mon, I'll show you all the way to the castle,
but really, you can't miss it! It's just over this hill!" she announced, taking off at full speed and
dragging Dipper behind her before he could even argue.

This of course, resulted in the other two humans taking off after them. "Hey, both of you get back
here now! Dipper!" Pacifica yelled out, clearly flustered and running after them right away.

"Children, wait, don't run!" Grunkle Ford also yelled ahead, trying to keep up with the group.

Eventually, Star had come to a stop outside of a large city built around a towering castle, which
caused all three humans to crane their necks to see the top of the skyline. After Pacifica and Ford
cought up to the other two, along with a quick apology from Star and reassurances that he's fine from
Dipper, the princess was leading the trio from Earth through the settlement at a much slower pace,
giving them ample opportunity to take in how badly damaged it all was.

Blast craters seemed to dot the ground, and some of the buildings looked like they'd been partially
devoured. Everyone they passed was some combination of dirty, nursing some kind of injury, or had
a far away look in their eyes. Dipper and Pacifica looked at the town with a sort of hardened
sympathy, not being shocked by the damage or the wounds due to their experiences rebuilding their
own town in the aftermath of a supernatural attack, but could clearly relate to everyone they passed.

Ford, on the other hand, wore a curious expression. His face was blank, well developed jaw muscles
locking squarely into place. From a distance or at casual glance, it could be seen as reacting to the
destruction they walked through with a stiff, determined upper lip, or even a mild scowl to
disapprove of such senseless destruction. Closer inspection, however, would reveal the expression
was too neutral, devoid of any transmissible feelings or ideas, a deliberate mask. Over what, Ford
wasn't saying for the moment.

If this unsettling display of emotional control bothered Star or was even noticed by her, she didn't let
it show. Instead, she took them through the destroyed streets, explaining recent history. "We were
attacked, an invasion masterminded by a regenerating monster named Toffee." she explained, giving
the bare, relevant basics. Even for someone as outgoing as Star, she didn't want to go straight into her
time in the Realm of Magic or her mother's painful past with these people she'd just met. "Using
stolen magic and an army or rats, he broke through our walls and briefly enslaved the citizens of
Mewni, but we managed to take him out in the end." Then, she stopped in her tracks and turned back
towards the three humans. "Do you think your Bill Cipher had anything to do with this?" she asked,
concern in her voice.

Ford came to a stop, and seemed to genuinely ponder the question for a moment before speaking
carefully. "I wouldn't rule it out as impossible, but I don't think so." He concluded. "He is skilled at
controlling events from the shadows, but with as far as this invasion seems to have gotten, he
wouldn't have been able to resist pulling back the curtain and basking in his triumph. He's an
incurable egotist with an overwhelming need to experience his victories in the flesh and furthermore
traditional military invasion isn't really his style."

The Princess of Mewni seemed reassured by this explanation, but kept something of a troubled look
on her face as she lead her guests into the castle proper. As the group of four moved through the
ornate halls, Pacifica made an effort to get to the ahead of the group, next to Star. "So, Princess
Butterfly..." she asked in a hushed tone of voice.
"Oh, you can call me Star." The second blond responded with a chirpy tone, at normal volume.

"...Uh, right, thank you." Pacifica replied, resigning herself to a normal voiced conversation instead of a discreet inquiry. "Is your mother, Queen Butterfly...? Is she, uh, like you, I mean? All easygoing and stuff?"

The question took a moment to dawn on Star, and when it did, she quickly shook her head back and forth. "Ohhhhh... Oh, no. No no no no no nooooooo..." Was her response. With a bit of a complex grimace, Star elaborated back that "Look, don't take this wrong, mom isn't bad or anything, but she's very... uptight. It's always rules and traditions and proper behavior with her." Then, with a mischievous look on her face, Star looked back at the other two humans then winked at Pacifica. "Don't worry though, I'll cover for you guys if you offend her delicate sensibilities." she added, like she was daring them to need her assistance.

"Right then, much appreciated prin... Star." Pacifica thanked their guide before falling back towards Dipper and Ford, whispering "Okay boys, let me do the talking when we meet this Queen, okay?" at them both, resulting in the two nodding affirmative.

"You're all very lucky actually, I should be able to get you a meeting in her private office instead of having to stand around in open court and talk to her while she's on her throne." Star elaborated from the head of the group. "And look, here it is!" she made a wide, sweeping gesture against a high quality but plainly furnished wooden door, sitting unassuming against another stretch of castle wall. Without hesitating, Star hammered the door with a strong, sustained and mildly tuneful knock. As soon as she stopped rapping her fist against the wooden surface, a voice emerged from the room, a faint glaze of frost against the tones of an older woman, mildly weary.

"Come in Star."

Looking back at her new friends with a narrow eyed expression, one hand pointing a thumb at the door and the other held up to the side of her mouth, to shield the words from traveling into the office, Star mentioned "She can somehow always tell when it's me." in a mystified tone. Then, the princess opened the door and let the three humans in, ushering them before the Queen.

Queen Moon the Undaunted sat at her ornate but practical wooden desk, numerous small piles of paperwork scattered about and an ink dripping pen in hand. She had her hair done up in its usual large formation and was dressed in her typical soft blue dress, complete with long gloves and makeup. She smiled softly as Star stepped in the room, but that turned to a tight frown as she lead three others in. "Ah, Star. I see you've brought friends." she said a with a small note of annoyance.

"Okay, mom, you're not gonna believe this!" Star said energetically, leveling both hands flat at her mother, palms facing each other as if she was about to lay out the secrets of the universe in the format of freestyle beat-boxing. "These three..." she continued, while gesturing to the group: Pacifica looked embarrassed to be in front of royalty like this, Stanford was hastily scanning his own memories, blind to the scowling he was unconsciously doing, while Dipper was rooted in place, nervously waving to the older woman. "...ARE FROM EARTH!" Star finished with a flurry of expression, waving her arms over her head while she leaned over the desk. "ISN'T THAT GREAT!?"

Queen Moon, annoyed expression gone, looking mostly sardonic but a little sympathetic to her daughter, slowly removed her reading glasses with a deliberate gesture while looking at the princess with skeptical eyes. "Star..." The mother said softly but firmly. This was the most energetic she'd seen her daughter since that other boy from Earth had left in the aftermath of the great battle. Casting her eyes over Dipper, Moon noted that despite being much more pale than her daughter's guide, he had the same nervous but observant posture as him. In the back of her mind, Moon was really hoping Star hadn't kidnapped these people.
"But, wait, wait wait wait wait there's more!" Star continued, waving her hands in front of her in a gesture asking for more time. Then, she jumped in front of the line of three humans, striking an action pose and doing the sword hand dance she'd picked up on Earth for emphasis. "They're here on a secret mission, tracking down an inter-dimensional criminal who attacked their world, and now wanders free across Mewni!" Then, Star straightened up, looked at her mother with a more serious expression, and finished by asking "So... can we have them stay here at the castle? I figured it'd be pretty bad for Mewni if some crazy villain is running around with everything else going on, so them catching him can only be good for Mewni, right?"

The Queen was quiet for almost a minute, taking everything in, while Dipper and Ford looked steadily more nervous, Pacifica kept a steady expression, and Star bounced in place on her heels. The situation had turned out more complex than Moon had assumed when her daughter had led three strangely dressed weirdos into her private office, and now she needed to make a legitimate decision. Could these three be trusted?

"Well Star, I'm glad you've brought this matter to my attention, but now I'd like to hear from your new friends." She finally spoke up in a measured tone, before turning her attention to the humans and nodding at them. "So, you three, please, explain this in your own words. You may speak freely."

Right on cue, Pacifica took a step forward and gave the Queen a small curtsy, nothing too elaborate, but enough to get across the idea the gesture was an act of respect, even if the exacts of it didn't cross the cultural barrier. "Your majesty..." She began, with a steady, formal cadence to her voice. "...Thank you for indulging us with this audience. Princess Butterfly summarized our reasons for being here with excellence. I have little else to add besides a personal plea that you understand how dangerous our quarry is: His name is Bill Cipher, and I assure you, he is a grave threat to your world of Mewni and all others."

Moon found herself leaning back in her chair slightly. She was actually quite pleased by this young lady's obviously well practiced air of respectful delivery, though she didn't express this in any way, and for the first time noted the physical resemblance between this human and her own daughter. Idly scratching some notes on a blank piece of paper to her side (reading out Consult MHC: Bill Cipher?) Moon responded by saying "Well, if this... Bill Cipher is a grave a threat as you say, it would certainly be within the best interests of Mewni for him to be captured. That is, however, a sizable if."

Suddenly, her gaze was more inquisitive, seeming to peer into the girl in front of her. "Will you do us the honor of properly introducing yourselves?" Star opened her mouth to explain who they were, but Moon held up a hand to quiet her. "I'd like to hear it in their own words, Star. Go ahead."

With a nod of her head, Pacifica began by gesturing sideways to Ford. "This is Doctor Stanford Pines, archmage of the planet earth." she explained, which generated a small look of flattered surprise from the older man, who had previously been peering right back into Moon's eyes, as if to discern their intent. Idly scratching some notes on a blank piece of paper to her side (reading out Consult MHC: Bill Cipher?) Moon responded by saying "Well, if this... Bill Cipher is a grave a threat as you say, it would certainly be within the best interests of Mewni for him to be captured. That is, however, a sizable if."

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The expression of the Queen of Mewni quickly but subtly slipped to skeptical. "I had been informed, by some very good sources I might add, that the Earth dimension does not possess any magic of its own."

"The magic of Earth is a recent, and highly localized, occurrence, but I assure you it is real." Pacifica replied without skipping a beat, feeling herself drawn into the familiar dance of combat by words. She was already calculating what possible responses the Queen might have for her reply, then working out what to say in response to them, letting the flow of the conversation stay in her favor by virtue of quick, effortless responses.
"I see." Moon said in a dismissive tone, though inside her head she was making an important mental note of another matter to discuss with the Magical High Commission during the meeting she now knew she’d be scheduling with them as soon as this group left her office. "Tell me, in a hypothetical scenario where I allowed you three free reign to pursue this, Bill Cipher, what precisely would you be... doing? You must understand, Mewni is fragile at the moment, and even though I have no doubt of your good intentions, recklessness could destabilize things as surely as malicious intent."

"Of course your highness, we understand your concerns perfectly. We have no desire to harm your kingdom in any way." Pacifica responded. "As for our methods, I'll allow Doctor Pines to explain that, seeing as he is the most learned among us."

There, a verbal blow thrown. Subtle and ambiguously worded, on purpose, enough to go over the heads of everyone else in the room, but Pacifica could see in Moon's eyes that she had understood. The girl from Earth had challenged her, stating that a representative of her group was the most intelligent person in the room, but if called upon this could claim she meant no offense, stating she meant that Ford is the most learned among the group from Earth, and of course, such a verbal offensive would make the Queen appear insecure and over-aggressive, pursuing offense where none was meant. This, however, would allow the implication to stand, giving Ford significant clout in the conversation, provided he didn't make a wild fool of himself next time he opened his mouth.

"Whoever this girl is, she is well versed in the battle of words that calls itself courtly politics." Moon thought to herself. "Threats, bargains, battles for superiority and the ebb and tide of public opinion, all dressed in idle gossip and elaborate complements." Not looking to fall into contemplation, Moon nodded to Ford. "Go ahead archmage, I would hear of your methods from the mouth of wisdom."

Ford, who along with Dipper and Star hadn't picked up on the subtle nuances of the conversation before them, cleared his throat before starting on an explanation. "Bill Cipher is dangerous primarily because he is an expert manipulator with long range psychic abilities. He looks for people who are desperate, lost, in need of some aid or those who are simply hungry for power, then contacts them through their dreams to offer them what they want, and if I may be blunt, the destroyed city just outside these walls is a perfect environment for him to thrive in."

After that, the scientist reached into his pocket and pulled out a small object, a circle of bone hanging from a string with spider webs interlocking all over the space inside the circle, and on the bottom was a string of beads hanging long off the object, that ended in a small kitchen sponge. "This is a dream interceptor of my own design, and I have many more. With your permission, I would place these at strategic points along the city. They're been specially inscribed to capture Bill Cipher's psychic waves..." he explained, pointing to a series of symbols carved into the outer loop of the ring, which form the legendary Cipher Ring of symbols when the circle closes. "And when the morning condensation is squeezed out of the sponge on the bottom after a night hanging out, I can analyze the liquid to see if Bill Cipher is communicating with anyone in the city."

"Might I take that from you?" Queen Moon asked abruptly, which seemed to startle Ford out of his lecture. "I would like to have it examined by my magic experts, in the name of...smoother cooperation between our two peoples." The scientist from Earth blinked a few times, but then wordlessly handed over the object, knowing he had more. "Thank you." Moon responded curtly while putting it in a desk drawer.

"Honestly, I'd advise you to keep it. Hang it over your head while you sleep to shield yourself from Bill's influence." Ford cautioned. Then, after a moment of trying to place himself again, continued his explanation. "Besides those, I also have other magical means of honing in on Bill's presence, as well as examining people that he may be... communicating with, for tell tale signs, once we've narrowed the list of suspects down. It would also be a great help if you could alert us to any strange
happenings in your kingdom."

Queen Moon crumpled her eyebrows in contemplation. Even through her gloves and scarred hands, she could feel a spell lattice working around the object she'd taken from the man. Further analysis would be needed to determine the object's true abilities, but it was genuinely magical, meaning that whoever these people are, they're a cut above common con artists. "Which risk to take, Moon, the risk of this Bill Cipher being a genuine threat, or the risk that these three are not what they seem?" She contemplated, turning an eye to her daughter.

"She seems to trust them... Not that that exactly means a great deal..." She thought, but quickly chastised herself. "Now Moon, you promised you'd try to be more understanding of Star. Perhaps this would make a good chance for her to gain some leadership experience... At the very least, it might take her mind off that Earth boy..."

"Very well." Moon pronounced, betraying none of her eternal conflict to the group in front of her. "As Queen of Mewni, I hereby grant you, Stanford Pines, Dipper Pines, and Pacifica Northwest of Earth, permission to move about the public areas of the Mewman Royal Castle and Mewni in general, to the ends of protecting Mewni from the menace known as Bill Cipher. For the duration of this criminal pursuit, you will report directly to Princess Star and conform to any instructions she gives you. Are we clear?"

All three humans nodded in affirmation, and watched as Queen Moon moved to face her daughter, looking Star in the eyes with a serious, but encouraging look. "That means, Princess Star, that these three humans are your responsibility while they are on Mewni." She explained. "Keep me up to date, and I will in turn send any relevant information I receive regarding this matter to you." Then, she cracked an eyebrow at Star and added "Are we clear?" with a hint of dry sarcasm to her voice.

"Oh absolutely mom! Thank you sooooo much, I promise I won't let you down!" Star replied jubilantly, having slowly gotten on edge as the conversation had gone on, worried her new friends were going to be ejected. In a rush, she got behind all three of the humans and began pushing them towards the door, surprising the whole group. "Come on, I'll show you guys where you'll be staying, you'll get the...

"I will provide a specific set of quarters for our guests, Star." Queen Moon spoke up assertively. "Have them wait outside for a moment while I summon a butler to lead the way. We still have a few more things to discuss."

Not long after, a sizable group of footsteps approached the door to a dark room. Muffled conversation was on the other side, and after a moment the wooden door to the new room was kicked open. "And here we are! Casa de Mewni!" Star explained, leading them inside the somewhat barren chamber. "Thank you Jeevann, you can go now!" she dismissed with a polite smile, and the butler who had lead them all here politely bowed then skittered off. After waiting a few seconds for him to get far enough away, Star let out a loud, annoyed groan and collapsed to the floor. "Ugh, sorry about having to chat your ears off with boring castle trivia back there, I'm sure if I'd said anything interesting Jeevann's has instructions to take it right back to mom!"

The humans were already able to take Star's antics in stride, simply spreading out to observe their new base of operations: It appeared to be a disused barracks for soldiers, being large enough for several simple military cots, but extremely barren in furnishing, dusty, and the sole window was small and barred over, making the room dim to see in.

"Well, it's not the Chillton Presidential Suite, but I suppose I've stayed in worse." Pacifica remarked sarcastically, until she tried to blow away a dust bunny underneath one of the cots, only to reveal it was actually a colony of spiders living around a rat skeleton. "Never mind, I take it back. This is
probably the worst place I've ever stayed."

"Oh, I dunno about that Pacifica." Dipper teased back in a good natured tone. "I mean you've stayed
in the Mystery Shack, haven't you?"

"Fair point."

"Ugh, I can't believe mom would try and load you guys off on such an out of the way dump like
this!" Star groaned while climbing off the floor, but then, she got a clever look on her face. "Luckily,
being friends with the princess comes with some benefits." In a flash, she was holding her wand over
her head. "MYSTIC ROOM GLITTER BOMB TRANSFORM!"

The whole space was abruptly consumed by a bright pink light, blinding everyone present. The glow
receded quickly however, leaving behind a completely transformed living space. Unfortunately, the
three humans it was meant for were a little slow to notice the transformation.

"AH GOD, FLASHBANG!" Dipper screamed from his position curled up on the floor. Ford had
found his attention jumping straight to Star's wand as soon as it came out, and as a result his eyes had
shrunk to pinpricks due to taking the full blast and was currently completely witless. Pacifica,
meanwhile, had been standing right where a luxurious four post bed had come into existence, and
found herself struggling against a clutter of sheets and blankets. "HELP! I FUSED WITH THE
BED LIKE THAT HAMSTER WE TELEPORTED ONE TIME!" she screamed, but after a
moment simply worked herself out of the ball of blankets and realized she was completely normal
"Oh."

Star, on the other hand, was looking around the room with breathless excitement and massive,
sparkling eyes while the three humans regained their senses. She got up, running around and
touching the luxurious decorations that covered the room to feel if they were real and make sure they
weren't going to catch fire as soon as they were touched. "YES! I AVOIDED THE SUCK THIS
TIME!"

That non-sequitur managed to catch the attention of everyone in the room, but before they could
respond to it with several questions, the radical transformation their space had undergone finally set
in with them. Besides a general massive increase in opulence and comfort, the military rows of cots
had been replaced with three distinct bed spaces: The four poster Pacifica had found herself in was
deep purple, and the fine wooden posts in question had a canopy stretching over them that also
boasted a retractable curtain that could be drawn shut over the entire setup.

Dipper, having quickly rubbed the glitter out of his eyes thanks to prior experience, was extensively
examining the third of the room that had formed around him. This section had a more normal but still
extremely large and comfortable flat top bed with a sizable headboard backed up against a much
wider stained glass window, through which you could look out and view the beautiful Mewman
countryside for miles, while also providing much more light to the room. In addition, the room now
boasted a pair of large, sturdy storage chests and a dresser positioned behind an extensive, well
shaded privacy divider. Out of curiosity, Dipper flopped onto the bed, and ended up sinking several
inches. "I've never been this comfortable before in my life." he said breathlessly.

Grunkle Ford, meanwhile, was standing under a unique construction of a bed: It was elevated on
four legs, like a bunk bed, but instead of a lower bunk was a well furnished oak desk, with a
comfortable velvet chair behind it, and a number of smaller tables, filling cabinets and chests
surrounding it and the rest of the room. Looking up, Ford noticed a chain light-bulb was attached
directly to the bottom of the bedframe. Upon pulling it, the whole work space became comfortably
lit, despite the light having no power source.
Filling out the room was a grand table, covering the space where the distinctly themed spaces meet together. Besides being wide enough to sit at least six people for a common meal, it currently had an exhaustive and comprehensive map of the Mewman dimension rolled out over it, which glittered and shimmered as if it was updating in real life.

"So, what do you guys think?"

The humans all turned their heads to look at Star Butterfly, who was looking rather proud of herself for how tremendously successful her spell had been.

"It's much better than when we started, that is for sure." Pacifica was the first to respond, and was speaking with genuine sincerity. "Thank you, Star."

"Awwww, it's not problem Paz-Paz, what are friends for!?" Star responded, before stepping forward and giving the girl from Earth a hug, completely baffling Pacifica as she stuttered from raw surprise.

"Okay, first, don't call me that." The human girl laid down as she pulled away from the mewman princess. "Secondly, if you're going to hug me again, notify me in advance first and we'll see if I approve of it."

"Um, I do agree with Pacifica's first statement though, this is really nice. Thanks Star." Dipper added in, causing the princess to grin.

"You are both very welcome, my newfound subjects!" Star replied, but giggled a little to indicate she was just teasing them. Then, while still in a good mood and quite jubilant, she got a little more serious. "So, what's our plan of action? How do we begin the hunt for Bill Cipher?"

At this point, Ford left the window he'd been staring out of, watching the sunset, to enter the conversation. "Unfortunately, it will have to begin tomorrow morning. We have some equipment that needs unpacking and activating, at which point it will be dark and we'll be do for a rest." he explained, before adding on "If, her majesty finds that acceptable, of course." in a wary tone.

Star just giggled at his sudden formality though. "Hey, don't worry old-timer, you can just call me Star, just like I've told these two!" After that, she calmed down a little. "But no, that makes total sense. I can have dinner brought up to you guys if you want it, and then we can discuss our game plan tomorrow over breakfast in the royal dinning room!"

"That sounds ideal actually." Dipper replied, already elbow deep in his backpack and pulling out the components for a psychic feedback generator.

"Alright, everything's perfect then!" Star exclaimed, before standing in place for a moment, not sure where else to take the conversation. Feeling her time might be up, she added "Well, I guess that's goodnight then?"

"Seems like it." Pacifica responded, offering Star a friendly wave goodbye. "Sleep well Star."

Then, as soon as the mewman princess was out of the room, Grunkle Ford collapsed onto one of the chairs scattered around the room, head on his forehead in turbulent thought. "Great Uncle Ford, are you okay?" Dipper asked on reflex, though he didn't step forward, recognizing his mentor was experiencing more of a "need to brood" exhaustion rather than physical exhaustion derived from an injury.

"No Dipper, I'm fine, thank you." He replied, clearly troubled. After an exhale, he looked over at the two. "What kind of impression did you two get from Princess Butterfly?" he asked, in a tone that Dipper knew indicated more than idle curiosity.
"Well, uh... she seems nice." Dipper responded, rubbing his arm with some visible nervousness. "She got us inside the castle and a pretty nice base of operations, so I think she'll probably be an asset to the investigation?"

Ford gave Dipper a curt nod in response, then gestured to Pacifica. "She's a rebel princess. Seen it a dozen times, and was personally put through a lot to make sure I don't turn out that way." She summarized curtly. When it was clear the other two didn't quite get what she had meant, Pacifica elaborated. "Basically, she was born to a very high position of wealth and status, but on some level resents or dislikes like it. Too many rules, expectations are high, parents want them to make money instead of spending it on cars and fanart commissions. Still, Star is on better terms with her mom than most of the people I'd seen who fit this category, so either she's not as rebellious as she thinks she is or Queen Butterfly is more accepting of her rebellious daughter than most rich parents are."

Ford nodded curtly again, though this time he added "That was very insightful Pacifica, thank you." After a moment of longer thought that seemed to put some weight on his shoulders, the old scientist began speaking, in a grim tone this time. "Children, I am not saying we should reject the help the Mewmans offers us, it could be vital in our fight against Bill. Nor should we rebuke the friendship offered by Princess Star, she seems genuine enough. But, as long as we are here, we must tread carefully around these people."

Dipper was frowning with concern now, looking at his great uncle with a confused expression. "Great Uncle Ford, you sound like... well, you've been here before."

"That's because I have Dipper." He answered, a dark look settling into his eyes. "During my time lost to my original model portal, I... arrived, in this dimension, during a different battle against Bill, my original fight against him..." Ford explained, and settled in to tell his story...

"Bill was seeking to acquire the means of personal dimensional travel, a strange power I don't totally understand that would allow him to slice holes between dimensions, through which the horrors of the Nightmare Plane could leak, and scuttle. To that end, he had challenged the High Wizard of Clam Castle within the Astral Sea to a game of skull dice and won the man's soul."

A castle rose above an inferno filled battlefield, and on the outside walls a cheery looking humanoid with a scale covered body, small fins around his body and with bulging, lidless eyes walked vertically with a jaunt to his steps. The whole way up, the meat puppet sniffed the air like a dog looking for a well hidden piece of wet, delicious meat, and eventually, halfway between land and burning sky, they found it. A spell was cast that turned the wizard's body to a perfectly thin goo that slipped between the stone and reformed on the other side, deftly evading the invisible magic wards at their weakest point.

"The master of portals, a mysterious figure know across the multiverse but rarely seen, had protected their castle well: Besides being inside an inhospitable wasteland, the castle was covered with every magical defense and ward possible and a few that were impossible, even by the rules of magic. In addition to all that, the dimension operated on an odd style of time acceleration, meaning that even those who escaped were often disorientated and lost in time. Bill had chosen his timing and his host well however, as the High Wizard's magic powers and Bill's own knowledge let them meticulously disassemble every trap and defense in the way, all without catching the master of the castle's attention."

The possessed fish-man stood at the end of a long hallway, which was covered in broken runes, sparking clouds of disassembled magic, guardian monsters trapped in force cages or reduced to piles of ash, and dozens of purely mechanical traps carefully disassembled. Bill and his host were standing before a massive metal door, fiddling with the combination lock, an eager look splitting the wizard's..."
face into an unnatural look of joy.

"Of course, a visit to the Oracle of Pearls let me know about all this well in advance, so I waited until he'd disabled all the defenses, then got the drop on him. I had three flame resistance rings, a leaf-string bag of C4, boots of spider climb, a blessing to ward me against the time distortion of the dimension from a renegade Chrono Count who wore a carrot on his jacket, and most importantly, a very, very big gun."

The wall at the end of the long hallway exploded, shockwave flattening Bill's host against the security door while a much younger Ford stepped through the gap literally guns blazing, holding a chainsaw grip automatic weapon with four rotating barrels and a hefty backpack that fed it ammo, fingers practically glued to the trigger to try and wash Bill down with a torrent of automatic fire, the bright trail of bullets tearing apart ornate castle decorations and unveiled mechanical traps like a swarm of omnivorous, invisible rats with a fast forward button pressed. Several small fires ignited as inert patches of magic were ignited by the ripping stream.

"Of course, the ogre strength gauntlets it took to even lift the thing and the backpack of bottomless ammo that let it fire for longer than five seconds cost a fortune put together, but I had just cut ties with a mega seed smuggling operation and needed to get rid of the dirty money anyways."

Bill's host had almost been cut to pieces by the time he managed to throw up a shield of crystal off which the hail of bullets deflected, prism beams of light erupting from the barricade every time a bullet snapped a fragment off, and the magical defense was shot hundreds of times as Ford held down the trigger, glaring and screaming the entire time. Eventually though, the scientist had to stop firing due to the ricochets getting dangerously close to him. With a scowl and a smoking set of barrels, he began stepping down the hall.

Bill and his body, despite being laid out against the security door with several large holes leaking green blood all over the fancy carpet and cold metal, was laughing his head off at the scene before him, as he quickly cast the liquid body spell again to slip through the holes Ford ended up shooting into the security doors with his magically boosted ammunition. On the other side, Bill found himself inside a medieval looking forge, and quickly dragged himself across the floor towards an unassuming pair scissors left to cool on a counter.

The battered security door could not resist Ford for long, and before it had even swung open all the way he was hosing down Bill's host with another barrage of fire. The barely alive puppet of a wizard had the heated scissors wrapped in one melting hand held close to the chest, and as a result Ford, who was attacking from behind, never even saw the scissors, even as a handful of the dozens of bullets that ripped the fish form apart penetrated through and impacted the slick metal of the dimensional travel device, resulting in it cracking, shattering and exploding.

Flying shrapnel fragments cut a dozen hungry dimensional rifts all over the room: Ford, at the edge of the forging chamber, was simply sucked into the furthest one, while Bill's host was ripped to pieces in a single, terrible moment by the conflicting pull of several portals upon him at the center of the explosion, completely destroying the host body, sending Bill back to the dimension of dreams nursing a newfound appreciation for absolute agony, and leaving quite a mess on the floor.

"Though I ultimately defeated that body of his and prevented him from acquiring the dimension cutter magic, a mishap during the battle resulted in me being thrown through an entirely different section of the multiverse. This dimension, Mewni."

The portal unceremoniously dropped Ford into wide, slow flowing river. It wasn't a particularly dangerous body of water, and the lost human could have easily escaped it under normal circumstances, but Ford, fatigued, suffering from portal sickness, and weighed down by an enormous
gun and matching ammo pack, had been seriously threatened by this unassuming, lazy river. He struggled underwater to cut loose the ammo backpack that was holding him under the water after immediately letting go of the gun, but had blacked out from lack of oxygen before that could be done, leaving him at the mercy of the depths.

"Luckily, I happened to float towards friendly company."

When Ford next returned to consciousness, he was resting inside a plain but fairly comfortable straw bed, inside what looked to be a simple farmhouse. A humanoid being was looking over him, male looking, very tall and thin, with green skin and the anatomical features of a frog. "So, da Mewman awakes." he had said, with a tone of relief and fear. Bizarrely, he sounded almost Russian, despite this being a completely different world.

"Stanford, actually." He had responded, still a little dazed from his near drowning. "I presume I have you to thank for saving me from a watery death...? Thank you."

"He said his name was Vladistave Bulgoyaboff, and soon after introduced his wife Brildostogvan. They had tadpoles on the way, he explained much later after earning my trust, and had spotted me floating by when the couple had gone to check on the mud bank where the eggs were hidden. While I resembled their ancestral enemies, they ultimately decided they couldn't just watch someone drown, and fished me out. I was quick to explain I had no involvement in their ethnic conflict and was intensely grateful to them for saving me. I'm not sure they ever believed I wasn't a Mewman, but I did eventually earn their trust. I had to live at their home for awhile, as I was lost again between dimensions without the small amount of resources I had gathered."

Numerous memories ran over Ford as he reminisced on his time with the Bulgoyaboffs: They had been very kind to the strange man from the river, freely offering him food and shelter while he replenished his strength and got over an illness he'd picked up while drowning, and even continued to house him while he was perfectly fit and looking for a way out of this dimension instead of kicking him out towards Mewman territory. In return, Ford had done everything he could to help the family: He performed repairs around the house, helped them construct a nursery for the eventual hatching of the children, improved their farm tools and taught them a great deal about crop rotation and chemical fertilizer after analyzing the soil a little.

The last two proved to be unexpected boons: These monsters and their neighbors were substance farmers pushed onto the edges of civilization. Despite the river nearby, which they frequently fished to supplement their food, the land was barren and nutrient poor, and the monster owned farms further from the river were even worse. Eventually, Ford's improvements proved to be a success, and the Bulgoyaboff's introduced him to their friends and neighbors, who were all won over and impressed by the strangely helpful Mewman whose secrets made their farms prosper. These memories, while initially good, soon overwhelmed present day Ford with guilt.

"That... proved to be their undoing. Word must have gotten around that this patch of monster land was more fertile than initially believed, because the Mewman army was soon on the march. They came over the hills, clad in shining armor and practically glimmering with the magic boost provided by the Queen. It... Gods of Ragnarok, it was no battle, kids, it was a slaughter, an extermination! The Circktors, Goathelm, Old Durney Farm, the Bulgoyaboffs... all of them were put to the sword. I... was never found out if they located the eggs or not but they... they didn't spare any of the other children."

"And me? They let me go. Made the same mistake the Bulgoyaboffs initially did and thought I was a Mewman. Much back slapping was had about successfully rescuing a kidnapped Mewman from torture or ransom at the claws of the dastardly remnants of the great monster army. The blood hadn't
even dried on their godforsaken shinning armor."

Back in the present day, Ford went quiet for a long moment after finishing his story, sinking into his chair like the physical weight of all those years was crushing him. "Of course, that mistake made it pretty easy for me to poison the whole bunch of them when they decided to celebrate their child killing with some drunken revelry." He spat, bitterness and a complete lack of satisfaction to his tone. With a distracted, airy tone of voice, he added that "Eventually, I managed to hitch a ride out of this cesspool of a dimension, but that's a different story. I spent about six more months here, give or take, until that happened, and in my time prowling around this world I saw nothing redeeming about it or its ruling people."

"You remember the wand Star had, that let her generate this comfortable room for us?" He asked, and both teenagers nodded in response. "I heard a great deal about that during my time in this dimension, and when I studied abroad in others, and I can safely say that it is one of the most powerful objects in existence. A raw wellspring of pure magical power that can rewrite reality on an unimaginable scale, and it might have more blood on it than any other singular weapon I have ever encountered."

After a grim silence filled the room for a short moment, Ford eventually regained his strength and pulled himself from his chair, looking at his two fellow humans with a strong, resentful glare, though the feelings were not directed at them. "That is why we should not place too much trust in any of these Mewmans, particularly not their royalty: They are murderous barbarians who chanced upon some of the most amazing magic in all dimensions and have resolved to use it to conduct an ethnic cleansing, and have done so for hundreds of years. I suspect Bill is probably hidden among them somewhere."

Dipper and Pacifica, both chilled to the core, set to work unpacking after that, tumultuous thoughts running through their heads for the remainder of the night.

Breakfast next morning was "a simple affair" according to Star, despite the fact that it consisted of multiable plates of fresh fruit and juicy meat for all parties. It proved to be a work breakfast, with the four participants largely talking about their plans to cover the city with the Bill warding dream interceptors, and they were on the verge of finishing up and leaving when the royal couple made their entrance, generating a small groan of disappointment from Star.

"Ah, these must be the magicians from Earth Moonpie was telling me about." King River stated in a measured tone while looking them over, not expressing any particular impression of them. "I am happy to make your acquaintance, and was wondering if you might assist me with something. It might even be a clue you're looking for."

"Daaaaaaad!" Star groaned out, obviously embarrassed that he'd decided to give them the suspicious treatment. "We gotta get going dad, the whole city needs to be covered in these cool Bill catching things!" she added, while holding up one of the dream interceptors.

"Now Star, yesterday the... archmage, asked Moon to pass along information about any strange happenings. Well, we've got one for you." River continued to explained while Moon had simply taken her place at the head of the table and was watching the whole thing play out with an analytical eye. Dipper and Ford perked up at the mention of a strange happening, while Pacifica was paying closer attention to the two Butterfly women in the room, trying to scope out more of their personalities.

"A few days ago, one of our knight patrols was lost in the field, and later found dead." King Butterfly explained with a curt, grim tone. Star became a little more reserved at the mention of such a ghastly affair. "What's troubling about this is that they seem to have been killed by magic, but no
magic we've been able to identify. To both investigate the possibility this is related to your interdimensional criminal and as a small service to repay the Kingdom of Mewni for hosting you, the Queen and I agreed to allow Archmage Pines..." River trailed off as he examined the rest of the party, before his eyes settled on Dipper. "...and his student Dipper to examine these bodies and report their conclusions." Then, he looked at his daughter, adding on that "Don't worry though sweetie, you can take your remaining friend out to the city as planned!"

Star looked like she was ready to argue, but Dipper took one good look at his Grunkle and made a gesture to the princess. "It's alright Star, this could be just what we're looking for potentially. I don't mind." He then turned so he was talking to her and Pacifica. "I'm completely confident the two of you can accomplish this part of the mission without me and Ford to slow you down."

Star looked unexpectedly taken by Dipper's faith in her, while Pacifica just crossed her arms and glared at him. "Dipper, have you forgotten how my last attempt at babysitting went?" she asked in a biting tone, while looking sideways at the princess.

Dipper just smiled in response to this, saying "C'mon Paz, think of it as a learning experience. If me and Ford get done early, we'll meet at the cornshake place Star was telling us about."

"Then we are in agreement!" River abruptly cut in. "Star, I'm sure you don't need any instruction to show our visitor from Earth around the capital. Ford and Dipper on the other hand, we have a pair of guards waiting outside to escort you when you are both ready."

"We can go right now." Ford spoke up. "I think I've lost my appetite."

Star and Pacifica were long gone into the city by the time Ford and Dipper had been lead through the Bureaucracy of Magic and put into a cold storage locker kept sealed with one large metal door by a strangely nonthreatening security guard who seemed to be a talking moose of some kind. "I'll be outside if you guys need anything."

With him gone, Dipper and Ford looked at each other, trading a nod of determination, before approaching the object of their investigations: Five Mewman bodies laid out on cold slabs, all of them quite muscular and physically fit. The corpses had obviously received a cursory examination, as whatever battle armor they'd gone out with had been cut away, but they were not anatomically posed correctly.

Dipper set down the backpack of supplies they'd retrieved from their quarters on the way here, carefully and meticulously removing the dissection supplies while Ford walks over to the bodies while snapping on a pair of gloves. "So, if Bill did kill these people, what do you think we're dealing with?" The boy asked in a curious tone. "Psychic shutdown, direct telekinetic laceration of the heart, blood bending, or something more exotic such as..."

"Magic didn't kill these people Dipper." Ford spoke up abruptly, seeming somewhat surprised. He was leaning over the body in the middle, taking a close examination of the chest, which a pattern of holes drilled into the muscular abdomen. Acting quickly, Ford fished a pair of ordinary needle nose pliers out of a coat pocket and jammed them into the small wound, wiggling them around enough to disrupt the slowly decaying flesh.

His apprentice simply walked over with curiosity, taking a spot on the other side of the slab to see what he great uncle pulled out. He had very evidently caught something with the pliers, and when it finally came free, Dipper let out a surprised gasp, while Ford's eyes simply narrowed. Held tight between the tips of the pliers was a dented, bent piece of metal, with some very familiar signs of craftsmanship upon it.
"Like I said Dipper, these knights weren't killed by magic at all. They were killed by plain and simple bullets. Bullets from Earth."

AUTHORS NOTES

Right, so here we go. The continuation of the story started in "Three Can Keep A Secret," now a crossover with Star Vs. Early parts of "Three Can Keep A Secret" were being written while Season 3 of Star Vs. was happening, and that crossed with the increasingly strong fan theory that they happen in the same multiverse eventually motivated me to take things in this direction. Rest assured I am not leaving behind the characters on Earth, but a lot of the plot here is going to focus on a rewritten version of season 3 where Bill Cipher is stirring up trouble in the background.

I hope that everyone who picked up this story as a Gravity Falls fanfic will continue to enjoy the story, while for all the Star Vs. fans discovering it for the first time, welcome! I'm interested to hear what both groups of fans think of this work. There is a purely Gravity Falls fanfiction called "Three Can Keep A Secret" that this is a continuation of, but the short of it is that Dipper accepted Grunkle Ford's offer to be his apprentice, and three years later they, joined by Pacifica Northwest, hunt a revived Bill Cipher across the multiverse.

Again, I hope that both followers of my original story and people first discovering my writing here can enjoy it, and I welcome feedback from all of my readers!
And now we can get into the character work, one of the big things that motivated me to take my story in this direction. The casts of these two shows just seemed really compatible to me, but even I was surprised by how easily and naturally writing a lot of this came. Star and Pacifica's friendship in particular flowed very naturally while I was writing it, and in the next few chapters we'll see how she gets along with Dipper, who as we'll see has a few similarities to Star's lost love interest. Oh, and the MHC bickering with Ford while Moon sits in the middle was also a ton of fun to write.

On another note, while the first chapter offered hinted at it, I'll be upfront about it here: This story is going to get dark in some places. There's going to be some rough themes explored, some pretty explicit violence and, further down the road, some steamy romantic relationships with plenty of teenage bad decision making. I hope these elements enrich the story rather than distract from it, and would love to hear your thoughts on them, positive or negative.

While the two boys were making their way through the castle, on course to a grim discovery, Star had asked Pacifica to swing by her personal quarters before they began their work, claiming she needed to pick something up before they set off on their mission. The blond from Earth took meticulous note of the route through the vertical labyrinth of a castle in hopes of memorizing a swift way to the personal residence of the princess, which could come in handy at some point. "Wait here juuuuust a minute!" Star had said, leaving Pacifica outside.

As soon as the ornate door slammed shut, the human girl whipped out her phone and began typing her recollection of the directions onto the notes function, trying to commit as much to writing as possible. Pacifica quickly became engrossed in this task, and didn't even notice Star had stepped back out until the princess intoned "Wow, I wouldn't think you'd have service here."

Pacifica's heart skipped a beat like she'd been caught in the act, but when she looked up at Star the other girl was giving her a pleasant, normal expression, no signs of accusation or mistrust visible. Doing her best to sound like she wasn't surprised moments ago, Pacifica responded by saying "Oh, no, I don't, I was just double checking my daily schedule, make sure I didn't forget anything." dismissively, but then however, a look of realization spread on the human's face, and quizzically, she asked "Wait, how do you know what cell service even is?"

"We HAVE phones here Pacifica, we're not savages." Star said with a sort of amused dismissive tone, clearly not offended by the other girl's presumption. "Besides, I know all about your Earth technology from, well, my stay there..." she explained, getting a little dour at the end of her explanation.

Pacifica's eyebrow raised in curiosity, but she also recognized something about Earth had deflated Star's seemingly bottomless good cheer, and she should tread carefully. "I, uh, had gotten the impression you simply knew of Earth, not that you'd visited it." Pacifica explained, before hastily adding "I'm sorry, I can tell I've touched a sore spot, look, whatever bad thing happened to you on my world..."
"No." Star replied quickly, still a little sullen. "No, Earth was wonderful for me, and I made such a wonderful friend while I was there..." she explained, looking wistful but downcast, chewing her bottom lip a little. "The bad thing was when I left..." The princess added, and the air between the two blonds was uncomfortably quiet for a moment. However, quick as a flash, Star was active and preppy again. "But, enough about that, I have a gift for you!" she continued, wide grin on her face while producing a knife from behind her back.

If Pacifica hadn't already been leaning on the wall opposite Star's door, she'd have jumped back when the princess abruptly pulled out a vicious looking hunting dagger and held it in her direction. "It's a friendship weapon!" she explained, seemingly oblivious to Pacifica wanting to jump out of her skin. "It's a tradition from my father's side of the family. You give meat to apologize and offer weapons to mark the beginning of new friendships!"

That explanation did calm Pacifica down, but she could still feel the fight or flight chemicals bubbling with uncomfortable warmth all over her body, and as a result, was a little snappy when she looked up at Star and remarked, "Did you not learn that humans have very different cultural connotations attached to surprising people with blades when you gave one to your earth friend!?" However, Pacifica quickly regretted this, as Star went simultaneously morose and bright red at this remark, causing the startled human to look apologetic.

"...No." she admitted, looking down at her feet. "This, uh, custom, it has... VERY different connotations if the two people involved are of the opposite gender." Star explained, clearly voicing a mixture of embarrassment, regret and longing to her tone.

Pacifica began to feel the pieces come together in her head, but this social calculation was interrupted by a flash of empathy for the other girl. Gingerly, she reached out and took the dagger from Star, offering her a soft smile in return. "Well, I'll accept your offer of a new friendship then Star. Now, anything else we need, or is it time to start the mission?"

Star had brightened up again in response to Pacifica's words, but instead of being full on bursting with cheer, she instead had a soft, warm smile on her face, seeming to thank the other girl with just her eyes. "No, I think I'm good to go. C'mon, it's gonna take an hour to cover JUST the castle!"

Meanwhile, in the more magical section of the castle, Ford was pacing back and forth in front of the line of slabs, while Dipper was leaning against the far wall, reviewing his notepad, within which he had painstakingly documented every clue and detail the older scientist had gleaned from the corpses.

Further examination revealed the other four were also killed by bullets, and that the bullets inside each of the knights were the same model, most likely all fired from the same gun: Dipper had ripped out five pieces of the yellow paper, and drawn approximate positions of all the bullet wounds on one knight's chest to one piece of paper, creating rough models of all five injury sites. When shifted around a few times, the papers could be lined up to create a clean line of trailing bullet wounds, indicating that these five were most likely killed by a single shooter with one weapon sweeping the patrol.

In addition, the bullets in question were all pistol caliber, but the team of knights had a total of 22 bullet wounds on them, all of them shot directly into the chest from in front of each knight. In the end, Dipper and Ford had concluded that the entire squad was probably killed in very quick succession by a singular shooter armed with a submachine gun, who was either lying in wait along their patrol route and ambushed them or had initially appeared non-threatening until they got within range and produced the weapon.

"And in addition to all that, they clearly have experience with this kind of weapon." Dipper concluded, looking over the corpses again. "Minimal bullet spread, well planned conservation of
ammo, and according to the filling in we got on the way up here, most of these guys still had their weapons stowed when the bodies were discovered, meaning the shooter got the drop on them."

"As much as a good scientist shouldn't jump to conclusions that validate their preconceived notions, I think I am safe attributing this to Bill." Ford remarked, briefly stopping his pacing to probe his memory. "It's something of a calling card for him, kill someone in one dimension with something from another dimension that's completely foreign to them, his murder of the guiding deity of a realm without heat or light by opening a pinprick sized portal to the surface of a blue supergiant being the most prominent example." Then, the older man stopped and scowled deeply. "I can't help but think this is a personal message directed at me, or worse, a cunning trick to try and cast suspicion on travelers from Earth."

"I wouldn't worry about us getting discredited." Dipper replied offhandedly, eyes going over his notes. "We've got the princess on our side after all. I think."

Grunkle Ford stopped and gave his apprentice a concerned look, enough for Dipper to feel the gaze upon him and look up, a troubled expression on his young face. "Grunkle Ford?" he asked, wondering if he'd done something wrong. Ford softened a little at this, not having meant to glare at Dipper, and when he spoke, it was with a cautioning but understanding tone of voice.

"Be careful around the Butterfly princess." He stated. "Every queen of Mewni was once a princess Dipper, and based on my research here, every queen of Mewni is also a bloodthirsty tyrant."

The current Queen of Mewni, as a matter of fact, was currently standing in a waiting room, an annoyed expression on her face as Sean the security guard checked her for magic items before she could be admitted to the meeting room. With an annoyed huff, Queen Moon finally entered the presence of the remaining three members of the Magical High Commission.

"'Sup Moon?" Hekapoo greeted, instantly dispelling the serious air of the meeting. Further annoyed now, Moon simply took her seat and got straight to business.

"Did you gather all available information I requested?" she asked, and quickly enough, a small portal emerged over her part of the table and a small number of papers gently floated out of it.

"As requested, all known information on interdimensional criminal S2E19-333333333, AKA Bill Cipher." The voice of Omnitraxus Prime emerged from his teleconference crystal ball. Moon began to browse the documents, very standard criminal reports marked with an odd circular symbol here and there, but she was interrupted soon into her reading.

After a quiet moment of letting her read the papers, the snake armed paladin of crystals, Rhombulus, forced a cough onto the head of one of his arms, making the snake wince. "Uh, Queen Moon? Not that I mind attending this meeting or anything, but... this isn't about Lekmet's funeral tomorrow, right? Nothing is happening to threaten that, right?"

The Queen looked up from her papers and gave the crystal headed warrior a look of sympathy. "No, nothing so dire as to disrupt that, at least not yet. I simply need to get a few facts straight."

"I don't know why you're suddenly so worried about this nobody Moon." Hekapoo cut in, a dismissive tone to her voice. "This guy was small time, a plane shifting con artist who pretended to be a god to fleece rube dimensions out of whatever worthless material they traded in."

"Was?" Moon asked, an eyebrow suddenly raised in curiosity.

"We captured and imprisoned him centuries ago." Omnitraxus replied matter of factly. "Pretty
standard bust job, it's all in the documents."

"Yeah, I put him out of business and into crystal myself!" Rhombulus spoke up, eager to tell the queen all about his success in this matter. "I remember the battle like it was yesterday! He tried to hit me with disintegration spell but it bounced off my pecs! Then I gave him some of this, a little of that...!" he continued, while throwing mimed punches that left his snake arms looking dizzy "...and then froze him up in a crystal, like all the other evil doers! He's been there ever since."

"For once, Rhombulus is more or less conveying things accurately. He was a small time smuggler who had influence between, maybe four dimensions? and we shut him down with barely a fight. Where did this name even come up for you anyway?" Hekapoo asked, remaining dismissive of Bill but now much more interested in Moon.

"We have... new guests, at the castle. Travelers from Earth, seemingly completely unconnected to Star, who claim they are in pursuit of Bill Cipher, and that he recently attacked their home dimension." Moon informed in return, obvious confusion at the contradiction between the two stories on her face. Similar looks grew on the Commission members, as this new information took them by surprise. The Queen of Mewmi has an obvious air of concern about her that she was only now letting show. "Did I send my daughter alone into a dimension we didn't truly understand?"

"That's impossible. There's only one pair of dimensional scissors on Earth, and you're saying Mus... I mean, Marco wasn't with them?" Hekapoo asked, clearly flustered now, for a couple of reasons.

"No, Marco isn't among this group of arrivals." The Queen answered with a raised eyebrow while shuffling the papers together into one neat stack. Moon then focused her eyes on the documents, reading them intently, while remarking that "Star was able to confirm they are genuinely from Earth, and they seemed very sincere in their statements about hunting Bill Cipher, so that makes two impossibilities we are dealing with." She turned her eyes up at the Commission now, giving them a mild glare. "It seems my sources about Earth are less knowledgeable then I'd been led to believe."

All of the Commission members shrank somewhat under Moon's glare, but Hekapoo seemed to take personal offense at the queen's tone. "You came to us almost a year ago asking for knowledge of the lowest magic dimension in existence for Star to run around and burn things in while she gets a handle on the wand, and we told you what was the absolute truth! Earth has no natural magic, of any kind! At most, it has small levels of background radiation passing into it from the Lucitor realm due to their soul trafficking, but a year's worth of that couldn't charge a mirror phone for one call!"

Her eyebrow raising in sarcastic questioning, Queen Moon simply responded that "Well, the facts blatantly contradict your initial impression, so either you were wrong, or something has changed. They've managed to arrive on Mewni seemingly under their own power, and I've acquired a magic item they claim to have created." While explaining this, Moon produced the dream interceptor she'd acquired yesterday and slid it across the table to Hekapoo, who she knew would want to examine it.

"The magic craftsmanship seems passable at least, though I've only done basic tests." Moon continued. "Supposedly it's a psychic interceptor, able to capture mind waves used by this Bill Cipher and convert them to hallucination liquid for later viewing. I've only done the most preliminary magic tests on it, but it seems genuine." she explained, before passing the object down the table to the smith of the scissors. Hekapoo quickly produced a visual aid resembling a jeweler's loupe to examine it more closely.

"Then they must be frauds, thieves of some kind. If they've stolen Marco's dimensional scissors..." the forger of portals retorted, while getting the object into position under her gaze. Her attention now fully absorbed by the magic trinket, Hekapoo phased out of the conversation, muttering observations to herself. "Sub-par material as I'd expect, blatant... wait, no, that's quite clever... is this genuine mana
amber? That shouldn't be possible... penmanship on the runes is excellent..."

In front of the crystal ball presenting the master of space and time, two portals appeared, one depositing a fresh sheet of paper and another spitting a primed pen, with hands following each object. "You highness, could you describe these humans for us? Please, spare no details." Omnitraxus requested.

"The leader was introduced as Doctor Stanford Pines, supposedly he's an archmage." The Queen explained, voice sounding a little dry at the last comment. "Elderly by human standards, but still looks quite physically capable. Brown hair, and six fingers on both of his hands." She continued to describe, before focusing in on her specific memories of the man. "While I doubt he's actually an archmage, he had an air of... certainty to him. Speaking on these subjects with the authority of an expert."

Around the table, Omnitraxus continued to scribble down these descriptions to search for later, while Rhombulus was reaching his snake arms across the table to try and grab the dream interceptor to have a look. Normally Hekapoo would swiftly rebuke him for this, but she was focused in on the object with a look of abject concentration and a deep frown.

"The other two are teenagers, a little older than Star, and claim to be Stanford's students." Moon continued. "One says his name is Dipper Pines and claims to be the archmage's great nephew, and I can see the family resemblance. The other is a girl who introduced herself as Pacifica Northwest. Long blond hair, very... courtly, attitude, for both a human and a teenager."

"So, where are these humans now?" Rhombulus spoke up to ask, having been passed the dream interceptor after Hekapoo finished examining it with a huff. "Did you throw them in the dungeon?" He added on, drawing an eye roll from the scissor smith.

"No, I left them in Star's responsibility and gave them limited permission to conduct their mission. It will be a good learning experience in leadership for her, and if Bill Cipher is as great a threat as they say, then someone needs to be working to stop him." Moon explained.

At this point, the Queen put down the stack of papers, having been reading them during the entire conversation and having just completed the pile. "They're actually scattering a whole collection of those dream interceptors all over the city, to protect us from Bill's psychic abilities, which these documents make no mention of." Moon raised a eyebrow at Hekapoo. "I trust these objects are what they seem?"

Hekapoo sat in her chair silently for a moment, arms crossed and somewhat huffy looking. Finally, she admitted "Yes, they're legitimate. If scattered across the city they'll capture psychic waves and distill them to liquid that went drunk will show you what was being carried in the wave. I've never seen someone make something so high quality out of such limited materials!"

"But that's pointless!" Rhombulus spoke up, angrily slamming his hands on the table, dazing the snakes. "I captured Bill Cipher a long time ago and put him in a crystal! It was a huge, cool battle that I won and I haven't set him free or anything! He doesn't pose a threat! My diamonds are unbreakable!"

"I am confident that you dealt with Bill to the full extent of your abilities and knowledge at the last time you battled him. I would never accuse the Magical High Commission of lying to the Queen of Mewni." Moon reassured, mildly annoyed by this outburst. "But, the fact of the matter is that our facts aren't adding up about what matters. We must consider the possibility that this Bill Cipher may possess psychic abilities you had previously overlooked, and perhaps that has allowed him to... influence the world beyond his crystal somehow?"
The three MHC members sat in uncomfortable silence, mulling over the Queen's words. "I think I would like to meet this... Stanford Pines." Hekapoo spoke up after a long moment.

"Yeah, me too! How dare he question the quality of my work!" Rhombulus added in, which did draw sarcastic looks from the other people in the room.

"I will decline a personal meeting, your majesty." Omnitraxus Prime spoke up while his collection of notes were sucked into a portal. "I believe I can derive more information about our visitors with some research. If you'll excuse me, I shall see you all tomorrow at the service." And a moment later, the crystal ball went dark.

"So, let's go meet the humans, Queen Moon. I'd rather do this sooner than later." Hekapoo spoke, getting out of her chair and pushing it in. "Where are they at the moment?"

"Quite close by actually. I'm having them look at a recent problem of ours."

While that meeting had been going on, Star and Pacifica had been completing the initial covering of the castle grounds, placing protection over the important bedrooms, the servant quarters, and the more magically sensitive locations.

During the trip around the castle Star had occupied Pacifica by telling her as much as she knew about the various places they passed, but now that they were making their way to the streets and doubling back through used pathways, she was unable to dabble into that topic. So, Star turned the conversation elsewhere.

"So, that was an interesting talking to you had with mom earlier." Star mentioned offhandedly. "I didn't realize people from Earth could be so... courtly."

With a guarded expression, Pacifica responded by saying "Well, it's a learned skill, as I'm sure you're familiar with. Comes with being born to high society."

"Ooooooooh, are you Earth royalty or something? I was under the impression it didn't work like that there!" Star spoke up excitedly, bouncing on her heels for a moment. "Do you have a castle as well?"

"I used to." Pacifica responded on instinct, before grimacing a little and verbally backtracking. "It's... it's not really the same on Earth though, well maybe it is a little. I was born to a family that was upper class because we have large amounts of money and an empire of businesses and stores that we own, not because we held political power. Well, officially we didn't. We weren't supposed to."

Star didn't quite fully get what Pacifica had explained, and her face displayed this, but she was slowly forming conclusions. "So, on Earth, it's... some people live in big fancy castles and have servants and riches because they're good at selling things instead of being born to a line of rulers who have to manage everyone in the realm, use magic to fight monsters and go to boring diplomatic meetings?"

"Well, the wealth and status passes from parent to child on Earth as well, but... kinda, yeah." Pacifica admitted, needing a moment to process Star's logic but ultimately understanding it. "The Northests, my family, have been wealthy for generations, but we got our start... less than honorably, and don't really provide for the people of the nation like yours does."

"Years ago I would have gleefully boasted about that fact and never mentioned our fraudulent beginnings, but that's not who Pacifica Northwest is anymore." she reassured herself mentally. After taking a moment to think this to herself, Pacifica meant to speak up and explain further to Star, but
the princess spoke first by throwing her arms ups in consternation first.

"Why does Earth gotta be so cooooool!?" Star groaned to herself in frustration. "Here on Mewni being a princess comes with a BUNCH of rules, and traditions and responsibilities that all seem to exist to make sure whoever's running the show can't actually do anything or enjoy their life in any way!" At that point, Star looked over at Pacifica, and while she wasn't burning with jealousy or feeling any negative thoughts feelings about her new friend, Star felt somewhat envious of the position she assumed Pacifica was in, and it showed on her face. "It must be awesome being a princess on Earth. I bet you get to spend all the treasure building giant bounce houses and helping people..."

Rather than be offended by Star's presumptions about her life, the Northwest simply gave the Butterfly a look that mixed pity for Star's naivete, a longing that things aren't like how she thinks they are, and a growing sense of discomfort as memories encroached on her. "It's... not really like that either Star. There's still a bunch of rules you're supposed to follow, formalities to follow, expectations to meet..."

Star winced a little at Pacifica's description, feeling bad that she'd presumed an ease to the other girl's life, but not quite noticing the discomfort that was setting on her. "I'm sorry Pacifica, but I know exactly how you feel. You gotta go to boring parties full of drunk old people, traditions to uphold even though they don't make any sense..."

"...Never let people know the real you, God forbid you have any kind of public immorality even though everyone you deal with is crooked as hell, can't go to any kind of public place unless you're putting on a media show..." Pacifica continued to ramble with contempt, getting into a bit of a cathartic ramble.

"...Have to study YEARS of dull political and military minutia on the off chance one piece of it becomes useful someday, put on weird self-righteous ceremonies that are all about lies, never have any kind of fun, never be yourself..." Star rambled alongside her, getting into the swing of things. With a sly sort of grin, she looked sideways at Pacifica and asked "But you know what the worst thing?"

Pacifica, seeming to catch the tone Star was throwing at her, raised an eyebrow in quirky fashion. "I think I have a pretty good idea, but why don't you let me know?"

"THE SUITORS!" They said together, actually sharing a laugh at the fact they'd guessed each other's response, a sort of laugh you have about a joke that felt uncomfortably real.

"Can you believe some of the people they try to set us up with?" Star asked, still laughing but with a noticeable ring of disgust to her voice.

"Oh I know, I've been introduced to some real wretched ones." Pacifica answered, giggling just as hard as Star but in a more reserved fashion. "I mean, if both of the families have so much to benefit, why not form a regular partnership, or an alliance? Is marriage such a vital component of this deal?"

"I know right!?" Star said in exasperation. "And everyone has to have an opinion on it as well! I mean, I don't go around judging all my aunts for their dating lives, but any time they come around the castle mine is the most important topic of conversation!"

"The only place that you meet worse people than on the rebound is at big high society gatherings." Pacifica remarked, laughter dying down at this point but still pretty amused. Star was also beginning to calm down, as they were almost at a castle exit by this point and would soon be moving through the capital streets.
"Yeah, haha, you're really right Pacifica..." Star trailed off, looking guilty for a moment before staring at her human friend with a smile that was asking for forgiveness. "Hey, I want to apologize for something..."

Pacifica looked a little confused at this statement, suddenly adopting a guarded attitude towards the princess. "For what, Star? You haven't done anything wrong to me, not yet at least."

"Weeeeeeell, I did kinda think a few less than nice things about you after your conversation with mom. I thought you were going to be some stuck up, ultra formal traditionalist who'd be unbearable to hang out with." Star admitted with a guilty voice. "But after talking with you like this... you understand. You understand a lot about the downsides of living as a princess even if you act like a strict rules abiding princess. I hope my stray thoughts didn't unconsciously sabotage your part of the room when I made it better."

Making a mental note to check her room for traps now, Pacifica looked back at Star and crossed her arms with a playfully upset expression. "Well Star, just because I know how to turn on the attitude when it will serve my advantage doesn't mean this girl from Earth doesn't know how to make a little trouble."

Star was grinning widely now, and answered Pacifica with an exaggerated voice that indicated she was teasing her. "Oh really, and what kind of rebellion against tradition do you even have on Earth? Drinking tea without a coaster?"

Taking this as a challenge, Pacifica looked Star dead in the eyes while pulling out a box of grape juice she'd put in her backpack as a potential snack during this day out, and with a slowly growing grin, poured it straight out onto the high quality rug the two were standing on. Star grinned a little in response to this, but then actually jumped with surprise when Pacifica hurled the empty container down the hallway and over Star's shoulder, so it would impact a marble bust of a muscular Mewman woman with a minimal amount of hair and send it to the floor, shattering into powder on contact. Star, who had followed the flying juice box with her eyes, slowly turned back to the girl from Earth with a mortified expression on her face that was gradually morphing into amazement and admiration, eyes going big and getting glittery. "You. are. so. COOL!" Star yelled out, pulling Pacifica into a crushing hug that knocked the wind out of the second blond, and soon enough had dragged the other girl out of the castle and into the streets, a desire to get away from the act still resonating despite how much she'd enjoyed seeing it.

Back up in the tower, Ford and Dipper had gathered all the information they believed they could from the dead, and wished to leave. Unfortunately, the security guard watching them proved quite insistent.

"My orders were very clear. Queen Moon will collect you two from here when she requires your presence again. You are not to move through this part of the Bureaucracy of Magic unsupervised. My instructions are to keep you here, and I will follow my instructions!" Sean insisted to the two Pines family members, who were standing in the open portal with the metal door swung open, looking disgruntled. "Now, please wait patiently until Queen Moon is ready to see you." he insisted, before spinning around to face the hallway again and stand guard. "Ah, Queen Moon!"

Somehow, all three of them had failed to notice Moon, Hekapoo and Rhombulus approaching the cold storage room, having come straight here from the meeting. The two humans swiftly moved their expressions towards a more neutral look after being fed up with several minutes of arguing with Sean, the guard himself look surprised, while Queen Moon looked emotionless, Rhombulus seemed perplexed, and Hekapoo was looking mildly smug.
"So, the archmage. A pleasure to meet you, Doctor Pines, correct?" Hekapoo greeted, sounding coy as usual. "Student Dipper, greetings."

"What news do you carry regarding the unfortunate fate of our noble knights, Doctor Pines?" Queen Moon cut in, seizing control of the conversation straight away. "Hopefully some insight to what strange magic slew them, and if it will be a continued threat to my kingdom?"

"Your majesty." Ford acknowledged with his not particularly skilled impression of respect for the monarch, offering a brusque head nod. "Our examination of the bodies has produced some concrete evidence for a few different causes, though all consist of foul play. To narrow down our hypotheses, I'd like to visit the sight of the attack."

"We can discuss an expedition in due time. For the moment, your attention is needed elsewhere." Moon explained, then shifted her attention to Dipper. "Young man, go assist Princess Star in whatever operation she is conducting right now. We only need to speak with the archmage."

Both Pines twins seem surprised by the queen's demand, and Dipper shot Ford a nervous look, but the elder scientist answered it with steely, unshakable confidence. "Everything will be all right Dipper. Go on and help Star and Pacifica spread the dream interceptors, we are going to need them."

"Sean, show Mister Pines here the way out, and ensure his safety." Moon ordered the security guard personally, while Hekapoo strode forward to challenge Ford directly.

"Ah yes, your dream interceptors. Handy little things, even if they show all the signs of being crafted on a stinky little rock. Unfortunately they are not needed here on Mewni." She stated confidently once Sean and Dipper were out of earshot.

"Based on the severe devastation the recent invasion inflicted on your kingdom, I would have imagined you'd be eager to put in place a fresh line of defense, particularly when Bill Cipher is at large." Ford responded, not feeling the least bit intimidated by the scissor smith.

"Well Doctor, that's where you're wrong. Bill Cipher is ancient history!" Rhombulus spoke up, trying to sound like a cool political game player like Moon, Ford and Hekapoo and doing a significantly worse job of it. His words did seem to take Ford by a little bit of surprise though.

With a worriedly cautious expression, he asked "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"It means the two bit hustler you claimed attacked your world had actually been neutralized and locked up by order of the Magical High Commission several centuries ago." Hekapoo said with barely contained smug certainty. "So, the game's up. Whatever you hoped to accomplish by bringing up the name of a long lost, two bit demon con artist to frighten the queen, it's gone now."

Rather than crack, confess into guilt or try to flee like Rhombulus and Hekapoo had expected, Ford instead hardened his attitude and responded with steely, dreadful certainty, making none of his feelings hidden. "You are wrong. Bill Cipher is an active threat, alive and stronger than you could possibly imagine. It's obvious he found some way to deceive you all those years ago. He's tricked much smarter in his time."

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Rhombulus yelled out, adopting an angry stance towards the scientist as his snake arms hissed in displeasure.

"It means he's given you the slip, and has been giving you the slip for centuries." Ford stated bluntly, not hiding an ounce of his contempt for the two otherworldly beings in front of him. "More than
likely, you've locked up some miserable patsy in his stead. Where are you keeping this prisoner? I demand to see them."

"You are in no position to make demands here!" Hekapoo retorted, an accusing edge to all her words. "Now, start explaining how you got to this dimension! How were you able to travel from Earth!?"

"Hekapoo." Moon cut in, her tone cold as ice, enough to make the flame atop the other woman's head shrink a little. "While you are correct that Doctor Pines is not in a position to make demands here, keep in mind neither are you. I am the queen here."

"Yes, your majesty." she muttered, taking a small step back in recognition that Queen Moon was about to seize the situation.

"Now, the simple fact of the matter is that both Doctor Pines and the Magical High Commission have provided information on this Bill Cipher, and both of your reports are highly contradictory." the monarch began to orate. "In this troubled time for Mewni, no threat can simply be dismissed. Doctor Pines, you will accompany us on a fact finding mission to Bill Cipher's prison, to ascertain the truth of this matter. I trust you have no objections?"

"As you wish, your majesty." Ford replied, eyes narrowing. "I'm certain this trip will be highly illuminating."

As Dipper was moved back through the castle, Sean attempted to start up casual conversation a few times, but Dipper always gave him the cold shoulder. He spent the entire walk through the gilded corridors wondering what the Mewman Queen and her two pet monsters had in store for his mentor. It wasn't so much concern, as Dipper had complete faith in Ford's ability to win or escape during any hostile encounter, but sheer curiosity. What could they possibly want with just him?

"Well, we're here. You're free to go Mister Pines." Sean's soft spoken voice, actually tinged with a hint of annoyance, roused Dipper from his contemplative funk, and he found himself in a castle courtyard, a clear path out in front of him. Dismissing the humanoid moose without even looking at him, Dipper quickly procured a map of the Mewman capital from his pocket, having requested this during breakfast to prepare for the mission. With that in hand, it was easy for him to plot a course to the cornshake restaurant Star had designated as a meeting point.

As he walked through the rubble streets of the recently invaded city, Dipper couldn't help but think back to the first few months of his apprenticeship on Earth. One of the first things his great uncle had given Dipper in the context of their new student teacher relationship was an apology, as the damage left behind by Bill resulted in the boy being thrown head first into a level of activity Ford would have preferred to ease him into, but neither of them could afford that luxury.

With a small smile on his face, Dipper remembered the work of those days. Curse purging, eyeball hunting, interring zombies, medical examinations for everyone who'd been targeted by Bill's magic, "Those went on forever!" Dipper thought to himself. Though the work had been exhausting, he still remembered it fondly. Putting what small bandages he could on the wounds Bill inflicted, sometimes able to save people from potential lifetimes of pain and curses.

"That was when I knew I'd reached an entirely different level, and that I'd made the right choice." he recalled mentally, free from doubts or second guesses. "All my previous efforts, running around with my journal and my sister, stumbling onto adventures, it was all a prologue. All to prepare me for what I do now, the important work."

The trip down memory lane did briefly bring a frown to Dipper's face though, as he thought back to
that first summer, where his life changed forever. "Mabel...Why couldn't you just support me on this, when I always supported you?" He thought bitterly. Looking through his memories only made the boy upset, as remembrances he once found pleasant were now colored dark by his new perspective on things. "I'm not even mad at her anymore, just disappointed and... disinterested. I never realized how much I didn't actually want to interact with her until I had other options."

Before he could consider this any further though, a pair of waving hands broke his concentration and brought Dipper back to reality. He was at the cornshake place, where Pacifica and Star already had a table and a few drinks ready, and seemed to be conversing with ease before Dipper had caught their attention. Making his way over the floor, the boy took a seat besides them, greeting the two with a simple "Hey guys, good timing! How's the hang up going?"

"It's going great so far Dipper!" Star responded, eagerly bringing the bag of dream interceptors up to the table to show it was almost empty. "We've been able to scatter them all over the place!"

"I've got all the locations marked here." Pacifica spoke up, removing her own map of the Mewman capital, which boasted fresh marker spots everywhere they'd hung up one of the devices. "Star's wand let us get this done way faster than we expected, so we figured we'd wait here for you before hanging up the rest." Then, with a little frown, she asked "How did the examination go?"

Dipper cast a brief glance over at the Mewman princess before answering, choosing to say "Went pretty well, but Grunkle Ford wants to visit the actual place they were found dead before we make any final conclusions." Then, he addressed Star directly. "Do you think you could arrange something like that, Prin... Star?"

"No problem." Star replied confidently. "We could probably go later today if you guys are still up for it." Then, she paused for a moment, blinking. "Hey, where's Doctor Pines?"

"Well, Queen Moon wanted to talk to him privately about the results of the examination, so I imagine he's not that far behind me." Dipper informed, speculating while looking over his shoulder. "She had these two, uh, kinda weird people with her. One of them looked like a cross between a vampire and a fire elemental, and the other seemed composed entirely of crystals, snakes and abdominal muscles."

"Oooooooh, that's Hekapoo and Rhombulus, they're part of the Magical High Commission." Star explained, while shaking some dust out of her wand onto a pile of napkins, which caused the cloth to come to life and wrap together into crude figurines resembling the two Commission members. "Rhombulus is the guy with a diamond for a head, he's some kind of dimension hopping crime fighter who locks evil people up in crystals and rides a scooter." While she mentioned this, the napkin Rhombulus argued with both his snake arms. "He's kind of an idiot." Star admitted bluntly.

Meanwhile, the Hekapoo mockup was holding a pair of disposable knives together at the handles to make an improvised pair of scissors, which it could only handle clumsily due to how much bigger they are than her. "Hekapoo is the fiery one, and she oversees all interdimensional travel. She makes the magic scissors that let you travel between dimensions, and she decides who gets to own a pair."

"Wait, you can just travel between dimensions with a pair of scissors?" Pacifica asked bluntly. "What, you just cut a hole between worlds and that's it?"

"Well, yeah? I mean the Lucitors got some weird ritual summoning stuff but most people use scissors. I kinda figured that's how you guys got here?" Star answered innocently.

"Oh no, believe me, a lot more went into our travel than just a pair of scissors." Pacifica replied, still somewhat taken aback that the outcome of thirty plus years of groundbreaking scientific work and
heartbreak could just be recreated with a pair of scissors that the princess spoke of so casually. "Dipper, can you believe that..."

When the blond turned her attention to the boy though, she saw he had no reaction to this revelation due to being intently focused on the little MHC member dolls, watching them run through the slightly mocking actions Star had set them to do with intense focus and a curled, upset eyebrow.

"Someone who regulates travel between dimensions..." Dipper thought to himself, "...And someone who fights against the evil of the multiverse..."

"Where the hell were you two when Bill attacked!?"

"Uh... Dipper? You there Dipper?" Star asked gently, waving an arm back and forth in a failed attempt to catch his attention. Pacifica, meanwhile, simply leaned back into her chair and sucked on her cornshake, recognizing this as a state Dipper goes into when he's thinking really hard about something and not wanting to disturb him. The princess was, however, able to follow his eyes and determine what the boy was focusing on, and gave her wand a little shake to try and catch his attention.

Right before his eyes, the two figures Dipper was watching changed, from carrying out a pantomime of their magical duties, to both of them performing an embarrassing dance. The boy blinked for a second as the change of information washed over him, then burst out laughing at the sight, both surprised and amused.

"I'm sorry I got all intense on you guys for a second there, c'mon, let's relax a little." Dipper spoke up, reaching to the cornshake that had been reserved for him and taking a sip. He abruptly stopped sipping, smacked his lips a few times, and tried it again. "Well, I've had worse." He remarked softly after finishing his second sip. "Star, could you tell us more about Mewni? I mean, you're somewhat knowledgeable about Earth, but I don't know anything about this place."

"I'd be happy to!" Star replied excitedly, spinning her wand around in her fingers in preparation for the conjuring of visual aids. "I think you guys are going to love it here!"

While the three youngsters got to know each other better, their elders moved through the crystal gallery that filled the lair of Rhombulus, distrust and dislike existing between all of them. The crystal master led the way, giving a brief explanation of the prison as well as the planet blasters and black hole makers he had frozen in crystal. Ford took the whole thing in with silence, opting to say as little as possible while observing as much as possible.

"It's certainly an interesting menagerie they have here." Ford admitted to himself while glancing around. "I should keep my eyes open for a spike of blue hair. Maybe they arrested that old smuggler I knew." He wondered, before casting a look over at Rhombulus trying to impress Queen Moon with the story behind the capture of a small, fluffy mammal. "...I doubt it. He'd outwit this bunch every day of the week."

"...But of course, they can't compare to the capture we've all come here to see, Bill Cipher!" Rhombulus exclaimed, abruptly rousing him from his thoughts. It took the scientist a moment to realize where he was supposed to be looking, due to none of the crystals around him holding anything resembling his life long nemesis.

"So, there you go old man. The proof is in the crystal. Bill Cipher, locked up and helpless for hundreds of years. Now, you ready to tell us all the truth?" Hekapoo commented smugly, crossing her arms and looking at Ford with an expectant look. Rhombulus seemed similar pumped, ready to be validated, while Queen Moon observed passively.
Ford narrowed his eyes.

"This isn't Bill Cipher. You've all been played for fools by an intellect superior to yours by eons."

The being frozen in crystal before the old man was a cyclopean creature, but that was as close as it got to resembling Bill. It was an exceedingly long and thin humanoid, stretched limbs caught frozen in time, mid-flex, extending off a short, barrel like torso that bore an open, fanged mouth. The being's skin was tight and rubbery over lithe muscles, and the head was a narrow cylinder rising from the barrel chest, that seemed to only have one eyes because two wouldn't fit upon the flesh. The open mouth, caught in a frozen scream, and the singular eye, bulging and red, seemed to indicate a being stopped mid-attack, but Stanford had other ideas.

The blunt condemnation coming from the earthling seemed to take the MHC members by surprise, causing them to lose whatever smug remark they had planned to say, allowing Ford to get a second word in before they could speak. "Let them out. Now." He demanded sternly.

"Uh, excuse me, human, I think we've been over the fact that YOU are in NO position to be making demands of anyone here!" Hekapoo responded aggressively, Rhombulus similarly getting worked up behind her. "WE are the central authority of all things magical and interdimensional here, not you! And we have just proven to you that your little boogeyman Bill Cipher has been locked up for centuries! The jig is UP old man! Tell us the truth!"

"The truth? You want the truth?" Ford stated, a fire beginning to build inside his stubborn old heart as the MHC drew him into this argument. "Well, the truth of the matter is that I have only been in this dimension for about a day at this point, and I can tell for certainty that the truth is that it, and all other dimensions, are policed by idiots!" he announced sternly while getting up in Hekapoo's face. "With enforcement like you two, it's no wonder Bill has been free to rampage through dimensions during his long life of bloodshed! He destroyed his entire home dimension under your noses!" Then, Ford turned to the side to throw his arms at Rhombulus. "Your chief enforcer is a sniveling manchild who isn't fit to issue parking tickets!"

"H...HEY, THAT'S NOT TRUE! SHUT UP!" Rhombulus sniveled in response, being patted on the shoulder by both snake arms.

"Look at this place!" Ford yelled, stomping about now and throwing his arms up to encompass the entire crystal prison. "I bet you've ignorantly locked up more innocent people than actually evil in here, probably with shoddy craftsmanship at that!" Then, his eyes widened as something caught his attention. "Why, look at that crystal over there! It's cracking apart!"

Due to the fact he had his back to them, Ford was unable to notice the shocked and worried expressions his last statement put on the faces of his hosts, even the so far unflappable Queen Moon. All of them followed his gaze, their worst fears confirmed when they saw just who was imprisoned in the slowly splintering crystal Ford had pointed out.

"Rhombulus!" Moon snapped, abruptly trying to take control of the situation and steer Ford's attention away from the resting Queen of Darkness. "Release Bill Cipher from his crystal."

"Buh... what... Queen Moon!" he stammered, but she held up a hand to silence the crystal keeper.

"Based on the dramatic stories of your exploits you thrilled us all with on the way here..." Moon continued, a dry tone to her voice. "...surely it is within your power to prevent him from escaping and form a new, refreshed crystal around Bill, should the point of view espoused by the Magical High Commission be proven accurate?" Without waiting for him to answer, she continued with "Then, surely it will do no harm to release Bill Cipher for a short interrogation?"
Rhombulus seemed conflicted, as Ford had now shifted his attention to glare at the jailer, but Hekapoo offered him a short nod of confirmation. Trying to return to his confident posture, Rhombulus offered a quick "Yes, your majesty." before taking position in front of the crystal, able to feel Ford's gaze drill a hole in the back of his head. Moments later, the crystal was broken, and the imprisoned being collapsed to the floor, long bow legs collapsing on themselves when he landed.

Ford was on the prisoner in a moment, shoving Rhombulus out of the way with enough strength to surprise the Commission member. He swiftly began attending the prisoner, examining his one eye with a pocket light and feeling for any kind of pulse he could. "It's alright, you can relax. You are safe for the moment." Said Ford, a new sort of kind, calm tone to voice that none of the others present had ever heard before.

"Urrrr, what's happened? Where am I?" the being asked, a deep but dazed voice coming out of its stomach mouth. When its expression was allowed to move, the creature seemed much less aggressive, and its long limbs seemed to twitch uncontrollably in short bursts.

"You've... been asleep for awhile." Ford offered, sticking a set of six electrodes to the creature's head, then producing a handheld screen from his pocket that had six short cords coming off of it. "Now, I know this is probably not what you want to talk about right now, but I need you to tell me about Bill. It's vital we know what kind of hold he had on you."

Even with the alien physiology the creature had compared to mewmans and humans, it was obvious the mention of Bill had put panic into him. "I... Bill...BILL!" he shouted in panic, beginning to writhe a little as the reading on Ford's pocket EKG spiked, but a sudden moment of clarity seemed to hit the prisoner and he relaxed. "Bill... he's gone. He's... gone. I can't feel his mocking laughter in my head. This body..." It breathed out, while manually lifting one arm. As weak as the motion was, barely able to bring the limb off the floor, the stomach mouth writhed into a shape of joy at its success. "THIS BODY IS MINE AGAIN!"

The three Commission members watches this display with confusion and awe, though after a moment Hekapoo whispered to the others "Alright, come on, surely this is enough already?" in a tone that was meant to be disbelieving, but was cracked by genuine uncertainty. Queen Moon, in response, simply shushed her.

Ford, meanwhile, was doing his best to calm the creature in front of him, offering soothing words and reinforcement of his declarations of freedom. After a fairly short time though, he grimaced and put forward the difficult question. "Please, we need to know about Bill. What did he do to you?"

The creature seemed to shiver again, but took a deep gulp of breath and seemed to calm down. "Okay, Bill. Yes..." It seemed to compose itself. After several false starts, words retracted at the last moment, the prisoner finally began to tell their story. "Look, nobody ever said Johrain Magnemount was a nice guy, okay? I know I've done some things wrong over the years, but Bill... Bill Cipher is a monster."

"I was locked up inside the county jail of a mining colony in some backwater dimension, just trying to bring some chemical bliss to a bunch of dirt poor miners who never knew a smile their whole lives!" Johrain confessed, sounding unrepentant but moving along with the story quickly enough. "They had me in a perfectly spherical cell, 'cause, you know, I'm an angle rider. Studied under the masters of Tindalos to master the art of jumping between dimensions. I can travel anywhere, provided I have an angle to jump into and an angle to jump out of." he explained. "But of course, that left me with a bunch of student debt, so I took up smuggling in hopes of hitting a big jackpot to pay it all off."

"That night, in the jail cell, I knew they'd hang me, and probably drag it out for hours trying to do it
right. So, I had a dream. A floating triangle with one big eye came to me, and told me there was a way out alive for me, I just had to... let him in, let him show me the way out.” Johrain reminisced. "I... I thought it was just a dream, and it sounded like a pretty good deal, so I said yes. That's when the nightmare began.”

Moon was now discreetly re-reading some of the MHC’s documents on Bill, comparing the central figure of the Cipher wheel to the prisoner's description. "That was the beginning. When I awoke again it was like I wasn't awake, was still dreaming, but I could see what was happening. What he did. I could see the structure of the universe, with him behind my eye. The waves and sounds and radiation rolling through the hills, colors I couldn't imagine blinding my sight! I, he, escaped from my cell by jumping into the shift angle of my own heartbeat." Johrain explained, but as he spoke, otherworldly wonder was replaced with creeping terror.

"He... he killed people, more than just killed them, killed them horribly, made them suffer! It seemed like he was trying to build a syndicate, but I've seen bottom of the barrel extortionists with hair trigger tempers put together territory better than him. It was big, bleeding wound of a criminal empire that caught as much attention as possible and was primed to fall apart at moment's notice.” The smuggler was stammering at this point. "I mean, I'd seen people die before, seen whackings and overdoses and even a portal accident at one point, but what he did... he did it and he enjoyed it! Every sickening second of it, he revealed in!"

By now, the freed prisoner was slowly winding his long arms around his short body in order to curl up into a ball. Even the Commission members looked troubled and unsure of themselves at this stage. "The last thing I remember, before now at least, was the wall of the hideout exploding, and Bill... Bill was laughing so, so loud, even as his... my body froze in place and everything went black." His story finished, the smuggler looked up at Ford with a haunted look in his eye. "What... what happened to me?"

Across the room, the three Commission members had a collection of troubled expressions, all debating on what to do next. Moon was the first to take action, quietly stepping up to Rhombulus and whispering to him "Stay behind and make sure you know who stays secure. We will discuss this further after the service tomorrow," before going over to Hekapoo and prompting her to step up and address Stanford, who was doing his best to comfort Bill's cast away host.

"Well Doctor Pines, it seems you were correct, there is much more going on here than the MHC was initially able to know." Moon greeted, and after a moment of silence, elbowed Hekapoo in the side, prompting her to add in "Yes, it seems you were right after all. I find it hard to believe a human from Earth could have set all this up as a deception, meaning you must be telling the truth."

"Your newfound confidence is flattering." Ford replied dryly while stepping up from Johrain, having gotten him down to a semi-calm state of mind. "Now that you appreciate the scale and intellect of the opponent we are facing, I trust I can expect greater cooperation in combating him?"

"Yes, I believe you can. It would still serve you best to send all your requests through Princess Star, but I am confident the majority of them will be met." Queen Moon responded. "Now, I believe our time here has served its purpose. Doctor Pines, as we walk, please, inform us more about this new enemy to the kingdom, Bill Cipher. Obviously our current intelligence on him is woefully outdated."

"What about him?" Ford asked, pointing back to the curled up Johrain Magnemount.

With a tone that was both reassuring but dismissive, Queen Moon stated that "Despite his pre-possession indiscretions, I will ensure this smuggler receives the finest available Mewman psychology. He'll be taken care of, I assure you."
Ford could only nod gruffly at this. "At least they're not putting him back in the crystal." He thought to himself. "Very good. Now, I'd like to be returned to my students. It's obvious we have a great deal of work ahead of us."

"Yes, I think we do." Moon replied, as she and Hekapoo began to make their way to the exit, Ford storming out ahead of them. "A Queen's most important duty is to shield the kingdom against threats." she remarked, while glancing backwards at a very important crystal. Even though she was farther away now, it almost looked like the spiderline cracks had gotten bigger...
Night had fallen over the Kingdom of Mewni, and Princess Star Butterfly had returned to her chambers after seeing her guests off to their renovated bedroom, where they had found the older Pines already returned from his meeting with the Commission. It was something of an early night for the princess, but she needed to attend Lekmet's funeral service tomorrow, and even someone as carefree as Star knew to take such an event seriously.

"That was the most fun I've had over a cornshake since, well, since Marco was here." Star thought to herself as she placed her toothpaste upon a waiting toothbrush. "Pacifica really seems like she gets it when I say being a princess isn't all it's cracked up to be... and Dipper..." she thought idly, trying to sort out her new thoughts while a faint, barely noticeable shade of pink spread out from her cheek hearts, unnoticed even when Star was looking in the mirror. "He's a good listener, careful, an organized planner, and he has that sort of endearing awkwardness about him." she thought to herself, almost against her will, while brushing her teeth and bending her neck down to rinse.

Any reflection on the ideas that were crossing her mind was cut short when Star's blond head rose up from the sink, and the pink on her cheeks drained white from surprise. She shrieked and jumped backwards in shock as the haunted gaze of her dead mentor, Sir Glossaryck of Terms, stared back from the reflection.

On the other side of the castle, the crew from Earth were talking about the dead rather than seeing them. When the three had reunited, they quickly shared what they'd been up to during the group's split up over the day, and after everyone was filled in on everyone else, began planning tomorrow's trip to the scene of the crime.

"I was able to talk to Star about that while she, myself and Pacifica were at the shake shop." Dipper explained. "She can't go with us on the trip, but she did arrange a military escort to drive us to the ambush location by carriage. Something about a funeral for a Magical High Commission member."

"Somehow it doesn't surprise me they've sustained casualties." Ford remarked dryly while pacing around the map of Mewni they were planning the operation with. After a long moment of thought, he spoke up. "Dipper, Pacifica, I'd like you two to stay here in the castle during the trip tomorrow. I will investigate the killing ground alone."

Both teenagers seemed surprised by this announcement, and Dipper was the first to object. "Grunkle Ford, please reconsider!" He asked. "Bill or his pawns could still be lurking around that location, what if they have a base there!? You can't just go in alone to that."

"That's precisely why I have to Dipper. My first responsibility on this trip is to keep you both safe, and I won't drag you into the firing line no matter how risky it makes things for me." He explained, before elaborating "Besides, I would need one of you to stay here in the castle anyways. The interceptors will need checking and in general, we need a trustworthy pair of eyes and ears around here at all times. Secretive, political halls like this are the kind of environment Bill can thrive in."

"Doctor Pines, let me come with you then." Pacifica spoke up, drawing a look of surprise and concern from the younger man in the room. "I'm sure Dipper can take care of everything here by himself, but it's actually crazy for you to go into the field like that with no one to guard you except Mewni's Finest." she explained with a harsh tone of voice. "I appreciate you wanting to keep us safe
Doctor Pines, but if we're working as a team then me and Dipper have to keep you as safe as you keep us."

Then, with a softening tone, she further explained "If things go too wrong, I'll use the fast return switch to go back to the Shack." while feeling around for the object in her pocket subconsciously. The inconspicuous little white disks that flipped open to reveal a small finger switch were the group's lifeline to Earth. Small, powerful devices able to activate a basic subroutine in the portal machine even across dimensions, causing it to lock onto the switch's current location and transport everything in a small radius back. A basic safety tool that each human carried a dozen of. "From there, based on what you've shown me, I can activate the portal, lock onto the castle here and portal back in, letting Dipper know what has happened and getting you rescued faster."

Ford seemed to be actively swayed by Pacifica's words, but still held visible doubt. "Dipper?" he asked, turning to his great nephew in search of genuine input on Pacifica's proposal.

Rather than answer his great uncle right away however, Dipper turned to the girl in the room, a conflicted look on his face. "Pacifica, let me go with Grunkle Ford instead. I have full faith you can handle everything that needs doing here at the castle." he suggested.

"Dipper, this trip could turn dangerous. It will be safer if you stay here in the capital." Pacifica replied, her voice full of concern for the boy in front of her.

"Pacifica, I want you to be safe. I'm serious, I'll go instead." The young man answered firmly.

"Well, maybe I want YOU to be safe as well, what about that dork?" The blond responded, getting more combative in tone now.

Dipper looked touched by this sentiment, but still struggled with how to respond. With a conflicted look on his face, her turned towards his mentor for advice. "Grunkle Ford?"

The old scientist was deep in thought at this point, and took minute to respond to Dipper. "It's entirely possible..." he eventually began to say, revelation and uncertainty to his voice. "...that the true danger actually lurks in the castle, and this attack on the field is a diversion, or an inciting act. Therefore, I believe we need to split our forces equally."

"Our two strongest assets in direct combat against Bill are my decades of experince fighting against him, and the aid of Princess Star Butterfly and her magic wand." Ford spoke, his voice expressing no ego at the mention of his abilities, simply practical analysis. Dipper and Pacifica looked surprised he was suddenly counting the Princess of Mewni as an asset. "However, I suspect she may be vulnerable to Bill's manipulation. That's why Dipper will stay here in the castle."

The young man look surprised at this, but Ford put a warm hand on his shoulder and gave him a look beaming with pride. "Dipper, at this point in time, no one is more wise to Bill's tricks and mind games than you, except potentially Stanley, and to be frank, I don't think we could involve him here without creating a diplomatic incident." By now, Dipper was looking up at his mentor with warm, appreciative eyes. "I'm sure you can keep him from sinking his roots in here at the castle."

Dipper looked incredibly determined and confident as he accepted his assignment with a look of pride on his face, but after a moment turned his head towards Pacifica. "As long as Paz is still willing to take the field with you?" He asked, a flicker of uncertainty to his tone.

"It's no problem Dipper, as usual, Doctor Pines has an excellent plan." She confirmed, before grinning a little and adding playfully that "Besides, if you're going to be babysitting Star while you're here you're probably in more danger than I am."
Dipper laughed at Pacifica's joke before turning back to Ford. "Okay, I suppose we're settled then. Anything else we need to plan out Great Uncle Ford?"

"For the moment, no." He explained, shifting away from the room center table. "With our general plan of action laid out, we can pack the specifics in the morning. For now, I think it's best we all try and get a good night's rest. We're going to need those wherever we can get them."

While Ford explained all of this, he went about hanging up a few extra dream interceptors around the room, just to be sure.

When morning came the next day, the team of humans found themselves up and at work right away. They had only just finished packing everything that would be needed for the expedition when a butler knocked upon the door, informing them that Princess Butterfly is offering to see them off over breakfast.

It was an offer Ford had refused however, requesting to be taken to their carriage as soon as possible so as to not let the trail grow any colder, and privately, inside his mind, wanting to avoid any further interaction with the Queen or the MHC, planning to eat packed food from Earth during the ride for breakfast. The tall, thin and quiet Mewman butler had curtly yielded to the request, and now Dipper stood in a small, quiet courtyard, seeing his two compatriots off as they strode up to their military escort.

The escort in question consisted of a tall, borderline stereotypical armored Mewman male, looking resplendent in his finely polished plate and noble features. Inwardly, Ford scoffed at the sight, musing that these champions of the kingdom were far less inspiring looking when their steel was soaked in the blood of children.

If the warrior noticed Ford's facial expression of contempt, he didn't react to it, but Pacifica spotted right away that the other soldier who would be guarding them certainly did. Short, female, ruddy red hair and outfitted with significantly less armor as well as a smaller weapon than the taller knight, probably some kind of squire. Despite a superficial attempt to appear stalwart and professional, Pacifica could tell she was regarding her charges with a glare, speaking to frustration at having to mind them and... perhaps a deeper seated contempt?

Pacifica wouldn't be surprised if Doctor Pines didn't pick up the social cues coming off the red head, but for the trained socialite she was an open book with an oversized font. "Something is up with this mission. Either it's going to be riskier than we were told, or maybe... or does she have a political motive?"

After a few more seconds spent analyzing the red head, Pacifica had one more passing thought. "Or, she might just be one of those types whose always upset."

"Verily and good day, students of magic. My name is Sir Stabby, and this is my squire Higgs. We will be serving as your bodyguards during this expedition. Your carriage is right over here. I will be riding outside, to keep a stout and watchful eye for any danger while directing the vehicle, while Higgs will join you in the compartment. Do not hesitate to ask her for anything you need." The commanding knight explained in sort order, before turning about to conduct a final check, clapping his hands twice to motion Higgs to join him. "We can leave whenever you are ready."

Left alone together now, the three humans huddled up for one more conversation before splitting up. "Are you guys sure about this? I'm still up to go with you on this mission." Dipper spoke up.

"I appreciate your willingness to go, Dipper, but it is vital someone keeps an eye on the castle." Ford replied with sincerity, putting a reassuring hand on Dipper's shoulder. "As vital as this fact finding
mission seems to be, we can't ignore the possibility it could just be a diversion by Bill."

"We'll be fine Dipper, I'm confident Doctor Pines will keep me safe." Pacifica added, taking a step closer to the boy. "Keep yourself safe, okay?" she asked with a soft tone of voice. The two were uncomfortably close for a moment, both feeling like there was something they should do but unable to put a finger on it, and soon enough, Pacifica was walking away, making her way into the carriage alongside Ford.

Dipper stood alone and waved them off as the horse drawn carriage left the castle, trying to steady his worries before heading off for the dinning hall. A short breakfast with the princess and he'd be able to bury his troubling emotions by working on the dream interceptors.

Settling down to the long table in the increasingly familiar dining hall, Dipper was chewing on a slice of corn pancake when the princess burst into the room, moving with a frantic energy and seemingly dressed halfway between pajamas and a fancy, ceremonial outfit.

"Oh, hey Dipper, sorry can't join you for breakfast getting dolled up for the service took longer than I thought and I overslept how are you?" She spoke with a run on tone, obviously in a hurry and grabbing random pieces of food off the table but not stuffing any of them in her face. Despite her high energy, Star had a noticeable look of sleeplessness about her eyes.

Not exactly unfamiliar with the sight of an energetic girl storming into a breakfast setting and making a mess, Dipper simply gave the princess a small smile and continued to carefully chew his food. "Good morning Star. Don't worry about it, anything pressing we can talk about later today. After I get done sampling all the interceptors I'll be in my quarters all day analyzing the results."

Star at this point ducked and weaved around his chair, collecting her last scrap of food. Upon the plate she'd walked in with was a single pancake, and a smattering of fruits and a toast slice sat on top of it. With deceptive strength, the princess folded the pancake over itself, smashing the fruit and bread to a fine paste inbetween the two sides of the pancake. While a small amount oozed out, the end result was an easy to carry, deep packed chunk of food.

Hardly a stranger to creative culinary concoctions, Dipper gave her a genuine thumbs up in place of a verbal compliment, since he was chewing at the time. When he finally could speak without choking himself, he added "Looks good."

"It tastes good too!" Star replied, small drops of fruit flavored spittle coming out as she spoke with her mouth full. "Okay Dipper, I'll see you in the afternoon!" She announced before bounding away, improvised breakfast in hand.

"Star, you really shouldn't run and chew! You'll choke on it!" The boy ended up calling vainly after her.

Already a good distance away, Ford and Pacifica were removing their own breakfasts from plastic bags as the carriage rattled down the roads. The red headed squire simply sat across from them, minding them with a critical eye.

"So, you're from that earth place, right?" Higgs finally asked cautiously, unable to restrain herself any longer.

"Yes, we are, first time visitors to Mewni actually. You however, speak as though you are familiar with our dimension, do you mind if I ask how that might be?" Ford replied quickly enough, focusing his ruthlessly inquisitive eyes on the squire, enough to make her figit a little.
"Well, I've never been there myself, my dimensional travel mostly consists of Quest Buy supply runs, but you're not the first visitors from Earth that Mewni has had the honor of hosting." Higgs explained, disdainful sarcasm leaking into voice despite her attempts to hide it.

Pacifica raised an eyebrow at this and went on the offensive. "Really? I was under the impression our group was the first to have traveled from Earth to Mewni. Can you tell us more about these visitors?"

Higgs looked like answering the question was the last thing in the world she wants to do, but after a moment of remembering his knight's orders to provide the humans with whatever they wanted, she responded. "Just some nobody from Earth who got dragged into the recent invasion by the princess, named Marco something-or-other. He spent the entire battle running around in the sewers while we, the members of the grand army of Mewman Knights... uh, protected civilians and secured the evacuation routes from the city." Then, crossing her arms with a fussy expression, she complained that "Somehow he gets all the credit leftover after the princess' lightshow..."

The red head's confident exposition had abruptly taken an uncertain tone as she detailed her own role in the battle, and this engendered a great deal of uncertainty from the two humans. They exchanged a meaningful look while Higgs' head was turned away, with Pacifica giving the older man a nod that indicated she shared his suspicions.

"Well, I'm confident Mewni's Knights conducted themselves against the monster hordes with all the heroism and nobility befitting their great legacy." Ford replied, sarcasm so withering it could case a flower in a vase to curl up and die. Both of them had the feeling that the squire wouldn't be able to provide any further information, and as such resumed eating their breakfast in silence.

It was later in the day now, and Dipper was fluttering about his refurbished quarters, carefully prepping and organizing the morning condensation he'd collected from the dream interceptors, knowing a mishandling could potentially give Bill Cipher an advantage. The process to make them readable consisted of mixing a small amount of bright powder into a test tube's worth of liquid, then heat the sealed container over a fire for a short amount of time. It was simple, but focus demanding work.

As a result of this, Dipper was taken by surprise when Star threw the door to the room open, causing the boy from Earth to startle in place and drop the test tube he was carrying. Quick as a flash though, Star readied her wand and cast a spell of levitation on the glass container, causing it to reverse path an inch from the floor and gently float towards the ceiling instead of smashing and spilling.

Dipper looked at the floating container with a boggle eyed expression of shock, before exhaling the sharp interior pressure he'd built up when it slid past his fingers with a deep sigh of relief, carefully putting it back with the other test tubes in an organized row. When he looked over at the princess, she was sporting a sheepish grin.

"Good save there Star." Dipper spoke up, genuinely grateful. "These are the samples from the dream interceptors we hung up yesterday. If Bill is up to something, this is how we'll figure him out. Sorry I almost dropped it."

The blond princess seemed confused by the boy's compliment however. "But, I almost caused you to drop it by barging in though? I should be apologizing to you!" she said self-deprecatingly.

"No, no, don't worry, it was my fault." Dipper replied reassuringly while turning off the portable bunsen burner he was using and pushing the experiment off to the side. "You told me what time I could expect you to come around, and I let myself get distracted organizing all the samples and got startled. Don't worry about it." Then, he took a seat on a rather comfortable purple velvet chair and
leveled his gaze at Star. "So, how did the service go?"

At mention of the service, Star became both apprehensive and embarrassed, and a few lines seemed to form on her face. "I... nearly drowned in a punch bowl." she admitted.

Dipper looked at her with a nonplussed but still quizzical expression. "Oh." he said, for lack of anything better to say. "...Is that some kind of Mewman thing, or, uh...?"

"No, it's not." Star remarked, a little bit amused by Dipper's uncertainty, but that expression didn't last long. "Something... scary happened, has been happening, and I was hoping you might know." she explained, trepidation in her voice before the princess swallowed and admitted "I've been seeing a dead person in every reflection."

Dipper didn't comment right away, instead giving the princess a look of concerned sympathy, which she found herself appreciating. "Well, have a seat and explain as much as you can, I'll do what I can to help." While directing her to do this, Dipper produced his notepad and a pen from inside his various pockets without needing to look.

"Okay, well, once upon a time, I had a magic teacher, who was tied to a spell book. His name was Sir Glossaryck of Terms, and he was the master and guardian of the collective, inscribed wisdom of all of Mewni's past queens." Star began to explain, a reverent tone to her voice until she more casually elaborated that "He was a little guy, blue, floated everywhere. Had a jewel in his forehead."

"I see..." Dipper remarked while narrowing his eyes at the notes he had taken. "Were you two close?" he asked carefully.

"He was kind of a jerk, if I'm being honest." Star admitted on impulse, before seeming to regret her words slightly. "But he was, well, a teacher, an okay one I guess. He acted like he didn't have emotions and did actively betray me once, but then, when I was dead and we were sitting around a pot of soup he helped me come back to life and beat Toffee because he helped me realize, I was a... uh... huh..."

Star had begun to ramble a bit as her conflicting emotions about her old teacher spilled out of her in a steady stream, the young princess being unable to figure out what she actually felt or wanted to say, only for the entire tangent to end when she was washed over with the kind of feeling that comes from getting an answer that created three new questions. Star spent a long moment peering at Dipper, really looking at him, as the boy from Earth tried to quickly scribble down everything Star had said, before finishing, looking up, and feeling a bit awkward in her gaze.

Eager to get the conversation going again, Dipper began to brainstorm. "So, this Glossaryck, was he a powerful magic user? Did he express any fear or defiance as he died? Any last second spells cast with his dying breath?"

Star frowned as she thought back about her mentor. "I... I was never really clear on what he could or couldn't do with magic, to be honest. He always seemed like he knew everything about everything at least, but he was always so secretive about it! He'd never tell me anything straightforward and packed all his lessons in stupid riddles and tricks, even though he knew I wasn't good at figuring that kind of stuff out, like when he almost let my diary get read just to make a point!"

The frustration that the princess had and the long amount of time it had been buried were overwhelmingly clear as it bubbled to the surface, causing Dipper to stop writing for a moment and offer her an incredibly sympathetic look. "Star..." he said with a reaffirming tone. "...Don't be so hard on yourself." he offered, causing her to look up him with a wondering.
"Look, if I'm being honest with you, I might not have been there for it, but based on the way you feel about him, I think you had a bad teacher." Dipper offered. Then, he spoke from experience. "Trying to figure out magic, this strange, otherworldly force that breaks all natural laws and can be manipulated like you're playing an instrument, is a strange and scary process. It requires emotional maturity and mental confidence just as much as it requires intellectual understanding. Magic will change your life, change who you are as a person. It's not a change you should go through with someone you don't trust."

Star was enraptured by Dipper's words, watching him with wide, shiny eyes as she thought back, remembering when magic had changed her. Her first transformation, that strange, sickly purple haze she descended into, which caused her emotions to burn so hot they hurt, like her blood was boiling and a living thing was crawling around in her guts. The terrible things she had done, had wanted to do in that state, had they come from inside her after all? As much as Star wanted to blame the strange energies leaking into her from the cosmos for the monstrous, shameful thoughts that had driven her six armed body, the lingering impulses, the nagging guilt telling her that it was all her, refused to leave Star's mind. And that was just the first time she had changed, which everyone had been infuriatingly quick to dismiss as a natural thing she shouldn't think about.

"I needed answers! Not to just move onto the next lesson in being a perfect princess!" Star shook with anger as she thought about this subject once again. "I need to know that those thoughts weren't me! That the magic put them their instead of just... unearthing them, from beneath my twisted depths. I need to know that I'm not a monster." With a sigh, Star felt the regret and shame bubble back into her body. "That wasn't even the golden change..."

"I felt like the hand of an angry god." Star whispered inside her skull while remembering the recent battle against Toffee. "I felt so good, so strong, and I did want to destroy Toffee more than anything... but it was wrong somehow. Like I'd been force fed the greatest meal in existence, chained to a chair and made to enjoy. The power flowed so easily, everyone looked so small."

Against her own will, Star's mind began to trail back to that place, the golden light dragging her brain towards it like it had its own gravitational field. The thought she had had during that sequence, feeling like she was sitting outside her body and watching the vacantly grinning deity cast down judgement, rolled into her mind's eye. The golden light of rage had blinded her, just like the purple mist of lust.

"I am the wrath of magic, the killer cell of the multiverse, the unicorn's rage and bringer of wet socks. I am the glue of creation, the blind singer at the center of the cosmos I am the lightning bolt of Mewni crashing down upon the monster hoards I inform the burritos when they shall die I am the rage of queens the vengeance of blood from beyond the grave Iamdeathlamlhunterlamlusttoffeetoffeetoffeetoffeeyoushallneverreachthetheruth!"

"Magic changed who I was and what I felt." Star thought to herself, fighting by to her conscious self through the clarity of realization. "And no one seemed to care, they hailed me as a hero when I felt like a ghost. No one cared about how it made me feel... No one but Marco."

Dipper had been letting Star struggle through her feelings, displaying more understanding by simply watching her expression shift and responding appropriately then he could just with words. When she finally settled down to a state where he didn't feel like he was interrupting simply by breathing, Dipper took the opportunity to try and connect with her.

"I couldn't imagine a world where I tried to follow my studies with a version of Grunkle Ford that I felt like I couldn't trust, or who used my lack of knowledge to pick on me." Dipper spoke up. Star
was both sympathetic to the traces of pain she could hear in his tone, and unconsciously envious of
the obvious, overwhelming admiration and respect he had for his mentor, Star wishing that she had
been taught by someone so great as to inspire her in that way.

Stopping for a moment, Dipper's face seemed to quiver with a buried pain and he seemed on the
verge of swallowing his words, but he continued none the less. "You... you can't accept magic from
people or sources you can't trust. Not power, not items, not... not knowledge. The damage something
can do to you, when they're your eyes to this world but lie to you about what they see..." He stopped
for a moment, thinking back to his own memories as well stories passed to him by Grunkle Ford. "If
your magic teacher, someone who is so close that they can literally reach in and touch your soul, isn't
someone you trust absolutely, they'll turn you into their puppet."

"He preyed on me." Dipper thought to himself inside his mind, unable to fight back the feelings and
the memories as he discussed her experiences with Star. "I was tired and angry and just wanted
someone to help me for once, and he preyed on my needs and stole my body, abused it and would
have left me for dead." The boy closed his eyes from a moment while old wounds echoed across his
face. "For just a moment, I thought I found someone who understood, who wouldn't just ignore or
demean what I wanted for once, who was offering me a break in exchange for a worthless sock
puppet. I was a fool."

Star suddenly felt uncomfortable, like Dipper had unwittingly exposed a very personal, very sore
from injury section of his personality to her. His body language had changed as he talked, and by the
end of his explanation Star was no longer looking at a young man growing towards a bright future,
muscles beginning to develop and a face that shown with ever calculating intelligence and ambition.
She was looking at a curled up child, who'd been wounded and abandoned just like she had been,
long before he met his wonderful mentor.

The two just sat in silence for a moment, but in that moment, they finally looked up from their
withdrawn states and made eye contact, and both of them understood the other. Both of them had, at
one point, lost themselves to something strange and eldritch, and both carried the wound on their
souls to this day.

This sharing of confidence did seem to strengthen Dipper though, or at least give him the motivation
to push it down for the moment. He quickly regained his confident, learned stature, brought his pen
back to his notepad, and was asking Star another question, albeit with reserve and a gentle tone of
voice now.

"So while I understand it might be hard to talk about him, I need to know if I'm going to help you:
Do you think Glossaryck would try and return himself to life?" Dipper asked firmly, resolving to
help Star through whatever this problem truly was.

Star was quiet for a few minutes, really thinking this over. She tended to stare at her feet or to the
side in this state, blond hair flowing down to create a visual barrier between her face and Dipper's.
When she finally spoke up, it was with a weary, somewhat resigned tone of voice.

"No, I don't think so." Star admitted, sinking into her chair a little. "He didn't care about anything or
anyone, and certainly not me. Only about the job. I think he only helped me out at the end because
we were both dead and he wanted me gone." Then, with her eyebrows knitting in confusion, she
looked at Dipper. "But, if it's not him, what else could it be?"

Scribbling down a long list of topics he would need to ask Star about later, Dipper took in her
confession of feelings. Keeping his eyes on the notepad for a moment, he soon looked up at her with
a hard expression to his eyes.
"Bill."

Star's eyes widened as Dipper's got narrow. "But, I though you said the dream thingies protect us from Bill?" she asked, a tone of worry getting into her voice.

"Yes, but it's hardly out of character for him to figure out a way around our defenses, especially with all the magic he has to work with in this dimension..." Dipper mumbled, deep in thought as his hat shadowed over his eyes, gears beginning to spin in overtime. "Does anyone else know about your relationship with Glossaryck?"

"Mom, dad, the Magical High Commission, Marco, actually the whole Kingdom knows about the book getting burned and that's what killed him but I don't actually know how much they know about him..."

"Star?" Dipper asked gently, interrupting her partially automatic list off of relevant people. "Whose Marco?"

The princess was stopped in her tracks by the question, words dying in her throat as her face heated up and her heart bottomed out, a lonely ache setting in again. She knew she couldn't dodge this question, but on some level, she didn't want to. Dipper was trying to help her and she felt very comfortable around him, it couldn't hurt to talk about Marco with him, could it?

"Marco is... was... I mean, he's not dead or anything, I just don't see him anymore... he was my guide when I went to Earth for awhile, I lived in his house with his family." she explained, building up a small stutter as she spoke. "He went on all my adventures with me, and helped me get through all the hard times. I don't think I'd have learned nearly as much as I did from Earth if I wasn't guided through it by him."

Dipper took in everything Star said, regarding her a little strangely as she lit up and began to stammer, but stayed focused on the vital task at hand. "And he's a normal human, right? No magical defenses?"

"I mean, he's really good at karate, but otherwise no."

With a grimace, Dipper responded "Then we need to be mindful of the possibility he's our leak. Not intentionally of course, but Bill can learn a lot about people just by watching their dreams, and even with all our research we're still not entirely sure how his powers work or what his limits are." while tapping his pen against his chin and eyeing his notes. Looking up, he asked Star "Is there a way I could talk to Marco?"

"NO!" Star responded impulsively, clearly agitated now. She quickly tried to compose herself when she saw Dipper had startled unexpectedly in response to her shouting. The princess felt her heart pound as familiar, buried hurt rung around her chest. "No, I can't go back, I can't do this again, I need to get Marco out of my life and stop feeling these feelings about him!

"I'm sorry, what I mean, is, uh..." Star struggled, trying to bring up a definitive excuse. "...I don't want anyone from Earth being involved in this. You're trying to protect Earth from Bill Cipher, right? Well so am I! I won't make anyone from that dimension into a target!"

"You make a good point." Dipper stated to Star's relief, his voice and expression all business now. "Given that you mentioned dozens of sources he could have learned about this from, visiting Marco would only put him in unnecessary danger on a very thin chance of success. Forget I mentioned him."
"Gladly." Star thought to herself, sinking into her chair. However, the thought of her painful crush continued to invade the princess' head, and so in an active effort to put her mind elsewhere, she put all her focus on Dipper, meticulously studying every twitch of his body and wondering what particular spin of the mental gears it matched to.

"It's possible..." Dipper said slowly, constructing his theory on the fly as he spoke. ".That Bill is targeting you with an illusion of Glossaryck, designed to weaken your resolve, fill you with guilt, and disrupt your sleep patterns, all of which are conditions that make one vulnerable to him." He spoke from experience. "Tell me, if you were given the opportunity to try and revive Glossaryck, but you'd have to sacrifice something important or do something dangerous, would you do it?"

Star thought about it for a moment, before answering. "Yes, I think I would, provided it wasn't something crazy like ritualistically sacrificing peasants." With a look of guilt, she hung her head and added "I'd feel obligated to, as much as I didn't like him. It's my fault he's dead."

"Don't beat yourself up over that Star, that's how Bill will get you." Dipper cautioned, then in a more reassuring tone added "The mistakes of the past should stay in the past. That way, we can study them from an objective distance to do better, but not let them control our every waking action and make us illogical with guilt."

"Thank you Dipper." Star replied, a smile getting on her face. She was feeling familiar determination coming over her, taking her out of her funk and into battle. "So, how do shut Bill Cipher down on this?"

"I have an idea on how to do that, as a matter of fact." Dipper answered, getting a conspiratorial smirk on his face as well, finding Star's eagerness for battle infectious. "Is your wand capable of tuning arcane radiation into specialized frequency and wavelength magnetic waves?"

Confidence drained from Star's face as Dipper's question froze her completely in her tracks. Some of those words were things she'd heard on Earth, but she didn't understand what they meant then and they meant even less to her now. She spent so long trying to pick her way through the sentence that her cheek hearts turned into spinning hourglasses and Dipper had to snap her out of it.

"Star, hey, Star!" He spoke up. "I'm sorry for getting all technical on you, but in short I think we can make up a spell that will shield you from Bill."

"OH!" Star responded, perking up instantly. "Why didn't you just say so!?"

Dipper pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment, but stayed patient and considered Grunkle Ford's description of Mewni. "Star, do you know what magic, well, is?"

"I mean, well, duh I know what magic is, I use it all the time!" Star replied playfully, but Dipper kept looking at her with something of a frown.

"But what is it, actually? Like what is magic made of, how does it work? What makes specific spells different from each other, and where does it all come from?" Dipper asked, not looking for answers for himself, but to spark Star's train of thought. He reached down and slapped the chair he was sitting on, the sound of solid impact ringing out, and he ignored the throbbing in his hand to continue the lecture. "You conjured all the decorations in this room out of magic, but are they still magic now? This chair, after all, is solid matter now. You cast the spell over a day ago and everything is still here, you can't make it all vanish by refusing to think they exist, like an illusion."

Star's mind ran a mile a minute, trying to dig up answers to Dipper's questions and finding that she lacked them. As he pontificated about the nature of the furniture they were sitting on, Star looked
down at her wand, giving it a long, contemplative look. "After all the trouble you and me have been through, how much I've worked to guard you, I really don't know how you work, do I?"

"Okay, well, what is magic then?" Star finally asked, genuinely curious and wondering where Dipper was going with this.

"Well, we haven't solidified a complete theory yet, but there are a few facts that all our observations and experiments seems to support." Dipper began, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck but gradually getting into his explanation. "Magic is, a sort of energy, an alternative energy! Instead of coming from burning stars and being captured by plants, magic flows from across the multiverse, like there was a great big burning star at the center of all dimensions and can freely react to electrical impulses in the human brain, including two way conversion to matter!" Dipper explained excitedly, then remembered who he was talking to. "I mean, present company not included, obviously."

"But, that's not what the stars are." Star replied, after having giggled a little at Dipper's use of her name so many times. "The stars in the sky are great chunks of ice. That's why it gets cold at night, when they phase back into our dimension and counteract the heat and light that comes out of the ground from the Underworld." She explained, like it was the most basic thing in the world. "Duh. Why else would Mom name me Star? She had hoped I'd inherit her cool headed attitude."

Dipper was slumped into his chair after that explanation, face gobsmacked with incredulity like Star had whipped out a gun in the middle of their conversation and shot him. He was quiet for almost a minute, making no noise except for a vague gurgling from his throat as he tried to settle on a response.

Star meanwhile just watched him with a playfully smug expression. "Well, looks like this little princess is a lot smarter than you first thought, ain't she?"

"...Star?"

"Yes Dipper?"

"That... you... not a single word you just said, in that specific arrangement of vowels and consonants, not a single idea you just posited in that verbal delivery information..." Dipper seemed to be struggling with himself, trying emphasize his message as hard as possible, to a degree that was giving him trouble.

He abruptly ended his struggle by getting up and walking to the window, throwing his arms at the grand vista beyond the glass. "Look at the world out there! And the horizon, and the curvature of the planet that the horizon suggests! Look at its curvature! You don't need the portal's scanners to determine this is a heliocentric universe you inhabit!" Turning back to the princess, he added on "Do the well documented movements of the sun mean nothing to you people!?"

"Why would we care about the movements of the sun?" Star asked dismissively. "That's just a big ball of poop that gets rolled around the sky everyday by ladybugs."

Dipper's right eye was actively twitching as, to his utter disbelief, the princess managed to find an even lower depth of ignorance to sink to in this conversation. Star suddenly felt glad he wasn't holding a pen or a fork or something else pointy since the boy seemed like he might explode at any moment. Instead, with the frustration quite clearly bubbling under every word, he simply asked "How was this castle even built in the first place?" His bafflement that Mewmans didn't live caves was incredibly obvious.

Star was really quiet and took a long moment before answering "...maaaaaaagic?" while holding up
her wand like it was a piece of defining evidence.

The boy from Earth gave a resigned sigh, boiling tension seeming to fade from his body as he took a series of steady, deep breaths to steady himself. "Of course, magic. Right, well, I had a more complete explanation of how magic works prepared, but I can tell I'm going to need to dumb it down a lot if we want to resolve your problem with Glossaryck some time this month."

"Hey, are you calling me stupid or something!?" Star angrily demanded on impulse, before she blinked with realization and asked, in a softer but more surprised voice "Wait, you're still going to help me with that?"

With a sigh, Dipper pinched the bridge of his nose and admitted "No, you're not stupid Star, just ignorant." Then, with a softening expression and voice, explained that "Of course I'm going to help you Star. No one deserves to be tormented by Bill like this, and certainly not you. I think we can jury rig a way to block him out, but I'll need you to listen to me very carefully." Then, with a nervous but apologetic smile, he added "I'm sorry about blowing up there, you just... caught me by surprise, that's all."

Though Star was feeling a mix of emotions at Dipper right now, relief that he was still going to help her ultimately won out. "Okay, lay your crazy curvy Mewni spell strategy on me!"

Letting out a sigh, Dipper began his explanation, editing it down on the fly. "Okay, so, imagine, a, uh... a rainbow! Like the one you created when you first met us out in that field!" When Star nodded in understanding, Dipper seized on the metaphor. "Well, you know how a rainbow is a beam of colors traveling through the visual air? Well, what Bill is doing is similar, it's like he's using an illusion to throw a Glossaryck shaped rainbow directly at your eyes, probably using reflections as a conduit through the mirror world."

"Wait, there's a mirror world?" Star asked suddenly, distracted now.

"Yeah, some of our research suggests there's a dimension connected to every reflective surface in all realities. Dimensional nexus, very uninhabitable. We hypothesize. Stay on topic Star."

"Sorry."

"No problem. Now, since this projection is also magic, think of it as being a little more... ugh, solid than a rainbow." Dipper explained. Inwardly he grimaced at how wrong that explanation of energy waves was, but knew that building this spell was more important than delivering an extensive education to the princess on earth physics. "Like how when a fire ray and frost beam hit each other, they cancel out! If we can figure out the exact tuning of Bill's projection on you, you can generate an opposing wavelength from your wand and cancel it out!"

Star had to sit and think it over for a minute, cheek marks turning to hourglasses as she mulled it over, but eventually his spell blast metaphor let her understand what he was proposing, and she grinned at the boy. "So, how do we, uh, 'tune' the counterspell to make it work?"

Dipper felt a small welling of pride inside as Star seemed to get the general idea. At the back of his mind, it reminded him of his many experiences helping Mabel with her homework. "That, unfortunately, is simply going to be a matter of trial and error. Do you have the rest of the afternoon free to try this out? I already have the psychic reader equipment here that can let us get started, and can go get the rest easily enough."

Star meanwhile was feeling a sort of comfortable nostalgia setting on her as she prepared to spend all afternoon trying to sort out a magic problem alongside a friendly boy from earth. "I'm ready if you..."
are. Let's get the magic flowing!"

Far across the land and awhile later, Ford and Pacifica were scrounging about the ambush site as the sky began to turn orange, their carriage and military escort told to stay behind a short distance away, hidden among some trees. The older scientist was sweeping the ground with a telescopic metal detector while Pacifica checked for tracks.

Finally, the scanning device let out a positive hit chime, causing Ford to set it aside and scrounge on the ground for a moment, quickly fishing a spent casing out of the grass. "Right where we thought it would be. Pacifica, any luck so far?"

"Well, someone was certainly here, they walked over to the fallen knights at some point, but I'm not sure where they came from or went." She explained, running a magnifying glass over a section of land closer to the dirt road the dead had collapsed to. "Still, these footprints will hopefully make a good comparison."

"Very good." Ford complimented distractedly, as he was digging around his coat pockets for one of the extracted bullets he'd brought with him, hoping to see if the two components matched. This redirected attention caused him to miss the activity coming from the casing.

The small piece of earth made metal began to rattle slightly between Ford's fingers, and a small droplet of hissing green liquid leaked out the open hole where the bullet once slotted. As Ford's eyes were focused downwards, a small beetle with gnarly, serrated pincers emerged from its little home, green gunk leaking from it and a black exoskeleton covering the body.

The insect struck quickly, wings flaring up from its armored shell to charge towards Ford's eyes, but luckily he turned his attention back to the sample just in time, having found the bullet, resulting in the angry insect slamming into the flat lenses of his glasses.

"Pacifica, look out! Bugs in the bullets!" He yelled out, going straight to fight mode as the partially crushed insect scrambled against his glasses, green drip causing the metal frames to melt and wither on contact.

The human girl let out a surprised yell as she saw the insect squirming on Ford's face, but quickly cast her perception wide to see if more were present, and to her horror, there were. More of the chittering, twitching insects were crawling out of grass hidden casings, small smoke trails marking their hiding spots as the acid mucus began melting nearby grass.

Ford reacted without hesitation, instantly ripping his glasses off his face and crushing them under his boot to get the insect away from his vulnerable eyes and kill it. The splattered mucus burned at his sole but couldn't melt through the extremely tough material. Without the glasses, Ford wasn't blind, but his vision did drop significantly without them. "Pacifica, just stay calm! Fall back to the carriage and get the knights over here!"

While relaying his instructions, Ford was reaching for a much more familiar, easier to access pocket than the one he stored the bullet in. He quickly produced an old style, block shaped silver lighter out it, albeit one with a minor modification: Ford had fitted the lighter with a small catch handle that, when set after it is ignited, stay burning through rough conditions. With a practiced hand, the scientist flipped the flame to life and locked it in place with one six fingered hand before hurling it at the nearest smoke plume, the fire catching quickly on the short grass. The spark caught on the foliage, and the quick growing flame swiftly consumed one of the beetles.

Pacifica was briefly frozen in place from fear, watching the discarded glasses melt apart and, involuntarily, her mind filled with hypothetical images of her own liquid flesh dripping off her face in
the same manner, but the resolve she’d built over a few years of helping Dipper on his adventures fortified itself, letting her gain control of her body once more. Just in time as well, seeing as the closest insect to her had taken flight and was clumsily barreling through the air towards her face.

Acting fast, the blond from earth went for a bottle of disinfectant spray stored in a back pocket, whipping it right into the path of the oncoming beetle. Her index finger slammed down on the spray releasing tab, and the resulting chemical haze seemed to disorientate the insect while the accelerant wind trail left it hovering in the air, forward momentum cancelled out. Acting fast, Pacifica flipped the spray can in her hand, raised it up and smashed it down on the bug before it could regain momentum.

The carapace crumpled against her smash and Pacifica could feel her skin prickle at the wrist as a few green droplets got on her skin. Quickly giving that skin zone a short spray, she stomped on the downed insect to finishing it off, only to recoil with a yell when she pulled her foot back up, letting her spot a second beetle crawling up her boot.

Attempts to shake loose the unnaturally determined insect failed, six barbed legs able to find traction on almost any surface. Meanwhile, Ford was trying to navigate by sound, focusing on a faint buzzing while the crackling of fire continued to build. He swiftly removed his coat and swung it in a wide arc, the flattened, spread out material managing to catch the approaching insect like a wide net thrown to the sea to catch fish. Ford swiftly bundled the jacket up to crush apart the insect at the center of the cloth sphere, gaining a few fresh holes in the thick material.

Pacifica had meanwhile given up on shaking the insect loose, and in a spat of desperation at the sight of it nearing her pant leg, slammed her foot against a stone, trapping the insect between a rock and a hard place and smashing it to bits while sending pain shooting through her foot. Now with a slight, temporary limp, Pacifica began to lurch towards her fellow traveler. "Doctor Pines, we need to get out of here!"

"I couldn't agree more Pacifica! Unfortunately, I don't think I can turn my back on this one..." he responded, holding a stick in one hand while a beetle zig-zagged through the air in front of him, albeit without going forward or back. Like an ace fighter pilot, it was jockeying for the ideal approach vector, and both of them knew it was fast enough to avoid a simple stick swing.

However, Ford had a trick up his sleeve, or rather, his pocket. Right still gripping the stick, his left hand produced a jar of talcum powder from inside his coat and flicked the top at the insect, causing a white dust cloud to puff and envelope the insect. The sudden addition of matter seemed to slow the insect down with weight, while the the sharp black and white contrast let Ford track his target, even with his reduced vision. These two factors let him smack it out of the sky with a stroke of the stick, though this time Ford couldn't confirm if it was dead or not.

"Doctor Pines, here!" Pacifica called out from behind him, having limped closer and produced an object from her bag. Ford didn't recognize it as first but she was insistently shoving it towards him, so the scientist accepted the object and instantly was able to tell it an extra pair of glasses as his twelve fingers rolled over it.

"An extra set! Excellent, where'd you get these!?" He remarked while sliding them on his face.

"I was packing supplies and figured it wouldn't hurt to bring some spares. Glad I was right." Pacifica answered, and Ford could now see the limp she had. He wordlessly grabbed her by the arm and propped her against his shoulder. This allowed her to move faster than she could have on her own as Ford charted a course past the growing fire.

However, a harsh buzzing noise left the two frozen in place, flames fanning on either side of them.
Ford's impromptu fire had smoked out the remaining beetles, causing them to fly away from danger instead of attacking, but now they had regrouped in the safe zone, and the assembled small swarm was staring the two humans down.

Ford and Pacifica went to their pockets as one of the beetles did a loop in mid-air to build up speed to dive bomb the two, but abruptly froze in place, shiny carapace gleaming in the dying light as it was pinned at the height of its angle by a thin, silver point skewered its body, green fluid flowing and rusting down the metal.

"THIS WAY ARCHMAGE!" Sir Stabby yelled out, wading into the beetle swarm and crushing them with his bare hands, paying no heed to the spurts of bug juice rusting the surface of his armor. "THE KNIGHTS OF MEWNI SHALL CLEAR THE PATH!"

Higgs, trying to shake loose the beetle she'd skewered on the tip of her rapier, motioned to take Pacifica off of Ford and onto her should, but the scientist refused her, pointing to the carriage instead. "Get the red cylinder I packed on the carriage! Hurry young one!" he yelled, and the trained squire jumped to the task.

Minutes later, thanks to Higgs' swift retrieval of the fire extinguisher, the fight was over. Sir Stabby had crushed apart the remaining acid beetles, though he had to discard his gauntlets before the hungry liquid reached his fingers, and Ford was putting out the last of the grass fire he'd started.

While spraying a steady cloud of white foam on the last patch of fire, Ford looked over to Pacifica, who was sitting on a rock nearby checking that her foot wasn't severely damaged, finding, to her relief, it was merely sore. "Good rule for adventuring Pacifica..." he offered in an educational tone of voice. "Always have on hands the means to start fires, and the means to put them out. Also, in my personal experience, if you can only pack for one of those, pack for starting fires."

"I'll remember that Doctor Pines, thank you." Pacifica replied, gratefully but a little dryly. She stood up and took a few experimental steps, and found herself most steady. She put on a smile as Higgs approached.

"I think I found something you'll be interested in." The squire informed, a small hint of smugness to her voice. "The various little foot trails, including the one from the ambush point, that we've managed to find all converge at a spot not far from here. Looks like some kind of clearing, a recent one at that."

"Other foot trails?" Ford asked up, once again in all business investigation mode. Before Higgs could even answer, he added "Show us this clearing."

On the way over, the squire wearily explained to the two that the initial prints from the ambush sight could be traced to this, and that several foot trails were uncovered leading to and from the small, circular clearing on the edge of a nearby treeline. However, while field analysis of the tracks by the military mewmans indicated that numerous individual groups had made the trip out here, there were no signs of carriages being used. Finally, the wide variety in footprint shape and size indicated the travelers were monsters.

Ford swiftly set to work doing his own analysis, while Higgs and Sir Stabby stood watch. Pacifica did her best to help the examination, but couldn't help but feel uncomfortable as she ended up doing very little. She just didn't have the effortless dynamic Ford shared with his great nephew and apprentice when it came to clue hunting.

Perhaps sensing this, or perhaps simply looking for feedback, Ford spoke up. "Pacifica, what do you make of what happened back there? The beetles, specifically."
The blond girl seemed caught off guard by the sudden question, but put her thoughts together in short order. "Well, it confirms our initial suspicions, doesn't it? Tin man back there never said anything about those being a normal Mewni species, and their crazy aggressiveness and acid dribble makes me think they're some kind of magic trick. Alchemy, maybe?" Pacifica stopped to ponder for a moment. "But then again, maybe it's a diversion? Leave a big, obvious clue behind to get us going down the wrong path?"

"Good that you're considering all possibilities." Ford answered. He was sounding "teacher-e" again, Pacifica noted to herself, his speech betraying the fact that he already had an answer but wanted Pacifica to work it out with her own knowledge. Despite the situation, the blond human smiled a little: Whenever Ford got like this, Dipper would become completely entranced at everything he had to focus, using intense focus to try and reach the truth, with an adorably content look on his face.

"But, I believe your first conclusion is correct." Ford continued, bringing Pacifica back to reality. "This trap is perfectly within Bill's nature, as despite his skill at it, deception is a labor for him. He revels in the pain and destruction of other living beings. If given the choice between erasing evidence and leaving the evidence behind as bait for some manner of murderous trap, he'll chose to build a trap, every time. It's the reason I suspect so much evidence of him is still scattered around Gravity Falls." He stopped for a moment, inspecting a depressed section of grass. "His malice overrules his cunning."

Pacifica, meanwhile, was noting a secondary depression near the one Ford had discovered. "Doctor Pines, it almost looks wheels moved through here. But we couldn't find any trace of pack animals being used, right?"

"Correct. This appears to be the resting location of a large, heavy crate." Ford concluded, looking over the two depressions in the grass. The wheel marks moved towards the nearby treeline, where it then disappeared into the thicker undergrowth. "Based on the conditions here, it seems like a number of crates were placed in this clearing, but they were moved by hand cart at best. That means they probably weren't moved very far." Standing still for a moment, tapping his foot in thought, Ford finally perked up and headed for the treeline. "All of you, stay back!" He yelled to Pacifica, Higgs and Sir Stabby. "When the noise stops, join me in the woods!"

The order was baffling, but before any of them could question it in earnest, the nature of the command became evident: Loud cracks of noise suddenly echoes from where Ford vanished to, along with flashes of light from within the trees. The knights wanted to rush in right away, but Pacifica motioned for them to stay back, recognizing the sound of gunfire and not wanting them to get caught in the crossfire. Based on the cracking noise that followed each explosion, Ford seemed to be shooting the trees, splintering bark with bullet delivered kinetic explosions.

However, the noise that accompanied the last gunshot was the noise of metal connecting to metal.

Waiting for the forest to be definitively quiet, Pacifica finally lead the two soldiers into the woods, their rugged exteriors betraying some level of uncertainty. Was this the strange magic that had killed their comrades in arms?

Past the tree line, Ford was standing before a seemingly normal tree, though in comparison to some nearby ones it lacked a gaping hole in the trunk, splintered bark left around a blast hole. The man from earth had begun shooting the trees with the concealed pistol he'd brought to Mewni, and now, in front of the tree that stood against a bullet, was examining it with a simple instrument pair: A small metal wand, cylindrical handle colored with the opposing stripes of a barber shop, albeit with white turned to blue, with a little metal loop on the top. This scanning tool caused data to flash across the lenses of a re-purposed pair of 3D glasses.
The three found the older human just in time to see him run his scanning tool up and down the trunk of the tree a few times, then without looking reach up to a particularly small but low to the ground branch and pull on it. With the sounds of scraping metal, the branch lowered on a pivot, and the tree began to rumble ominously.

"Doctor Pines?" Pacifica asked with awe. "How did you figure out this was here?" she asked, as the metal trunk of the tree folded open to reveal a cramped but human sized elevator cabin.

"Because." He answered ruefully, beginning a scan of the elevator itself. "It's how I would have hidden it."

Chapter End Notes

Now we're starting to get out first look at what's going on here, while Star and Dipper run through an alternate version of "Rest In Pudding." At this point in time, Star is still struggling with her feelings for Marco, and her new friends from Earth are going, shall we say, significantly change the direction those feelings go.

Like when I wrote Star and Pacifica becoming friends, Star and Dipper bonding came incredibly easy to me when writing. I'm a little worried they might be bonding too fast as a matter of fact, but the intense emotional exposure they had to each other just felt really natural and real and seems like it would bond them together really well. I'm interested to hear what you all think, but let me be clear: This fanfic isn't going to take a swerve and suddenly ship Star and Dipper together. You can all rest easy on that subject.

Oh, and I'd really appreciate any feedback about the fight scene against the insects. I really want my fanfics to be full of interesting action scenes and fights, but sometimes wonder if I'm even writing them well. If you loved it or hated it I'd be happy to know.
While Ford and Pacifica were out traveling the countryside and stomping bugs, Star and Dipper had spent the day together in the earthlings' quarters, slowly cranking the gears of science. The beds of the room were now covered in continuous sheets of printed paper, documenting sometimes jagged, sometimes curvy wavelength lines that, to an educated eye, explained the various mental functions of the blond princess and assorted discharges from her magic wand. Currently, they were in the middle of a vital step of the experimental process.

"Thank goodness I was able to get some of these before Mabel drank them all." Dipper commented with relief while pulling a soda can through a scissor cut portal. As he took a long, refreshing drink from the fridge cooled soda can, Star looked at him with curiosity, lifting the rim of the brain scanner she was wearing on her head, made out of a large colander with wires attached to it, running into a small sized portable printer. It had been brought to Mewni by magic of portal science, as opposed to the science of scissor magic that had let him get drinks, or the magic wand magic that had conjured the bowl of chips Star was snacking on.

It had been a brief but still difficult decision, when Dipper had ultimately had chosen that using the portal again to retrieve the supplies needed to help Star with her hallucinations was the right decision. Of course, he wasn't worried about gravity fluctuations or rifts between dimensions anymore, the years of work Ford and Dipper had spent improving the portal ensured it now ran smooth and safe, but he was still naturally wary of demonstrating too much of it to the princess of Mewni. On the other hand, she already knew they had some manner of traveling between dimensions, and so the boy settled on explaining the basics to her, that Great Uncle Stanford's greatest achievement is a variable destination interdimensional portal generator machine, while not letting her actually step through it and go back to the lab with him.

The princess had taken this with more stride than Dipper had expected. "I understand, you boys gotta have your secrets to protect, can't have girls looking at your private spaces, right?" She had answered in a very jokey tone of voice, but when the boy had gotten flustered and somewhat frustratedly told her back that it wasn't like that, she seemed to frown somewhat and offer a more serious response. "I... I know Dipper, I just meant it as a joke, I didn't mean to tease you. I'm guessing your uncle Ford wants to keep your laboratory and stuff on a need to know basis?"

Looking surprised by this, Dipper found himself somewhat dumbly nodding yes, despite the back of his mind telling him that that information was probably also supposed to be on a need to know basis.

Star smiled back at him. "Well go ahead then, I'll wait right here! I'm familiar enough with the concept of someone all older and wiser asking you to keep secrets, even if it doesn't make sense at the time." she explained, tone becoming a little weary at the end.

So, Dipper had left one his fast return switches sitting on the bed, seeing as their secondary function is serving as homing beacons the portal can be manually locked onto, then thrown one of the other ones he was carrying, vanishing from Mewni back to Earth in a flash of light that kicked up a few papers around the room but otherwise left no ripples from his passage.

In the Mystery Shack's basement, Dipper landed on his feet after falling through the temporary passageway through the multiverse, the entrance rip only in existence for the blink of an eye, like a camera flash going off. He quickly set off on the easy task of gathering up some basic experimental
gear and assembling it before the portal, and during that manual labor he couldn't help his wandering mind. "Star does have a point though." He thought to himself, while rummaging through a dimly lit storage room which had everything from circuit boards to preserved eyeballs lining the shelves.

"This isn't really a place you'd want to take a girl down to." Then, while moving a pile of shoe boxes, he muttered "Right this way ladies, let's head down to the creepy science basement and have a good time!" in a sarcastic tone as a little joke, but then stopped to reconsider.

"Pacifica understands." He thought to himself with a very warm, comforting sensation. "I bet Star would as well, she's very..." He began to trail, then scrunched his eyebrows up. "Why are you so quick to trust her Dipper? This isn't like you." the boy wondered aloud. "Why do I suddenly feel so comfortable around her, actually!? Great Uncle Ford warned me about that dimension, but she's just so... familiar, and easy to talk to. But also really understanding, somehow. I don't doubt what Grunkle Ford said about Mewni, but I'm sure she's different."

Having come to terms with his decision, Dipper finished assembling the needed equipment in short order and began booting the portal up. The modern computing systems they added to the portal over time made it easy to lock onto the specific fast return switch Dipper had left as a beacon, and set the portal to turn off automatically after three minutes of maintaining a portal, which should be just enough time to move everything into the castle room. Right before executing the command though, Dipper opened up a side window to check one more thing, smiling softly with relief. "Grunkle Ford and Pacifica are still right where they need to be, excellent." he muttered contently, and moments later a celestial gateway through the wonders of the multiverse opened up before him.

"Amazing what a world of good some hard work and experimentation can produce." He chatted out loud to himself while getting the first box of supplies in his arms. "The first time I ever saw this process, it was destroying the town and I was scared for my life. Now I use it to ship packages and can come and go without seeing a trace of Grunkle Stan or Mabel."

That had been a few hours ago, and with the equipment from Earth the apprentice and the princess were able to get off to a good start, vigorously testing and tuning the proto-spell that would hopefully shield her from Bill Cipher. The biggest roadblock was undoubtedly the radically different backgrounds on magic the two had, with the transition from psychic energy wavelength readings recorded on paper to the right combination of words and emotions necessary to conjure those same energy wavelengths out of the royal wand being akin to a four stage foreign language translation, but the princess and the apprentice had found they worked well together, so even this difficult task came naturally enough to them. Eventually though, they'd opted to take a break, and in the interest of making them even, Star had begun explaining the dimensional scissors to Dipper, which eventually resulted in him using them to pilfer soda cans.

"Whose Mabel?" Star found herself asking on impulse as Dipper made an offhand reference to some other female. "I mean, well, it sounds female at least." Star chastised herself mentally. "I dunno, maybe that's a boy's name on Earth?"

"She's my sister." Dipper answered a little hesitantly, not sure how much he wanted to get into that relationship. Star had been exceedingly honest with him to the point that he disliked the idea of misleading her in conversation, but at the same time the thought of his sibling gave Dipper complicated feelings. Luckily, Star seemed to be satisfied by the bare bones explanation and didn't press further, letting him comfortably change the subject. "These scissors are really handy you know. You were saying the weird fire vampire who was with your mom makes these?"

"Her name's Hekapoo and she's not a vampire." Star corrected gently. "Also yes." Winding herself up, she explained further that "The Magical High Commission bestows the gift of interdimensional travel upon the royal bloodlines best suited to the responsibility of bearing it. They're a heavy burden
to bear, only bearable by those with the strength of royalty." Star explained while doing a somewhat
unkind impression of her mother. Dipper giggled a little, and she went back to a more normal voice.

"Or by Ludo. Or by Ponyhead, somehow." She added on, slight curiosity tempered by an almost
imperceptible taste of disdain. Then, her eyes narrowed and her voice got quiet and accusing. "Or by
a piece of eye candy you can't stop slobbering over, you fickle fire vampire."

"I see." Dipper answered noncommittally before taking a long sip of his drink, eyes narrowing at
Star. When he spoke again, his inquisitive nature was being fully expressed by his voice. "If the
Magical High Commission wants dimensional travel to be provided to the multiverse, but in a
responsible way, why not construct fixed position portals that open between a set pair of destinations,
built in major cosmopolitan areas to facilitate better trade and communication?"

The princess regarding Dipper's question with interest, picking over it with a wondering expression.
"I don't know actually." She admitted after some thought.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I understand that these things have the potential to be dangerous." Dipper
added, using Star's royal scissors to cut back to the Mystery Shack's fridge and grab another
soda. "But it seems like even if you give them to people who are responsible, they could always get
stolen later. A fixed position portal would be much harder to steal. Or lose in the washing machine."

Having not been able to instantly grab a soda, the earthling put more focus on palming around until
he eventually got one, causing him to only notice a far away, shrunk eyed expression of surprise on
Star's when he pulled his hand out of the temporary portal and cracked his soda open. "Oh, uh, I
didn't cause any flashbacks to a traumatic washing machine portal incident, did I?" He asked, half
jokingly and half genuinely nervous. After a moment, he realized what a lost pair of scissors opening
portals in the middle of an active washing machine could actually cause, and became bright red and
very flustered. "No, wait, I didn't mean it like that!" Dipper yelled in an embarrassed panic, worried
he'd offended when Star was still sitting stiffly frozen in place in her chair, staring right past him.

"I can see him." She finally breathed, pointing over Dipper's shoulder to the room's window. In her
sight, her dead magic teacher Glossaryck stared back at her, a flat, emotionless expression on his
bearded face. Dipper spun around to follow her gaze, but couldn't see anything in the reflection. His
blush had quickly faded and now the boy from Earth was all business.

"Star, are you sure? Is he still there?" Dipper asked, looking intently at the glass and rapidly donning
and removing a procession of modified eye glasses to examine the window with.

"Uh yeah, he's still floating there alright. Clear and crisp as ever." Star answered, prompting Dipper
to run around the room checking various equipment: Turning the printer back on for a fresh brain
scan, setting the psychic oscillator to a jamming frequency, flipping over a quicksilver filled
hourglass, and checking the color of a green burning candle.

"Alright, break time's over Star. Let's field test some magic."

Across the plains and a short distance underground, Pacifica was stepping out of the elevator Ford
had uncovered near the ambush site. Despite being stuffy, unnaturally warm and borderline hellish in
architecture, the ride down did feature pleasing orchestral muzak and the elevator itself was
surprisingly spacious on the inside. She and Ford could have easily ridden down together if not for
the risk.

"Doctor Pines, are you sure we should be leaving our escort at the surface level? We don't know
what's down here..." Pacifica asked. The Mewmans hadn't been happy about being ordered to stand
guard outside, but continued to obey the scientist, as per their royal instructions.
"On the contrary Pacifica, I think I know exactly what's down here, and I don't want the Mewman military knowing a thing about it, or worse, acquiring a sample." He explained. The room they were in seemed to be a simple lobby, a metal square with one metal door blocking further movement into the underground bunker. Ford was examining it at length, looking to break some manner of lock. "Besides that, it just makes tactical sense. They'll be able to intercept anyone fleeing this space or attempting to flank us."

"Right, we certainly need to be worried about whatever is down here getting terrified of and running away from US." Pacifica muttered under her breath, but was quietly grateful about the fact that the odds of someone sneaking up on them through the elevator was lower.

Ford was closely scrutinizing the seam between the door and the wall, where the two metal pieces fit together snugly. Running along the door on the wall in an arc from floor to floor was a series of bright red symbols painted into the wall. "Basic demonic logarithmic security runes." Ford commented, with the same casual ease of a person remarking on unexpected warm weather. "Won't take a moment, probably primed to the number six six six."

Reaching out a six fingered hand, Ford touched one of the runes and dragged his finger up the wall, and to Pacifica's mild surprise the painted symbol moved with it. When Ford moved it up to the rune above it, the stationary symbol slid through it and the two changed places. Maneuvering a number of painted symbols like this, Ford soon had everything where he thought it should be, but the door remained locked.

While the older scientist scrunched his eyebrows in concentration, Pacifica spoke up. "So, what does that all mean, exactly?" She asked, meaning both the symbols on the wall and Ford's explanation of his actions.

The experienced dimension traveler paused for a moment, working how to compress decades of study to something he could explain in a short amount of time. "It's basically a magic lock made of math, very Plato. These symbols make up a mathematical equation written in the numerical and alphabetical language of a society of dimension traveling soul merchants who may have inspired human mythology's visual description of devils, you know, lots of horns and red eyes and extra eyes. The key, essentially, is knowing what number an alphabetical variable represents. If you know that, the equation can easily be calculated and the door opened."

Pacifica processed this for a moment, before asking "And your first guess was six six six?"

"Yes, they seem to have something of a cultural attachment to that number. Always doing things in units of six, or hexadecimally." Ford answered distractedly, eyes and focus primarily on the lock.

Pacifica thought about it for a moment, then had an idea. "Try six six seven." She offered. Then, after a moment, added "If that doesn't work, try six six five."

Rather than reply right away, Ford thought about the idea for a moment, eyes traveling all over the wall equation before setting to work, swift fingers moving all around the arc of symbols. When he withdrew his hands again, Pacifica noticed a small amount of sticky, red liquid was now attached to his fingertips.

After a moment of anticipation, the runes began to glow with faint, inner light, and with a loud grinding noise the door slid open, seemingly a portal into a darkly lit storage space. Ford turned back to Pacifica with a raised eyebrow and a pleasantly surprised expression. "How did you know that would work?"

Feeling a little proud, Pacifica replied "I wasn't certain, but I after you explained the whole thing I
figured it must be close to six six six if it seemed like that would work to you, then I kinda had a brainflash and wondered: What if whoever set this up had to change their password at some point and put the minimum amount of effort into it?" After a moment, she shrugged and added "It's a very common weakness in computer passwords."

"Very good thinking Pacifica, thank you." Ford said with sincerity before prepping himself to step through the gap, removing from his pockets a flashlight with his left hand and his concealed, freshly loaded pistol with his right. The intense beam of light scanned the room, revealing it to be full of wooden storage crates, some sitting unattended and some stacked, blocking him from getting a full view of the room. "Tell me, have you ever used a gun?" He asked suddenly, not turning back to the subject of his question.

She seemed surprised that he'd ask now, but never the less answered with "I've used some of the Northwest family ancestral firearms on our property's shooting range before, we all did, but the only time I've ever shot someone was, you know, that alien."

Ford crunched his eyebrows at this, he didn't want to put the girl on the spot, but his suspicions were getting stronger and stronger as he passed the beam of light over the base of crate and confirmed there was loose grass and dirt plastered on the bottom. As the man from earth stepped through the doorway, Pacifica asked "Why, did you bring a spare you want me to take?" before stepping in after him.

"Yes and no. I did not bring a spare, but it turns out I didn't need to." Ford explained while pulling the lid up on the grass stained crate, one of the only two inside that was unlocked. Pacifica had a small expression of surprise at the contents, while Ford was impassive. It was just as he'd suspected. The crate was packed with firearms, familiar models constructed on earth, packed in to maximize storage efficiency. This one in particular was stacked with assault rifles, light brown stocks and grips contrasting the gunmetal narrow barrel and long magazine. "Weapons from earth, well beyond the technological capacity of anyone in this dimension. I imagine the rest of these crates have a whole army's worth of gear." Upon close inspection, Ford dryly noted "And of course he stores them all fully loaded."

"Bill Cipher: Destroyer Of Worlds, Necromancer, Ender of Hopes, irresponsible gun owner."

Pacifica snarked while walking over to the other grass stained crate and throwing open. "Oh nice, a combo pack." She remarked with an incredibly sarcastic tone upon seeing that this box was loaded with dark colored semi-automatic pistols and bumpy surface, tan colored hand grenades.

"All Soviet models at that." Ford observed while joining her besides the other crate, carefully reaching in, checking the safety on one of the handguns, then fished it out and passed it to Pacifica. "I know, Stanley updated me on the rules regarding giving children weapons back in our dimension, but I think these are exceptional circumstances. Only fire if you absolutely need to."

Pacifica nodded in affirmation as she gently felt out the pistol in her hands. It was deceptively light, but had a more mental weight upon it for the teenager. She remembered shooting that unfortunate alien soldier, a mislead pawn of Bill's that was going to kill Dipper. She was beginning to pierce together the general idea of this place based on Ford's exposition about Mewni, and was quietly hoping she didn't have to deal with any of his local minions, feeling most comfortable at the thought of shooting the devil himself.

"Doctor Pines..." she spoke up after getting a feel for the pistol and finding the safety. "If Bill is able to stockpile all these weapons here, he's got access to Earth."

"Quite right." Ford responded, cracking open a third box, this one with a lock that needed breaking,
and couldn't help but whistle upon seeing it was stocked with a full complement of rocket propelled grenades and matching launcher systems, all products of the Soviet Union as well. "I don't think it's a stockpile though, not primarily at least. I think this is an inventory, and those dead knights had the misfortune of becoming a live product demonstration."

"Astute as always Sixer!"

It was a new mouth delivering a new voice, but Ford knew the cadence and reflection too well, connected it with too much pain to ever mistake the speaker for anyone different. Pacifica made up for any fleeting doubts her comparative lack of experience with Bill might have generated with a lightning quick look at Ford's face. Both humans, filled with certainty, turned towards the voice and fired without hesitation, unfettered by the loud noise of pistol firing ringing off the metal walls. Pacifica fired four bullets reflexively before stopping to assess the situation while Ford, in stone cold control of his response, emptied the entire magazine.

The two were facing towards a dark corner of the room at the end of their turn. In that section of the room, further from the elevator, the crates were stacked on top of each other. With no other visible entrance to the underground base, the two came to the unpleasant conclusion that he'd been there the entire time.

After having the time to process the appearance of the third person in the room, there was no doubt in the two humans that they were in the presence of Cipher. His newest host appeared to be some kind of monster, closer to Mewman shaped than many though, wearing a long black robe and boots that would fit on the body of a normal sized mewman or a human at that. The skin that was visible, lit up by the beam of Ford's flashlight, was a dark, lumpy sort of red/purple. Their hairless head, the most visible part of their body, had a pair of pointed horns growing from the back of the skull, angled downwards and back like the winged helmet of mythological Hermes, and four eyes arranged in a square on the noseless face. Three of them were covered by eye patches, leaving only the bottom left to glare at the humans, twitchy and bulging with bright yellow veins. Across the figure's face was a sickly split smile, like the mouth was being held up by a pair of invisible fish hooks digging into the sides of the orifice.

The bullets ripped towards the dark figure, who stood in their path without flinching, even taking a jerky, puppet like step towards the bullets without hesitation. In a moment so fast both humans couldn't help but blink in shock, the air in front of Bill's newest host distorted with a cloud of hazy gold light, and the bullets suddenly deflected off track, pinging against the metal structure of the room and the wooden boxes that filled it, luckily not setting off any explosives. Both humans lowered their guns only a short distance, with Ford quickly sliding in another magazine, as they glared down the hallway with leery expressions, staying read to act at any moment but not wanting to risk firing again and being hit by reflected bullets.

Before their eyes, the hazy golden light consolidated into something solid, air rippling like a hot summer day before molding into another human shaped figure. It was even less human looking than Bill's host though, being shaped simply, lots of smooth and undetailed lines, like a figure of paint that stepped free of the frame and walked among the living. The being consisted of a muscular, geometrically simple body made out of golden bricks stacked together, save for the hands, as wide, round bone sprouted from both wrists into clumsy hands, and the feet, which ended with the claws of crocodiles. In place of a head, the golden mask of an Egyptian sarcophagus sat, but instead of a stoic expression carved into gold, the face bore a sickly grin that almost seemed alive.

"Oh Sixer, I'm flattered! I didn't even need to introduce myself this time and you recognized me! You know me so well!" Bill exclaimed in affected, hollow joy, before adding a mocking "It's like our souls are bonded!" More than ever, Bill speaking through this host sounded like the voice used
by the demon in the mindscape. Whoever it was he'd been able to possess, they'd be capable of doing a very good Bill Cipher impression under more normal circumstances. When the latest meat puppet took a step forward, the gold figure moved forward with it, even though the two humans noticed it was floating a few inches off the ground.

"Bill..." The older human snarled with contempt, but not able to fully mask his feelings of uncertainty and dread building up inside him. Even with all his experience, whatever magical wonder the dream demon had at his disposal this time was a genuine surprise to the veteran dimensional traveler. All he knew for certain about this gold projection was that it could deflect bullets, hardly a comforting fact. "What have you brought to play this time?" he asked in a steady, serious tone. "Bit of a long shot he'll just tell me outright, but worth a try. Bill loves to talk about himself after all." was what Ford was thinking in his head after saying that, the mental words considerably less steady and confident than the spoken ones.

"Well this one's a political activist believe it or not..." Bill answered with a deceptively carefree and flighty tone of voice, striking a few fast poses and pulling some of the loose sections of his black coat/robe like he was trying to model the simple garment while actually talking about his new puppet. "...Oh, wait, are you talking about my big gold friend here..." he picked up with faked realization while pointing to the otherworldly being, "...The big stock of party favors I've imported..." he continued while sweeping his arms around to encompass all the storage crates, "Ooooooor did you really have in mind this guy here?" He finished, while driving the sharp nail of a right hand finger into the left palm hard enough to draw something vaguely similar to human blood. "Speaking of overly idealistic, annoying know it all youngsters who are always getting in over their heads, how's Pine Tree doing? Did you finally manage to give him cancer with all your whacky experiments and decided to press gang his little girlfriend into being a replacement?"

Both humans glared at Bill with unabashed contempt. Both wanted to riddle him with bullets more than anything in the world and their nerves were screaming at them to pull the trigger, but reason prevailed in both minds. Whatever Bill was using to protect himself here, it seemed capable of deflecting their bullets. Ford, as subtly as possible, tried to inch backwards towards the second box they had opened as Pacifica took up the conversation. "So, you've moved into the arms industry Bill? Sure, it's profitable and all, one of the biggest businesses there is, but it doesn't seem very... you." She chattered, trying to keep a cool air even though on the inside, she was terrified. Unconsciously, so flashed back to the somber, emotionally charged times Dipper would discuss his experiences with Bill. The Pines Twin was one of the most dauntless, fearlessly inquisitive people Pacifica had ever known, and he still spoke of the demon before her with a shudder.

"Killing has always been my business Llama." Bill remarked offhandedly, keeping his host's one eye glued on Ford. "And here on Mewni, business is good."

Ford slowed to a crawl, realizing Pacifica hadn't managed to distract Bill long enough for him to reach the box. The demonic form did seem to have stopped its slow tread forward, content to stand at the point that put the strange, projected golden figure just a little longer than arm's length away from the scientist. "But, hey, this isn't about business, believe it or not!" Bill suddenly spoke up, his voice having a sort of casual chatter to it like he was building up to a harmless joke one might tell during a pool party. 'I'm here on a humanitarian mission, believe it or not! Well, monster-tarian mission? Monstarian? Monsterrarian? Hmm, wonder what the word for that this, not like those castle klutzes you two are living with would have even invented that word..." Bill was rambling now, and while Ford knew better than to assume he was the least bit distracted by whatever insane tangent he'd gone off on, Pacifica saw it as an opportunity to gently scoot to the side, trying to get further away from the gold figure. Luckily for her, Bill was genuinely too focused on Ford to care.

"And besides!" He concluded with a theatrical flourish towards his bizarre golden spirit. "Who needs
something as mundane as bombs and machine guns when you've got THIS wonderful hunk of black magic!" The figure, as usual, displayed no expression, not even the subtle shifting of skin that marks even perfectly quiet human beings as alive.

"...What is that even? What weird magic have you managed to acquire from Mewni?" Ford asked, his genuine curiosity getting the better of him as he was genuinely puzzled by the shape in front of him.

"Ooooh, close but no towering pillar of burning, screaming skulls Sixer!" Bill answered, leaning his back a little to try and imitate the zero-gravity pose his spirit had taken. "Believe it or not, this fellow here is a little gift from Earth, of all places! Sure the locals helped me put the finishing touches on, but this is a one hundred percent guaranteed made with pride on Earth tortured soul of the damned!" Then, Bill took a single step forward, well polished shoes clicking against the floor "Holy Diver is what I've decided to call it."

It was over in a flash. The decades long nemesia had seen each others' moves coming from a mile away, but this time, Bill was just quicker on the draw. Suddenly leaning back on his heels and pointing one claw like hand toward's Ford, the cloak worn by Bill's host seemed to whip in a non-existent wind while he screamed "HOLY DIVER!" and the gold shape burst into action. Ford had been trying to shove his hand into the nearby crate and grab something, but his hand had barely cleared the wooden rim when a skeletal hand latched onto his wrist with a deceptively crushing, iron grasped strength.

"That happened so fast!" Were the identical thoughts Ford and Pacifica had in response. Ford could feel his six fingers going numb even as he strained towards one of the grenades stored in this crate. "What kind of power does Bill hold now!?" Was Pacifica's next thought, while Ford's brain was rapidly being clouded by pain as he let out a few gurgling groans as the pressure on his wrist got heavier and heavier.

"Much as I enjoy a good round of playing with grenades, I can't let you do that Sixer." He said in a faux regretful and apologetic tone. "Those hand grenades are lovely little Tekh Festival presents for all the good little monster boys and girls, and I can't have you stealing even one of them! After all, Holy Diver here went through so much trouble to find all these."

Pacifica had spent this entire encounter, as quick as it actually was, sticking to her re-positioning plan, having no idea what to do herself but with a fading certainty that Doctor Pines had a way out, that optimism weakening as he was caught by the wrist and breaking when the wet noise of bone beginning to crack filled the air and a look of genuine, desperate pain and panic crossed onto the older man's usually impeccably calm and rational expression. She knew she had to do something then, or they were both going to die here.

Seeing as she had a gun in her hand and a possessed body in front of her, Pacifica did the expedient thing and opted to shoot at the devil. It would have been such a small movement, to slide her finger over the trigger and take aim at someone less than five feet away, but somehow that was still too little. Before her mind had even processed the body's decision to shoot, Holy Diver was before her. She hadn't even seen it move, it was like one frame of the movie passing to the next, with the grinning, sickening face of a masked pharaoh crudely edited in, jump cutting to fill her whole frame of vision. When the skeletal fist smashed into the side of Pacifica's head, she'd mistook it for the noise and recoil produced by the gun. It had happened so fast, it wasn't until she heard Doctor Pines screaming that Pacifica realized she was laying sideways on the floor, blood beginning to trickle over her eyes.

"PACIFICA!" Ford screamed out, causing Bill to turn his attention back to the old scientist with the
intention of mocking him for his shriek of despair, but his one eye widened as Ford finished his shout. "STAY DOWN!" Through sheer determination, Ford had shoved his shattered at the wrist, numb hand into the crate and trapped a grenade between his six, slicked with blood, fingers. He pulled the pin with his teeth and chucked it towards Bill, and even in its state of severe mutilation, the face of his host expressed panic.

Again however, Holy Diver moved with impossible speed, seeming to jump straight out of Bill's body into the path of the grenade. Its two skeletal hand suddenly ripped a brick out of the upper abdomen of the brickwork human figure, leaving a gap right in the grenade's path. Quick as a flash, the brick was shoved back into after the grenade fell down the hole, the whole thing fast enough the the short fused explosive blew up inside the spiritual being's body, shielding everyone in the room from harm.

Bill, however, had a grimace on his face, despite having foiled Stanford's attack. "That... was really unfortunate Sixer." He stated in a threatening tone of voice, while taking heavy, angry steps forward. All the obnoxiously fake pretenses of friendliness were gone from him now. "What you have just witnessed... the thing you saw before you... That was the true power of Holy Diver on display. It's kind of a vital trade secret for my plans, you know, so that means that you need to disappear now."

The demon gave another commanding point, and Bill's servant struck with its terrifying speed. A heavy, strong fist rocketed towards Stanford's torso, with no hope for the old scientist to avoid the impact. Holy Diver almost seemed slower now, though Ford couldn't decide if it was his reflexes kicking into overdrive in a hopeless attempt to try and dodge, or if Bill had deliberately slowed his attack to let Stanford see it coming, even if it was only for a second. "Both of those are very probable." Ford thought to himself, in a brief moment of clarity and calm.

Then the impact hit, the spectral figure punching straight through his stomach, a gore dripping skeletal fist emerging through his back, and none of that mattered anymore.

Completely unaware of the danger his loved ones were in, Dipper was frantically moving Star through the last stages of their magic experiment. They were so close now: Star had been doing her best to "modulate" her wand, producing a variety of magic wavelengths while still being able to view Glossaryck in the glass. It was somewhat tricky for Star to understand the concept, since it was basically requiring her to cast a spell that didn't do anything visible or physical, with only a few specific wavelengths producing small flames or little light shows, but they were making progress. Only three casts ago, one of her efforts had resulted in the image of her mentor distorting somewhat, and he went back to normal when she changed the setting.

At the moment, Dipper was holding up several different brainscan readings, looking at them with agitation that he was so close to solving this mystery and trying to see how they'd all fit together and perfect his spell. A notepad upon which he'd scribbled pages of Star's observations down on sat inside his vest pocket, being on the verge of falling out with how quickly he'd been taking it out and putting it in. "Okay, so, do you remember test #78? Where he briefly vanished from the window and showed up in your glass of water? Try that again, but pick up the... ugh, I think we need the dispersal patterns of #22, so, picture a prism or something while you're casting #78 this time?"

"Dipper?" Star spoke up. She was behind him at this point, doing an exercise where she draws on a copy of her brain scans with crayons to try and make them into pictures, thus making the wavelength spells more visual for her and thus easier to cast. At the moment, the princess was trying to turn her copy of #56 into an adorable octopus while Dipper went over his note spread with his back to her. "I can't see him anymore."

The apprentice actually froze in place as he processed this information, pieces of info in his brain
trying to clip together in a way that makes sense. "Maybe there was a time delay aspect I didn't consider..." he muttered slightly, putting his hand to his chin in contemplation, before brightening up and turning around with a cheerful disposition. "Well, I suppose it's problem solved then! Star, any adverse conditions you might be feeling at the moment? Side effects, residuals, uh..."

The boy trailed off upon looking around, because as soon as he was able to see it Star's expression of relief had shifted to a burst of surprise followed by tension. Dipper's own relieved attitude faded right back to business mode when he saw her. "What is it Star?" he asked, knowing something was wrong.

The princess slowly raised a finger and pointed it straight at Dipper's head. "He... he's inside your eye now!" She yelled, recoiling slightly as the small blue figure glared out at her from the reflective surface of Dipper's pupil. His previously emotionally vacant face had changed, now he looked desperate and was even moving, pounding his fists against the reflective surface as if to escape a glass box.

Reflexively, Dipper's hand curled to fist and he rubbed the side of the eye in question with the joint of his index finger, as if to remove some annoying dust from his eye, but quickly chastised himself mentally for the automatic action. "That was irrational Dipper, you know this whole thing is an illusion only Star... can..." His whole thought process derailed however, when Dipper actually looked down at the hand he had used, and saw a small drop of blood sticking to the finger. ".s...See...?" he couldn't help but stutter aloud at the sight.

"Dipper, what's wrong? Stay with me, okay Dipper? Dipper?" Star asked with mounting concern as she saw the signs of a freak out getting onto Dipper's face.

"It's... it's not possible. I... it was so many years ago, I let Ford put the metal plate in my head!" Dipper mumbled, getting louder the more he talked. "Blood from the eyes, I can't be... STAR!" He suddenly yelled, causing the princess to flinch slightly, which the boy was too worked up to notice. "Bleeding from the eyes is something Bill causes, just by his presence. This... this is far worse than I'd thought..." He looked at her with desperation now. "Star! I need you to complete the spell now!"

Feeling panic overwhelming her, Star tried to put her focus somewhere else to try and center herself, but the only place her attention could be drawn was Dipper's eyes. They'd always been a little bloodshot and kinda baggy during their previous interactions, but from Star's perspective they'd also shone with a sort of oddly familiar, deeply set and calculating intelligence that she found to somehow be a little comforting, even though they'd only known each other a few short days. Now, they were lit aflame with deeply seated, pain driven panic, and small pools of the red liquid were beginning to build at their sides, building up to form bloody tears.

Star gripped the wand tightly in her hands, starting to shiver with anxious hyperventilation, mind racing over all the previous experiments, trying to put all the numbers and charts Dipper had explained to her into perspective, into something that would work! "I can do this, I CAN do this! Okay, #78 plus #23, needs the... wavelength, what does that mean!? Okay, just imagine the two charts are snakes eating each other!"

As much as she tried, theoretical physics just wasn't a subject Star had a great deal of familiarity with, so her grip on Dipper's explanations and instructions was steadily fading as he looked straight at her, desperate for some kind of response from the princess. All the while, the emotional mass of panic was rising across her brain like flooding water, submerging everything she desperately needed to solve this puzzle. Dipper was continuing to bleed from the eyes, and the Glossaryck illusion seemed to be getting bigger!

"GLOSSARYCK! THAT'S IT!" Star screamed mentally, and when stuck at a crossroads as rising
water threatened to drown her, did what she did best: Dove right in.

Rather than fight back against the emotions of panic and dread that were slowly blocking out her ability to access Dipper's magical maths and sciences, Star dunked her head into it, swam into the panic and bathed in the worry. She let the dreadful emotions fill every nerve of her body, flowing through her as she dove deeper and deeper into the ocean. Finally, she hit the bottom, and stumbled upon the true emotional core, the pulsating core that all the fear and panic flowed out of like pus from a wound.

Star cared about Dipper. Star cared about the boy from Earth. Star cared about Marco. This deep down, she couldn't quite tell them all apart, but the light shone through the depths with endless clarity.

Suddenly, everything became crystal clear. Dipper's math, the electrical signals of her brain, the wand, her inner feelings, the energy of the cosmos, and the conduit that was her body all felt the same. They were all one substance, and she could mix and match them together however she pleased. Matter was energy was thought was matter. It was so simple now. Star simple attached all the calculations and charts Dipper had created by scanning her brain, that she could visualize but not understand, and snapped them onto her desire for the boy from Earth to be safe like zipping up the two sides of a jacket. The two things became one idea, and then, Star just threw it back to the universe.

"Wait, hold on." She thought to herself, recalling Dipper's earlier explanation that they needed to figure out Bill's wavelength, then cancel it out. The princess fished her complete spell out of the astral sea, reaching through the wand to get it back, then flipped it upside down before putting it back in. "There you go buddy. Now, swim for freedom!"

Back in reality, Star's wand, eyes and cheek marks shown with golden light to Dipper's amazement, and suddenly the room exploded into a golden haze, like a camera flashing. Golden spots exploded in his vision, causing Dipper to once again instinctively rub his eyes. This time though, there was no blood on his hands when he pulled them back.

"Star?" He asked, mindful of the fact he was a little dizzy, but the princess looked absolutely out of it. "Did... was that an attempt to cast the counter-spell? Can you still see Glossaryck?" She didn't respond verbally, instead shuffling forward on jelly legs to abruptly throw her arms around Dipper, in what seemed to be half a hug and half an attempt to stay on her feet. "Woah, hold on Star! I think you need to lay down after whatever you just did, let's see, uh... chair will do..." Dipper was stuttering at that point, having not expected the hug and being somewhat ashamed of himself for finding it sort of nice. "It's... kinda like being hugged by Pacifica now that I think about it. But... stickier somehow. Eugh."

The apprentice had to drag her limp feet across the floor, but managed to set the princess down in one of the room's comfy chairs, looking down at her with a frown of concern despite still being a little dazed himself. Gradually, her eyes came back into focus and her gaze met Dipper's. She looked right into his eyes and grew a really goofy smile all of a sudden. "I can't see him anymore." she said with a little giggle.

Despite himself, Dipper couldn't help but giggle along in response, genuine relief sweeping over him. "Well, that's good to hear. Now, you just need to do that, uh, probably every day for the rest of your life, and everything's gravy!" He said with a giggle, trying to intentionally tell a joke. In truth, he had no idea how exactly this spell functioned at the moment, or if it even needed refreshing.

It seemed to work, as Star giggled back at him, but in the state she was in Dipper could have told her she had contracted a gastrointestinal disorder and she'd probably have laughed at it. Disorientation
was beginning to return to her face though, and Star's eyelids were on the verge of crashing shut when she managed to cut through the giggles and say "I did it Marco, I invented a spell..."

This caused Dipper to look at her with confusion for a moment, but when Star slipped into sleep a moment later, he wrote it off as just some harmless rambling. Finally taking his gaze off her face, which finally looked relaxed after her recent troubled sleep, Dipper stood up straight and let out a long exhale, tension finally draining away with the satisfaction of a job well done.

At least until he looked around the room, taking in just what a mess they'd made with the day's worth of work. "Well, true science never comes without a cost..." he muttered softly before setting to work cleaning up the room.

Pacifica realized how long she'd been laying on the floor well before she'd figured out the fact she was laying on the floor. Everything was sort of a blur for her at the moment, thoughts in her head seeming to fall away like they were house utensils coated in butter when she tried to think about them. She tried to blink, only to realize that didn't do anything. She tried to blink again, and while nothing happened, she learned from the nothing that time. "Right, I'm still bleeding from the punch to the head."

The girl from Earth blinked a third time, and this time, there was a change: As her eyes receded, a shot of fight or flight was changing her vision, offering vague shape to the endless fuzz she was experiencing with all five senses. "FORD! BILL!" she screamed in her head while slowly regaining control of her arm. Pacifica's eyes began to flutter, blinking back and forth at a crazy rate while the eyes inside rolled around without focus, but slowly, the vision of red was fading from her sight. The micro-wash of tear liquid that coated the eye every time a human blinks was slowly clearing her sight, like windshield wipers fighting through a thick layer of highway insects! When sight finally returned, it gave her a vision of what she was dreading most: Doctor Pines laid flat against the floor, a grievous injury to his stomach.

"HE JUST MISSED!" Pacifica thought in her head, some nagging thought at the edge of fuzzy sensation telling her that wasn't the conclusion she was supposed to come to. "I... he was too focused on Doctor Pines, didn't see me moving, so when Bill swung for me he was off center! He only grazed my head instead of smashing it flat!" Then, Pacifica frowned. Frowned in her head at least, she didn't have control of her face at this point in time. "No, not Bill, not Bill but Bill. Gold Bill. Pyramid, but Bill's a pyramid."

The odd tangent about the nature of Bill's nature felt like it could bounce around Pacifica's head all day, but fortunately for her, by pure chance, it bounced against the gaping hole in her skull and fell out of her head, leaving her no idea what she was just thinking about. "Why... why is everything so fuzzy? I can't think straight, can't focus on everything..."

"I gotta get out of here." Pacifica suddenly realized, a cold chill sweeping her body. "I'm gonna die here, Ford is gonna die here and Dipper is probably going to die here if I don't get out of here!" On instinct, she tried to push her body up with her limbs to make an escape, but only her right arm still responded to her, as far as she could tell, and the blond's attempt to push herself up failed as she collapsed down. "No, that's not it..." Pacifica realized. There's was something else, a way to vanish into the light and step between the walls of reality, to flee from this place.

Her right hand snaked its way into Pacifica's pocket, fumbling over all the little gadgets and supply bits she'd packed in them, flicking her nails against each object her fingers passed over, knowing she couldn't tell them apart by touch even if she tried.

Suddenly and without warning, it engaged. Reality fell away from Pacifica, turning into a ravaging tunnel of stretched stars, blue vortexes, dying planets, compressed timelines, overlapping space and
the other wondrous infinities that exist hidden beneath tables and sunlight and cars and people and everything else people think reality actually is. Pacifica couldn't help but snort at the mental image of a time paradox hiding behind a piece of lipstick, then resigned herself as she flew through the void.

"Well, either I escaped or I'm dead. Either one is better than having to listen to Bill talk at least."

Just as suddenly as it came, the fabric of reality faded away and the illusion returned. To Pacifica's relief, it was a familiar illusion this time, something extremely similar to the Pines family basement. She blinked a few times. "THIS IS THE PINES FAMILY BASEMENT! I STILL HAVE A CHANCE!"

The trip through dimensions had almost been sobering for Pacifica, as this time, when she tried to get to her feet, her limbs obeyed, perhaps given strength by the comforting atmosphere. However, with awareness came pain, and Pacifica was suddenly very, very aware of the throbbing impact site on the right side of her head. She hadn't been cut, but her skin had been flattened and tenderized enough that thick blood was leaking out, turning her blond hair into a matted mess on that patch of her head.

Despite every step sending a fresh shot of agony out of the fist shaped wound on her skull, Pacifica continued to stumble towards the control terminal for the portal. She knew exactly what she had to do now, but her brain didn't seem to have full control of her body. Her eyes wouldn't focus on what she needed to, her legs could only move in broad, ungainly shuffles, and her fingers twitched at random. Normally, navigating through a complex, built for computer programmers operating system would be damn near impossible like this, but in a stroke of luck, the fast return switch tracking sub program was still open!

As much as she wanted to do this as quickly as possible, fingertips flying over the keyboard, Pacifica forced herself to hit each key slowly and methodically, punching out the whole process with just one finger. She knew if she didn't take it slow she'd make a mistake, which would only make this take even longer. "Short return portal... activate gravity trawl... engage!"

Pacifica was rewarded by a brief flash of light from the portal that, when faded, had left behind an old man with a grievously bleeding wound behind, his open stomach exposed to the mostly sterile air. Most would have rushed over to see if he was still even breathing, but Pacifica knew she had to stay on task, and besides, she knew if she tried to run she'd just fall on her face. "Second target... found it!" The dazed girl said in her head, unsure if she'd said it aloud or not. "Set... half hour opening, just to be safe. Lock on... fire!"

The portal machine glowed back to life as space and time were rended once again, and Pacifica finally stumbled towards Doctor Pines before dragging him towards the vortex. A part of her brain was screaming at her for handling someone so grievously wounded in such a rough manner, but the girl's limbs literally couldn't do any better at the moment, and besides, if the fevered plan her concussed brain had come up with worked, then everything was going to be good regardless of a few extra bumps or bruises!

"Star Butterfly, please, for the love of whatever gods they worship on Mewni, PLEASE be a divine caster!" Was the last tangible thought Pacifica had before she dragged herself and Doctor Pines back into the portal.

Back inside the distant room of the royal castle, Dipper looked at an organized pile of brain scan papers with satisfaction. He hadn't thrown out anything except the snacks so far, since the boy was confident Great Uncle Ford would want a look at all of the data after he explained what he and Star had done today. The simple task of organizing all the records had honestly helped Dipper relax, all while Star continued to slumber peacefully over in the chair.
The relaxation vanished as his skin began to prickle, detecting the familiar feeling of the air ionizing. Dipper wasn't frightened by the feeling, not yet at least, but was confused. "I'm absolutely certain we never taught Stan or Mabel how to open a portal..."

His question ended up being answered when a stable gateway through dimensions opened up right in front of his face, and both Pacifica and Great Uncle Ford stumbled through, their collection of injuries instantly overwhelming the boy and throwing him into a panic. He began to gurgle, trying to scream a dozen frightened, concerned questions at the same time, only to get out a "WHAT!?"

The two were laying in a heap on the floor, Pacifica on top of Ford, so Dipper picked her up first. "Pacifica, what happened!?" he asked, scared to death as he saw her blond hair curled up and messed with blood and her disorientated face. Rather than answer through, the girl straight up shoved Dipper away from her, resulting in her almost falling over before she could stumble onto the closest bed. Dipper looked at her, completely bewildered, but when she pointed to Grunkle Ford, he understood completely: She was telling him the old man was much more injured than she was.

"Oh my god... GRUNKLE FORD!" Dipper yelled in shock, tears instantly flooding his face as he saw the enormous wound and the lack of movement from his beloved mentor. Barely able to stay in control and calling on muscles he didn't know he had, he heaved his great uncle onto the table containing the map of Mewni, laying him flat on his back in an impromptu surgical position. The idea to operate on his mentor had briefly flashed through Dipper's mind, but it evaporated into white hot anger as Dipper wanted to punch himself for thinking something so stupid! "His stomach is GONE Dipper! A little prescription morphine and a field dissection kit can't fix this!" He screamed with absolute self-loathing, the cold feeling of watching someone so incredibly close to him dying clenching his heart.

However, Dipper's greatest strength was being a quick thinker, so rather than sink to the floor while breaking down in despair, he was able to keep running and keeping thinking while despair encircled his heart. "STAR! STAR!" He yelled out, running towards the sleeping princess. "STAR GET UP, WE NEED YOUR MAGIC! YOU CAN HEAL PEOPLE RIGHT!?" He yelled desperately, actually violently shaking his friend by the shoulders in an attempt to wake her, but despite the fact that her neck was flopping around in a fashion Dipper would be concerned about if Ford wasn't on death's door, her eyes stayed shut. "Okay, magic sleep, next option!" Dipper muttered, actually tossing Star to the floor as he discarded her as an option. He was in full on survival mood, desperate to save his mentor's life, going from one option to the next, no more room for any other considerations.

Without a moment of hesitation or reverence, Dipper Pines snatched up the Royal Magic Wand of the Kingdom of Mewni from the seat cushion where Star had sat on it as she fell asleep.

The change in his grip was instant. Bright gold light covered the "stick below circle" shape of Star's wand, turning it into a hazy, indistinct shape that could easily morph like clay, responding to Dipper's soul. The handle got wider while the head of it got narrow until the two were equal in diameter while the bottom end tapered into a point. Then, the top of the wand began to grow a new extension, that grew straight, before curing to the right while still extending, then curving back above the wand. All the while, the gold light had subtly color shifted to a more sedate dark green, before finally exploding to reveal the wand beneath: The wand had reshaped itself to an over-sized, novelty pen with a Mystery Shack brand question mark coming from the top.

Dipper hadn't paid a lick of attention to this change however, simply rushing back to great uncle's side. He was still breathing, but it was shallow and wet. His blood had already soaked the map underneath him. Hyperventilating, Dipper tried to put his thoughts in focus. He had one chance to save his mentor, his great uncle, the most important person he had ever met, and he had to make it
"Thoughts to energy to matter, thoughts to energy to matter..." Dipper muttered nervously, calling up all of his memories of the day's work. "I KNOW how this wand works, I've spent all day studying it, I can make it work!" He said with absolutely no self-confidence, trying to talk himself up even as the wand began to sparkle with energy, small green embers falling from the end like ink.

"Matter, energy, thoughts, change, dimensions, the source, change, cycles, thoughts to energy to matter to energy to thoughts, organs, the body is matter, life, energy happening inside carbon matter..." Dipper was rambling now, falling into a full on mental breakdown as everything seemed to fit together but wouldn't, like having jigsaw puzzle pieces you know fit wash down the kitchen sink.

Then, it struck him.

The puzzle had fit together, by pure chance, washed away pieces ramming into each other in a statistically impossible series of combinations to complete the puzzle inside the drain, the image twisting and folding to fit the narrow space but still complete. Dipper was blinded by the light as he could see nothing but the complete puzzle, not Pacifica awakening to the side of him, not a pair of question marks burning into existence on his face while the constellation birthmark on his head shined with the real light of night, and not Ford laid down on the table in front of him, but somehow seeing the complete puzzle let him know Ford was there. Before he could lose nerve and back down, Dipper dove down, firing the wand at max strength.

"Inner bone, osteoblasts, osteocytes, osteoclasts, red marrow, yellow marrow, structure, support, resistance..." Dipper was rambling now like a man possessed as his right arm moved the wand through the air above Ford's wound like an equally sporadic possessed man, but from across the room, Pacifica was now clear headed enough to watch the process with awe. As he spoke and... wrote, Pacifica realized, he was writing on thin air even if he was moving so fast it looked random, magic was flowing out of the pen tip like ink, into the wound before it, and miraculously, the soft green trails of light seemed to solidify into biomass inside the wound!

"Arteries, veins, hemoglobin, lymphocytes, capillaries..." Dipper listed, barely aware of what he was doing, simply listing off everything Ford would need to live, everything HE would need to live. His words, his thoughts were scribed into reality, made real by Dipper's bottomless desire to see his mentor live! The pen tip of the wand carve apart reality, opening the space and time before them like a book and changing the ending because he hated it so much. Reality could only bend when faced with such conviction behind the words, shifting its base matter into the exact arrangement of atoms and molecules that would be needed to save Stanford's life.

"Keratin, corpuscles, sweat glands, follicles, hypodermis, dermis, epidermis!" Dipper declared, making a elaborate flourish as if he was using the wand to provide a flamboyant autograph, as fresh, perfectly clear skin regenerated atop his magical, surgical handywork. Then, when the wand was lifted as far above the boy's head as it could go, he slammed the tip of the pen down into Ford's newly repaired stomach, screaming "DISINFECTION!" as a bright, warm light erupted from the site of the incision, but when Pacifica could see again, Stanford's stomach looked in perfect condition, instead of being disemboweled by pen point.

Breathing heavily now, Dipper's shoulders sagged with great weight, as he stumbled over to Grunkle Ford's side to take his pulse. Whatever the result was, it was enough to make Dipper smile softly before collapsing to the floor with exhaustion. Despite this seemingly positive result, Stanford was still deep into unconsciousness as well, while Princess Butterfly had somehow remained asleep through the whole thing, even though she was still thrown to the floor. As a result, with her head still swimming, Pacifica was the last person in the room to pass to unconsciousness, the last image of
front of her eyes being Dipper's bright silver birthmark before she fell into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this is where I hope this story is hitting its stride. All the characters have met each other, bonds are forming, time to bring in the bad guy! Between the weapons, the punch ghost and his implied connections, he's certainly got enough to go toe to toe with our heroes. Lots of little details and references scattered around this chapter, I'd love to hear any catches you made or guesses about Bill's plot.

I also hope you liked the turn of Dipper using the wand, combined with his knowledge of anatomy, to save Ford at the end. Plus, replacing Janna with the Pines Twin seems to have had quite an impact. It seems Glossaryck isn't coming back to life anytime soon. As usual, I love to hear what people think of the story so far and hope you have enjoyed yourselves reading it.
The one-eyed demon stalked the streets of the Underworld, moving from dark alley to dark alley, doing his best to look like a boring man traveling down a boring street, upon which sat a boring building. Giving the back alley door of this place a distinctive knock, the figure waited a few moments before the door cracked open, allowing him to slide inside, then seal and lock it behind him.

"So, what's the deal Phil, are we still in business?" One of the demon's associates asked. Of course, the associate himself was also a demon, technically, but Bill considered it a phonetic similarity only. "TRYHARDS DON'T EVEN MAINLINE PURIFIED HUMAN SUFFERING, JUST WATER IT DOWN AND TRAFFIC IT FOR 'PROFIT'." he thought with annoyance.

"Yeah Phil, the liberation movement hasn't been discovered, has it?" A different demon, audibly more nervous, asked from across the room.

"THAT'S SOMETHING ELSE THAT ANNOYS ME. THIS NAME. PHIL. IT'S NOT CLOSE ENOUGH TO BILL, LIKE WILL OR SOMETHING, TO MAKE THE COINCIDENCE FUNNY. IT'S JUST ANNOYING THAT I HAVE THE IMPULSE TO CORRECT THEM, THEN THE IMPULSE COMES IN TO NOT CORRECT THEM AND HOLD MY COVER." Despite this annoyance though, a few quibbling nags couldn't get the dream demon down, not when his most recent encounter with his enemies went so well. "I'VE HAD WORSE HOSTS THAN A DEMONIC POLITICAL ACTIVIST NAMED PHIL I SUPPOSE."

"There are no worries gentlemen." The body spoke soothingly, a familiar voice speaking the words of a diabolical mind to put everyone at ease. "Our cache remains secure, and we will be able to conduct the deal at the scheduled occasion." Then, with a magnetic smile, Bill added "The only problem, such as it is, was my journey; it's left me quite exhausted. If you'll excuse me..."

Far away from his minions, whose bizarre, not quite human shapes brought to mind wistful memories of his Henchmaniacs, Bill laid his host down onto a chair. The room he was in now was a secret compartment, secret even to his current servants, connected to his bed chambers. In the publicly know room, Bill had thrown off his overcoat, after carefully removing a recently used brimstone bell from an inside pocket and setting it on a table, before traveling through the dresser back secret door to his private sanctum.

The room was a basic little compartment, an oval shaped chamber that was able to fit a perfectly circular pool of ankle deep water in the center, and a crappy fold out lawn chair besides it. Runic symbols of a mystical nature were carved into every surface of the room, with the sprawling, eccentric designs all converging at the pool of water. After making himself comfortable, Bill folded back an eyepatch without any discomfort to reveal a singular, gouged empty socket behind it. Then, he whispered the command. "Holy Diver."

The strange spiritual being, face still frozen with a sickly, gold plastered grin, materialized into existence besides Bill. Almost casually, the dream demon directed his body to begin plucking blocks out of the figure's golden brickwork form, stuffing each brick into the seemingly bottomless cavity on his face where an eye had once sat. Once a significant cavity was made in Holy Diver's body, Bill reached into his host's socket and removed enough bricks to cover it over, leaving an empty sphere inside the muscular figure.
"Alright, we're rapidly approaching the big sale and we need more stock. Hit up the usual places and focus on more ammunition and explosives than guns and weapon systems, you know, the stuff they'll use up." Bill instructed while pointing towards the pool of water. "Oh, and if you've got time, kill a couple soldiers for me. Somewhere so a minority population gets the blame for it. Ethnic, religious, I don't really care. Just... Just get a good retaliatory massacre going. That'd really make my day."

Without any response to his master's demands, Holy Diver began to trudge the short distance to the ankle deep water. Taking a standing position at the very center of the pool, the figure clasped the palms of both hands against each other, then slipped under the water, leaving a gentle ripple behind as it vanished, a brief surge of light passing through the runes carved into the floor and walls.

"And now, we can pass the time with a little dreamscaping." Bill whispered to himself while folding the one eye patch over and closing the remaining eye shut. He seamed to fall asleep instantly, but after enough time passed Bill suddenly squirmed in his sleep and awoke, a sly look on his face. "CLEVER CLEVER STANFORD, YOU BROUGHT QUITE THE SUPPLY OF DREAM CATCHERS, DIDN'T YOU? WELL, WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT, CAN'T WE PHIL?"

As the cruel expression grew wider on the face of Bill's puppet, he directed the arm to retrieve a vial of fresh red blood from a trouser pocket.

His mind drifting through darkness, the wiseman crossed the desert smocked in white while the black sands stretched endlessly beneath his feat, the boiling heat of the sun leaving an ever present sizzling pain all over his body, and on top of that, he felt like he hadn't eaten in days. His endless wanderings were not for naught however, for while he couldn't tell how long he had truly been wandering, lost in the unknown desert without sight of anyone familiar to him, the wiseman eventually came upon the Sage in Steel.

A great construct in the shape of a robed woman with hundreds of eyes, the Sage's mouth slid open with a rusty groan, and from the maw the water of life began to flow, and the wiseman drank freely and deeply. Having consumed his fill, knowledge soon returned to the wiseman.

"You didn't really think that would stop me, did you?"

Ford was sitting at a table inside a pleasant little coffee shop. He remembered it quite clearly, despite how long ago his last visit was: It was just down the road from Backupsmore University, and Ford had frequently visited the place during his downtime during his education. Lovely place, probably out of business considering that had been decades ago. The experienced scientist was younger now, a hardworking college student clad in a buttoned shut winter long coat. They'd been a necessity during the cold winter months at the university, and it was here Ford had picked up a life long appreciation for the style of dress.

Across from him, sharing the same table, was Bill Cipher. He was in his glowing triangle form now, gently hovering above his seat and leaning back in the air, holding his cup of coffee despite not having a mouth to drink with. A vibrant crowd of students was moving all around their room center table. "EH, I FIGURED IT WAS WORTH A SHOT."

"I've escaped from an infinite, bizarre expanse that I didn't understand before Bill, even you could guess I'd do it again." Ford continued, and held a hand out to the crowd. Despite neither of them looking at each other, a passing student dropped a sleek, silver revolver into Ford's waiting hand, and without hesitation he brought it about and blew six holes in Bill's body in a single, slick motion. The dream demon seemed unphased by this, even as the holes in his body were frayed with broken bones and leaking blood vessels.
In turn, Bill turned a hand towards the moving crowd, which hadn't reacted to the gunshots, or the six bystanders who were laying on the floor bleeding from over-penetrating bullets, and passed a note to a passing hand. "COME ON SIXER, CAN'T AN OLD TENANT MAKE A SOCIAL CALL?" He asked casually, before melting into a golden puddle all over the chair. In just a moment though, young Dipper Pines popped up from under the table, dressed in a black preacher's outfit. Ford was surprised for a moment, and even dropped his guard for a split second when Dipper smiled disarmingly at him, but that was all Bill needed: Bipper smiled freakishly and jumped up to the table to drive a fork into Ford's hand.

As nonreactive to this as Bill had been to getting shot, Ford coldly accepted a different weapon from the passing crowd, this time a high tech disintegration ray. He fired it at Bill, basking him and a huge number of customers in a wide beam disintegration field, causing them all to melt apart to muck, starting at the skin and proceeding inwards through the body. Bill's triangular form was waiting inside Bipper, while the melted crowd members were swiftly replaced. "The game's up Bill, I've already got your plan figured out. I won't allow you to make Mewni an even worse place."

"YOU DID DO A PRETTY GOOD JOB OF BUSTING MY WAREHOUSE, I MUST ADMIT!" Bill admitted in a dismissive tone, while trading another note for two handfuls of knives, which he swiftly hurled into Ford's body. They sank deep into his center chest and both upper arms. "STILL, I'M NOT WORRIED. MORE MARKET EXISTS THAN JUST MONSTERS YOU KNOW!"

Narrowing his eyes at Bill, Ford unbuttoned the winter coat he was wearing and reached inside, tossing the now damaged books he had stuffed inside his outfit onto the table, all worse for the wear after keeping the knives from sinking into his skin: Relativity: The Special and General Theory, On the Origin of Species, The Divine Comedy, The Caves of Steel, and Goth Opera. After pulling the last book out of his coat, Ford also produced a compact submachine gun and casually riddled Bill and the crowd behind him with a full magazine of bullets. "I'm honestly surprised you weren't trying to arm the Mewmans first. They share your proclivity for mass slaughter."

"I FIGURED THEY'D MAKE THEIR WAY TO MY LITTLE BEAUTIES ONE WAY OR THE OTHER. THE MONSTERS HOWEVER, OH THEY NEEDED A HAND." Bill remarked casually, despite the fact at one of his stick hands, which had been moving to pass off another note to the crowd, had been shot to a bloody stump by Ford's attack. His single eye swiveled to focus in on Ford after this.

"THEY MAY BE THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF A CURIOUS PEOPLE, BUT I'M SURE I CAN MOTIVATE THEM TO DISCOVERY WITH SOMETHING SUFFICIENTLY APPEALING. SUCH AS, SAY A PROPHETIC DREAM PROMISING A CROWNING ROYAL ACHIEVEMENT, SPREAD TO AN EAGER FOR VALIDATION YOUNG PRINCESS VIA A GROUP DREAM ROOTED IN YOUR MIND, WHICH I WAS ABLE TO DODGE THE DEFENSES ON THANKS TO THE BIG PILE OF BLOOD YOU LEFT ALL OVER MY WAREHOUSE. BY THE WAY, I EXPECT YOU TO COVER MY JANITOR'S HAZARD PAY." Bill explained facetiously, in a smug voice, before planting his only surviving hand on the tabletop, leaning in close and yelling excitedly. "THINK OF ALL THE VILLAGES THESE KNUCKLEHEADS WILL BE ABLE TO WIPE OUT WITH MAXIM GUNS AND TNT AND ZYKLON B!"

Ford narrowed his eyes and glared at Bill with contempt, but quick as lightning, grabbed the hot cup of coffee that had been left on his side of the table and splashed it into Bill's large, singular eye without a blink of hesitation. The demon abruptly began to scream, having made a misstep in the game of the mindscape, allowing Ford to get to his feet and pull his right arm back, hand clenching into a fist. "Scurry back to your newest host Bill!" He spat, and when the fist connected with the
The demon's eyes, the yellow brick body cracked and began to explode from within. "As long as a single member of the Pines Family draws breath, your evil will NEVER prosper, no matter where in the multiverse you lay your roots!"

The world began to melt as Bill let out a high pitched wail as his form exploded, the patrons dripping to piles of liquid and screaming all the while. Ford simply sat down in his chair and pilfered Bill's coffee from the other side of the table, gently sipping the warm, wonderful memory of a coffee as his chair spun off into a void as the world dissolved, waiting to awaken back to the real world.

Pacifica Northwest meanwhile was running down a grand but dark Gothic hallway, a wisp of brimstone in the air and all lighting provided by flickering orange lamps. She wanted to run faster but found herself stumbling over the high heels and flowing dress she didn't remember putting on. "Besides," she thought to herself while slowing down "Not like I know where I'm going anyway."

Eventually the winding passages chosen at random deposited Pacifica into a grand, ornate dance room, the door vanishing behind her. A grand ball was in progress, fancily dressed gentlemen and ornate ladies spinning each other around the floor with perfect synchronization. A ominous bell chimed in the distance and the sleek shine of silver permeated the decorations.

The blond girl was swiftly caught up in the movements of the dance floor despite her lack of a partner. The couples would spin and glide all over the floor like they were all of one leaving Pacifica to be pushed around and shuffle herself out of the way. Eventually it was clear that the figures, clad in face concealing, frozen masks of pleasing, angelic humans that were none the less unsettling in their lack of emotion, were guiding Pacifica to the center of the ballroom through their rough, impartial handling.

Being josteled and pushed across the dance floor made Pacifica's head spin and the dancers around her began to blend together, not helped by them already being functionally identical. She felt sick to her stomach and wasn't sure how long she was lost in the blur, but the world did eventually begin to stabilize, vision becoming clear as streaks of color assembled into stable shapes.

She was in the center of the room now, and the crowd had fallen still around her, forming a solid wall of masks and fabric in a perfect circle, but not with her as the center. Pacifica's eyes widened in horror as she realized what the centerpiece of this dark ballroom dance was: Dipper Pines, tied to an ornate chair bolted to the center of the dance floor. He was scratched up, bleeding in places, and blindfolded. His head hung limply to his side, bare neck exposed and vulnerable.

"Pacifica..." he groaned out, sounding disorientated, limply calling into the darkness that covered his eyes. "...I love you."

Pacifica's heart began to race at these words, but not in a good way. She felt overwhelmed, claustrophobic, pressured on all sides, and more than that, she felt hungry. Hungrier than she had ever been in her life.

"Drink, Pacifica." Came a voice from the crowd, and she couldn't tell if it was her mother or father. "Drink deeply and wholly of love struck blood. There will be others to sate future tastes. He has surrendered to you, and is now yours to feed on."

"Drink Pacifica!"

"Drink Pacifica!"

"Drink! Drink! Drink!"
The felt herself shrinking in the gaze of the crowd, the grand bells beginning to boom now! She felt her knees buckle and put her hands on her head in fear, then bit her lip from the stress she was overwhelmed with. To her horror, two of her front teeth easily pierced the surface of her lips, sinking into the skin and filling her mouth with the bitter taste of her own blood.

Fangs.

"Pacifica..." Dipper moaned, sounding like he was returning to consciousness, and feeling all the pain that entailed. "I... I love you..."

"Dipper, please no! You can't say those words!" Pacifica begged, not caring that the moving of her lips was resulting in her bloodthirsty fangs piercing her lower mouth over and over, until she was so mumbled by injury and flooded by incredibly sweet blood that she could no longer talk, the grand bell continuing to ring in her ears. Somehow though, even over the endless bell, a voice managed to reach her, softer and more gentle than the lacerated voice of the Dipper in front of her.

"Pacifica..."

"Pacifica... please wake up..."

"I... I need you to wake up..."

Rousing from his own slumber, Dipper soon found himself looking at himself. After blinking a few more times he realized it was his reflection, and that he was staring into the still surface of a body of water. When he straightened his own body up to stretch his arms above his head and yawn to dispel the last of his sleep, he was able to clarify that the body of water was the Gravity Falls lake, where Stan had taken him and Mabel fishing during that first summer. The lake shore, where Stan had later taken him and Mabel stealing, was a distant horizon.

Somehow, the situation didn't seem all that weird, even as Dipper realized he was in a cleanly painted white rowboat. The corner of it that he'd seemingly curled up asleep in had a pair of limp, unattended oars mounted on it, so clearly he'd rowed them out here, then taken a nap. That made sense.

"Them?" He questioned himself suddenly, and with a look to the other side of the boat, was able to confirm there was someone else on the boat with him: A girl of some kind, same age as him in a lovey white dress, but her face was obscured by a mass of long blond hair. Dipper frowned a little. Who had he gone boating with again?

"Awake at last, Dippen-dots?" The girl asked. Dipper's frown deepened. He couldn't quite place the voice. It was hot today, he suddenly noticed, the summer sun reflecting off the lake water as dragonflies tapped the surface in erratic, high energy flight patterns.

"Uh, yeah, I guess so. Sorry, I guess I nodded off for a bit..." Somehow the general situation didn't seem weird to him, but Dipper was increasingly curious about the blond girl.

"That's typical. I told you your little noodle arms weren't up to the task of rowing me out here for our romantic date, but you insisted on doing it anyway, dork." The girl responded in a voice as light as helium, giggling a little, but her laugh was loaded with a razor point that made Dipper squirm a little. "You just couldn't pass up the opportunity to get a pretty girl alone on a boat with just you... and the implication, could you?"

Dipper choked a little as the accusation of the girl actually set in on him, and began to sputter out "NO, it's nothing like that! Look, if you're not comfortable we'll go right back to the shore!" He
shouted apologetically before grabbing the oars and trying to move them, only to find they were stuck.

"Oh Dipstick, don't worry, I'm not scared of you or anything. You couldn't hurt me if you tried." The girl explained, getting more mocking sounding as she began to crawl over the boat towards the boy. "C'mere, you little weakling, I'll show you how a real man handles a lady..."

Feeling more profoundly nervous now, Dipper tried to hold the girl back with his foot, her blond hair forming a veil around her face as she advanced on him. "No, that's alright, let's just go back to shore."

"Awwww, what's the matter Dip, I'm not enough for you?" The girl asked, climbing right over his foot and beginning to scale his body. "Am I not musclely and strong and sweaty enough, not too worn out by every other boy in town? Or am I not smart enough to stay by forever, like we promised? Am I just a stupid piece of trash you threw away, because you're so paper thin you couldn't take a little bit of friendly teasing?"

By now, the girl shimmied up Dipper's body and was rubbing her chest against his while her hair cloaked face got dangerously close to his. Feeling encroached on and threatened, Dipper threw back the curtain of hair in front of him to look at the girl's face, and felt himself recoil when it got through to him.

The girl was still blond beyond the blocking curtain, but small hairs with a distinct brown color, the exact same brown he had, curled out of the flowing blond locks seemingly at random. Her eyes were the exact same as Dipper's as well, and the girl had bright red cheeks marks in the shape of hearts on her face. Then, the girl opened her mouth, revealing a set of braces over bright white teeth, and ran her tongue up Dipper's face. "C'mon Dipper, be my forever king! Put that big brain of yours to work and help me exterminate the monster vermin!" She demanded, eyes flashing yellow for a brief moment. "Morality is relative anyways!"

Dipper was squirming and suffocating in her grip now, arms slinking around his throat. "Don't fight me Dipper, you should feel lucky I love you so much. Don't forget who put you on this boat, you unlovable big jerk..." The breaking point proved to be when the girl pressed her knee into Dipper's groin with enough force to make him wince and buckle. Body surging, the boy threw the girl back with as much force as he could muster, sending her tumbling back and over the side of the small boat.

Instantly overcome with remorse, he rushed to the starboard bow and looked in, not wanting to drown this weird person despite how uncomfortable she made him. However, the recent disruption to the water's surface meant he wasn't greeted by his reflection this time, instead it was sight he recoiled from: His hometown of Piedmont, submerged beneath the lake. It was so hard to remember the California town sometimes, so the indistinct, murky vision in the depth was accurate to Dipper's memory. But more concerning was the girl: As soon as he'd put his head over the side, she was trying to crawl back into the boat, muttering "Come home Dipper..." inbetween gasps for air.

Acting on instinct, Dipper shoved his arms down at the blond head emerging from the water, shoving it back underneath the liquid surface. He was recoiling with horror the whole time but couldn't make it stop. The feeling of a wet string encircled and constricted his throat while his arms were frozen in place, feeling like solid metal attached to his shoulders which he had no control over.

Under the water, the girl continued to struggle, her hair blooming out from her head under the water to reveal more and more brown hair, but it was changing somehow, the brown melting away underwater and the strands seemed to fall out and sink to the depths. When the girl bent her neck towards the surface and her throat burst, releasing bubbles into the water and water into her throat,
Dipper could see that her braces were rusting and falling off underwater, her cheek marks seemed to be fading, and her dress was coloring itself purple, like she'd been dropped in ink.

Dipper more and more felt like his unresponsive arms were going to fall off, sink to the depths with the girl and possibly rip his shoulders out with them, but finally he regained control and wasted no times hauling the girl out of the water. She was purely blond now, the braces and cheek marks gone, and her eyes had seemingly changed, being their own color now and looking at Dipper with a light of admiration shining from deep within. Acting on further instinct, the boy brought the girl up to his lips and the two began to kiss, the blond girl swiftly, sweetly surrendering to him by admitting his tongue to her mouth without prompt. Their lips stayed locked together as Dipper dragged her into the boat, freely and without fear, and was swiftly buried under the soft layers of the blond girl's voluminous purple dress.

"...erfly...

"...Mis...utterfly...

"MISS BUTTERFLY!"

"WAH, GUAGH! I DIDN'T POKE THE PIE!"

Star awoke in a fumble at the call of her name, tumbling into reality at the angry demand as well as the sudden realization she was sitting in a rather solid chair. "This isn't the comfy castle chair I'd fallen asleep in..." She thought to herself. A quick scan around the room caused the princess to gasp with surprise: She was back in an Echo Creek classroom!

"I didn't ask if you did, Miss Butterfly." The mildly annoyed, now distinctly male, voice asked again. Star had been wildly looking around the room, swiftly recognizing it as one she'd attended during her visit to Earth, though at the moment it seemed to be curiously empty of any other students, only her and... "I asked you, as I am asking you again at this moment, what the answer to this SIMPLE math equation is!"

The demanding voice finally got Star to look at the front of the classroom, and the sight she saw made her head freeze in place as she stared forward. In front of the chalkboard, pointing to a math equation she couldn't even read at the moment, was her distant friend and not so secret crush, Marco Diaz.

Only, he was different, Star realized as she blinked several times. He was taller now, stronger looking but not as strong as the version of him from Hekapoo's dimension. He had on a larger version of his "Doctor Marco" costume, glasses included over an increasingly annoyed expression, and a solid wooden yardstick in hand, which was tapping the chalk equation on the board.

Star couldn't answer, couldn't speak, couldn't really tell what the math problem on the board was for some reason, and rapidly felt her body getting uncomfortably hot all over as it really set in that the two of them were all alone in this classroom. After a few more moments of silence, Marco began to step towards Star's desk, causing the girl to curl up as much as she could in the cramped plastic platform, letting out a small "eeep" when Marco finally came to a stop, looming over her while looking down on the blond.

"Miss Butterfly..." he began, tone of voice somewhat weary and somewhat husky all of a sudden. While speaking, Marco made sure to gently tap the end of his wooden stick against Star's desk. "...I'm starting to believe you may be in desperate need of a stern, lengthy, disciplining session."

Star was basically curled up into a red hot ball at this point, heart pounding against her chest and her
head feeling like it was on fire. It was suddenly intensely uncomfortable to sit on the classroom seat (well, even more uncomfortable than they normally were) but Star didn't dare stand up or squirm around to alleviate her achy feelings because then she'd just have to look at Marco again, and that would make everything worse. "I CAN'T do this anymore! Get it in your head Star, Marco is GONE to you! We can't keep feeling like this, no matter how much we want to! He doesn't love us back!"

"What else are scientific advisers for?"

Star abruptly cracked her eyes open again, despite having closed them as part of her general "curl into a ball" strategy. The voice was different now, still the exact same speaker, at least according to Star's ears, but they had a completely different mood and tone now. The scenery had changed as well, even the seat underneath her! She was still seated though, but this time on comfortable leather. Uncurling herself to a normal posture, Star was suddenly able to feel a crisp breeze on her face, rapidly cooling off her overheated body and letting her blond hair flow behind her.

Looking to her left, the princess realized she was rolling through the Mewni countryside at breathtaking speed. "I'm in a car." Star put together out loud, though it was more old timey than anything she'd ever rode in on Earth and painted a similar bright yellow to the Echo Creek school buses. Looking to her right, her heart skipped a beat as she saw who was driving.

It was Dipper, the new friend from Earth she had made recently, who was wearing a red velvet jacket with matching slacks and a frilly white shirt underneath. He was behind the wheel of the vehicle, expertly maneuvering it through the rolling hills and grassy plains of the countryside. "So, what do you think your majesty? Do you believe the automobile is the right technology for Mewni?"

He asked with a disarming awkward smile, even while keeping his eyes on the road. It was strange; despite his face being clearly different, the wind passing over them kicking up his hair enough to display a strange birthmark, he spoke with the exact same voice Marco had been using just a moment ago.

"Marco, where did Marco go!?!" Star asked inside her head, but abruptly stated aloud "Isn't this car backwards?" she asked, focusing on an inconsequential detail instead of her feelings.

"It's an English model." Dipper replied offhand.

"Oh." The Princess muttered. "I don't actually know what that means, but I trust that's an explanation."

"Excellent." The boy behind the wheel responded again. Just as he had the exact same voice as Marco did in her last situation (an odd blend of both boys now that she thought about it) the tone of her companion suddenly got husky and alluring. "Now, shall we seal the deal on this matter, my queen?"

Shivers flew down Star's spine as she was addressed by the title, the implications of the phrase setting in. Suddenly, Dipper was leaning over, lips puckering up to kiss the blond royal! Though frozen in place and burning up from the inside once again, Star couldn't bring herself to move, waiting for contact to land with a small spark of anticipation inside her.

Then, something caught the corner of her eyes.

"THERE'S A WARNICORN IN THE ROAD!" Star yelled suddenly in panic, but even though Dipper jumped back to the wheel to try and swerve out of the way, it was too late. In a brief flash of light followed by a moment of pain, the car had collided with the frozen in fear animal.

Moments later, she opened her eyes again and felt perfectly normal. The princess still had memories
of flying through the windshield, but didn't associate any pain with the thought. More concerning to
Star was her current predicament.

As far as she could tell, the Mewman princess was hanging upside down, her entire body wrapped
up in chains, locked with an oversized padlock on the front of her body and hanging from the
ceiling. Down below, a distinguished looking Mewman woman held up a key in a taunting fashion
while a gaggle of scaly skinned monsters laughed with her.

"The time of your line has come an end, Butterfly!" The woman began triumphantly. Star frowned,
but before a megalomaniacal speech could be begun in earnest, the door to the room was being
kicked in, drawing all eyes to the entrance.

Striding through the now open pathway was a tall, muscular human warrior, wearing a long red
hoodie over an otherwise bare, and extremely muscular chest, and hiding their eyes under the rim of
a blue cap. Their legs were covered with tight black leather pants and their feet had riding boots over
them. At the waist sat a pair of long swords styled after the two blades of a pair of scissors, like
dimensional scissors split apart.

"Good grief, I can't leave you people alone for five minutes without you causing trouble, can I?" The
intruder remarked with cocky disdain at the gaggle of villains in a voice Star could only just barely
place as being pleasing to her, almost sounding like two people talking at once.

The order was given to kill the intruder as the battle began, and Star watched with amazement as
they jumped into action, easily fending off the dozen minions with a relentless display of premium
physical might and the expert usage of the two scissor swords, which burst with blue fire. She didn't
have to watch for long however, as despite being on the other side of the room, her rescuer quickly
set her free.

He had just bashed one lizard minion down the head half handle hilt of one sword, then full body
hurled them into the crowd of six rushing in to buy a little time. Free to act, the man sliced his right
hand blade through the air, creating a portal that burned with blue fire. The left hand blade was then
thrust through the passageway, and something caught in the corner of Star's eye: the other end of the
portal was in front of the giant padlock binding her, and the blue hot blade thrust out of the portal
into the keyhole, causing the internal mechanisms to melt and the lock to collapse apart!

Star felt the squirming she'd been doing against the tight metal finally give way, and is a glorious
flash of light exploded out of the mass of chains, transformed again into the golden butterfly. Floating
gently to the ground, she stood back to back with her rescuer, soon to be an equal partner in battle.
Around them, their enemies had seemed to multiply, until they stretched forever and it seemed the
world was against the two.

"You ready to have a good time Star?" The man asked, staring down the assembled hoards with a
confident grin peeking out from under their hat.

"Always and forever." Star replied, grinning herself, and the two jumped in together to a long and
exciting battle. The princess felt the familiar rush enter her veins as she made physical contact herself
and observed the heroic feats of her companion. She never tired or faltered despite the battle going
on forever, though slowly, the action began to fade together, foes and shapes becoming indistinct
until Star was acting purely on instinct, straining increasingly unresponsive muscles against a world
she wasn't actively perceiving.

"Did I get knocked in the head?" She asked herself groggily while straining to open her eyes, a task
that seemingly took all Star's effort. When the eyelids finally did slide open, she realized she was
back in the renovated guard barracks, and could feel her limbs again.
Yawning gracefully as she awoke from sleep, Princess Star Butterfly briefly wondered what had happened to her, before the vivid memories of Dipper bleeding from the eyes and then a vague golden light appeared. "Oh!" She voiced aloud before picking up a nearby discarded glass and looked at the reflection.

"Dipper! I think it worked! No Glossaryck!" Star said excitedly, but her expression fell as she turned her head around and put the boy in her sight. He was on the other side of the room, having seemingly not heard a word she said, due to being too busy tending to Pacifica Northwest.

"Urgh... Dipper... be gentle..." Pacifica muttered, clearly out of it as the boy from Earth gently cleaned her hair with a damp cloth, trying to get the dried blood out of her blond locks.

"I'm sorry Pacifica, if you're still sore we can wait until you feel better." He responded, comforting and apologetic. The girl simply grunted though, trying to reassure him. The two were extremely close to each other at this point, and were sharing a deep, intimate gaze as Dipper did his best to clean off and comfort the girl after her recent experience.

"Not sore, I feel amazing considering I've just been punched in the head. Just... tired. And I don't like the cold touch. If you couldn't get a finely embroidered dinner cloth you could have at least made it lukewarm temperature." She intentionally whined playfully, and they both smiled at each other a little.

Star watched from across the room with admiration, confusion and growing disappointment as Dipper continued tending to Pacifica, who was seated in a different comfortable chair while the boy was down on a knee in front of her, while an oddly familiar question mark pen sat on a table near the two. Numerous conflicting thoughts were running through the head of the princess as she struggled to decide what to do next. Despite her announcement, the two hadn't seemed to notice her waking up, they were too focused on each other. Getting out of her chair, Star walked over to them softly. They still didn't notice her, and as much as she wanted to cough or something to catch their attention, the blond princess felt like she'd be something wrong in the process. Instead, to keep herself busy, she picked up the weird looking pen, hoping she could just examine it until the humans noticed her. Her eyes widened in shock however as the pen began to glow and shift in her grip, and before Star's very eyes turned back to the familiar shape of her wand. Speechless and shocked, the princess's wide eyes went from looking down at the wand to up at the two humans, whose attention the lightshow had finally managed to capture. Pacifica looked more confused and surprised than anything else, while Dipper had a sudden look of panic and concern on his face, like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Before any of the three could say a word, there was a knocking on the door. "Star? The servants have told me you've been in here all day. I'm coming in." Came the voice of Queen Moon, with a somber and regretful tone to it that the Earthlings were unfamiliar with. The door to the barracks swung open with a creaking noise, revealing the monarch in all her regalia. She stepped through the opened portal with a regretful, apologetic look on her face and began speaking on automatic. "Star, I'm sorry to let you know that the military team sent out with your friends hasn't... checked..."

All looks of sympathy and regret that were on Queen Moon's face vanished as she abruptly noticed that Pacifica Northwest, one of the missing humans, was sitting alive and well in this room, as well as being intimately close to the boy that was also quite intimately close to her daughter. Her expression deepened into a frown when Stanford Pines stepped out from behind one of the modesty dividers provided by Star's room makeover. He'd been back there examining the spot on his stomach where he'd been wounded the whole time.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise." The Queen intoned, despite not sounding pleased in the slightest.
"When the military team didn't check back in I was terribly worried our new visitors from Earth had been lost in the wilderness they'd gone off to, but it turns out they were up here in this room with my daughter the entire time. Now I'm simply left to wonder if anything has befallen my knights?"

"As long as they did what I told them, they should be fine." Ford responded quickly, stepping into the conversation to put himself between Queen Moon and the teenagers. Of course, he actually had no idea what the fate of the knight and squire actually was, and said what he said purely as the opening feint in the duel of words he could tell he was entering. "Unfortunately, the expedition confirmed my worst fears: Bill Cipher has acquired a physical form on Mewni and already has a plan in motion."

Moon remained visibly unmoved by this information, instead continuing her line of questions. "A physical form, I presume in the same fashion as he when he was inhabiting the body of the smuggler?" When Ford nodded affirmatively at this, the queen had a simple demand. "Describe this new body to me."

Ford frowned for less than a split second, but answered none the less. "Some variety of monster, though I doubt Bill has any interest in genuinely helping them, he's totally self motivated. Very human... er, mewman shaped and proportioned, dark red skin, backwards facing horns, and four eyes, with three of them covered with eyepatches."

Moon actually seemed taken aback by this description and blinked at Ford for a moment, before stating "That's not a monster in the slightest, 'archmage,' it's much worse as a matter of fact: Assuming your description is accurate, our mysterious Bill Cipher has possessed the body of a demon."

"I'm sure that's a very meaningful distinction your majesty, but the exact details are lost on the current audience, your daughter excluded, I'm sure." Ford responded, but wasn't quite right. Behind him, the three teenagers had settled in to watch the exchange between their two authority figured, Dipper and Pacifica showing cool, observational interest while Star seemed genuinely taken with the older man's statement. "Could you please explain the political reality of the situation? It could be important to the investigation."

"What... really is the difference between monsters and demons, anyways?" Star asked herself inside her head while tapping her chin with a finger. "Or the Pony Heads for that matter? Or Baby? Or the Commission members?"

Clearing her throat, Queen Moon began her explanation with an air of grace and mild offense, as if she was explaining basic social customs to someone who had just violated them. "Demons, as they are commonly called, are the inhabitants of the Lucitor Kingdom, a noble, upstanding ally of the Kingdom of Mewni, with a proud and distinguished culture, thriving economy that operates in a mutually beneficial fashion with our own, and a great history of magical achievement." Then, offhandedly, she added "They're quite distinguished from monsters, you see, who are incapable of building or inhabiting civilization of any kind."

"Okay, so they're the Imperial Japanese." Ford thought to himself, the pieces starting to make sense and add together the longer he talked to the queen, who seemed blissfully unaware how chilly her offhand statement had made the humans in the room to her. Even Star was looking a little put off and uncomfortable. "Well, they might not be as reliable allies as you believe Queen Moon. We investigated the sight where the knights were found dead, the evidence seemed very clear: I am certain that Bill, in the body of a member of the Lucitor Kingdom, killed the knights because they discovered him conducting a weapons deal of some kind. I can't say for certain it was with monsters, but whoever he was making the delivery to, he didn't want you to find out."
"Ideally, we would have discreetly removed Bill Cipher and his human weapons from the equation before too many people on either side of this conflict find out, and it potentially gets worse due to his meddling." Ford thought to himself in the span of a moment. His conversation with the queen was getting tense now, and both could see it in the eyes of the other: both were probing for information and carefully guarding their own. Every word was carefully thought out from here forward. "But it's too late for that now. Thew mewmans know the general location of Bill's stockpile now, and even if he killed the military escort, they'll find the it sooner or later. I can't stop them from learning about his weapons now, so by being the one to tell them I might be able to earn valuable trust that could be useful for catching Bill, keeping them from understanding the true power of these arms, or stopping them from acquiring a steady supply of ammunition. After all, the kingdom acquiring a crate of loaded machine guns would be bad, but if they can't get more bullets that puts a cap on how much damage they can do."

"This crowd... they have a colder, more reserved air compared to Marco. I never knew humans could be so crafty." Moon thought to herself, mulling over her next choice of words. "The Lucitor Kingdom... the political reality of our agreement with them is hardly secret. They would eventually find out themselves, with enough time and study. I might as well inform them, perhaps the truth can be the bait with which I'll hook some secrets out of this archmage."

"We appreciate your discovery, and find your concern touching, but you need not worry Doctor Pines, this is a familiar situation for our two kingdoms." Moon stated, audibly going into lecture mode. Star let out a silent groan, certain her mom was about to begin talking about stuffy royal nonsense, while all three humans in the room payed rapt attention. "The Lucitor Kingdom is a prominent trade partner with the Kingdom of Mewni, and their primary export to us is weaponry. You see, the Lucitor Kingdom is where the souls of the fallen from across the multiverse reside, permeating the fabric of the dimension. In addition to creating many natural wonders like the Soulrise, they represent potent industrial potential. Metal weapons and armor forged in the natural burning the souls undergo creates extremely high quality equipment that is highly receptive to magic enhancement. Which, of course, is one of the prime duties of the Queen, to use the magic wand to bless the brave warriors of Mewni with great strength in times of conflict."

Ford nodded in response, scientific curiosity overtaking his contempt for the moment. "Ah, a soul nexus dimension, interesting." Ford responded, and when Moon didn't immediately respond, he seized the advantage and took over the flow of the conversation. "Some dimensions have the capacity to attract the souls of the departed from nearby dimensions, the little bundles of magic energy that their final electrical brain impulses imprint onto upon death. My students and I have studied the phenomenon, and while we do not have a concrete theory for how this property emerges, it's observable in dozens of dimensions across the multiverse, most of which gain mythological significance as "realms of the dead" for nearby dimensions, whose souls get drawn in. We suspect it's a sort of spiritual equivalent to how extremely high mass celestial objects like planets and suns can attract smaller objects into orbits around them through their influence on gravity."

The veteran scientist explained the concept like he was explaining something as simple blood typing. Star seemed completely surprised by and non-comprehensive of what she'd just heard, having only vaguely understood the Underworld as "that place those jerks lived" before now and knowing it had kind of a soul motif to a lot of things. She looked to the side, hoping the other teenagers would be just as confused as she was, but instead felt herself shrink a little when she saw Pacifica had been hanging on every one of Ford's words with rapt, enlightening interest, clearly able to get what he was saying, and being amazed by it, while Dipper with beaming with pride for his mentor.

Even Moon seemed to have been put on the back foot by the sudden burst of knowledge, with Ford clearly understanding more than she had anticipated. Even worse, this had taken her by enough surprise that her normally perfectly reserved, well controlled expression briefly betrayed her surprise,
and she knew full well Ford had caught her. "And for the record, I'm familiar enough with soul foraging to know it's totally barbaric. Particularly when you're grinding up the souls of the dead to make weapons to make more dead." He added on with a hint of self-righteousness, unable to resist pressing a button or two.

"Well, it seems your research is incomplete then." Moon replied, getting a tone of steely confidence back. "The foremost magical experts on the subject have confirmed that the post-mortem soul is not a true representation of the deceased being. It is incomplete, damaged into sub-mewmanity during the process of death, making it acceptable for use in industrial processes. Numerous treaties between our two kingdoms ensure living souls are not put into these processes." She explained, gaining an air of superiority to her tone.

"Yes, I'm sure you managed to find a completely non-biased and objective set of researches to produce that conclusion." Ford thought to himself, but held his tongue. The Queen believed she had regained the conversation and was set to reveal more information.

"However, we have strayed off topic." Moon stated, moving the flow back to the matter at hand. "The role Bill Cipher is playing is one that is familiar to us. While the relationship between the Kingdoms of Lucitor and Mewni is an extremely close, mutually beneficial one solidified by several prestigious treaties, political dissidents will always exist. The Underworld has a small but tenacious anti-Mewni element to its political landscape, mostly among commoners and the unlanded merchants. They sometimes worm their way into a place of small influence inside the extensive arms industry that employs large sections of the kingdom's population, and use this corruption to deliver small shipments of soul forged weapons to extremist monster groups out of misplaced sympathy for their causes, or simply for personal profit. Various treaties and regulations forbid royally chartered arms companies, which is all of them, from doing any kind of business with monsters."

Ford seemed to find this political intricacy quite intriguing, openly cracking an eyebrow in contemplation as Moon explained it all. "The Lucitor royal family has, of course, been extremely cooperative in eliminating this mutual threat to the political stability of all kingdoms and the safety of their citizens. Their intelligence assets are always on the lookout for such activity, and information regarding suspected instances of weapon smuggling are freely traded between our two realms. Lucitor and Butterfly military assets have even cooperated for arrest actions against these smugglers. If this is the profession Bill Cipher has decided to step into, he will be captured in short order. He's made a very unwise career choice you know."

"Bill has more influence and knowledge than you could imagine, it won't be a simple matter of just kicking his door down and putting him in handcuffs. Your High Commission already made that mistake." Ford replied, getting a grave tone to his voice. "He'll have contacts, back up plans, pawns and minions. This has to be more than just a regular smuggling job, that's too ordinary for him. He'd never be content posing so little of a threat."

"Then what, pray tell, is the greater threat, Doctor Pines?" Moon asked, tilting her head forward in a dry expression of questioning. "What precisely was it that you found at the ambush site that has convinced you Bill poses such a large threat, and that motivated you to use what I presume is some form of magic to escape and abandon your escort in the process?"

Ford felt his throat dry for a moment. "This woman... Queen Moon... she's a brilliant politician! She could tell right away I was being defensive and secretive about what we actually found out at the ambush site and maneuvered the conversation so I would have no choice but to answer her!" The six fingered old scientist was frozen and quiet for a moment, just long enough to make the pause awkward and the change in conversation noticeable to everyone in the room. "Stanley would never have fallen for this!" Ford berated himself for a moment before moving to damage control.
"As I explained, I believe your knights were killed because they discovered a weapons trade, and my investigation of the area uncovered a small underground cache where the merchandise in question seemed to have been stored. Unfortunately, Pacifica and I discovered the room space was heavily trapped, likely to eliminate any investigators since only a small amount of merchandise remains stored there. Most of it seems to have been sold and carried off already." Ford effortlessly lied. "Once we stepped inside, a mechanism sealed the place, forcing us to use our dimension traveling magic to escape to Earth, then travel here to get back to Mewni and circumvent the trap." Then, he leveled at Moon with a grave expression. "However, what we did see there, combined with what you've told me, suggests Bill may have a high level on influence with the elite of the Lucitor Kingdom. The weapons he had stored there were highly advanced, not the kind of things a politically sympathetic night manager could make go missing in the crunch of inventory. After all, by your own admission you had no idea what killed those knights, correct? If it was a regular soul forged sword that had done it, you would have recognized the fact right away, correct?"

The last statement by the archmage before her actually seemed to give Moon pause. As much as she didn't want to admit it, something was wrong. In all the occasions of anti-Mewni demons getting a line of supply and funnelling weapons to monsters, it was back row stuff, surplus inventory and overproduction that wouldn't be missed, not high end prototypes that the Queen hadn't even been informed existed, and the Lucitor Kingdom was always quick to inform their ally when a new design or model was being experimented with by the blacksmith demons. Always eager for an investment or an advanced deal. "Of course, all this need to be confirmed by more reliable sources, but I have put him in a position where he is most likely being truthful. He seemed sufficiently inexperienced that I doubt he could spin together such a convincing falsehood in the limited time he has had to do so."

"Do you have anything else to report about your expedition, Doctor Pines?" Moon asked, steely expression returning again.

"No your majesty." Ford responded, equally steely and reserved now.

"Then I presume our meeting is over, provided no one else has anything to add?" Moon asked, casting her eyes over the teenagers in the room before settling on her daughter. "Star, come with me. I need to discuss royal matters with you in private."

"Yes mom." Star replied and trotted forward unusually dutifully. Even she was able to feel the heaviness of the conversation that had gone down and knew now wasn't the time for her usual argumentativeness with her mother about royal matters.

As soon as the door shut behind the two Butterfly women, Dipper opened his mouth to say something but was silenced by a gesture from Ford. The elder scientist retrieved a stethoscope from one of his supply bags and held it to the wooden door. After confirming no one outside was listening, he turned to his two teenage students. "Now that we have some privacy, I imagine there's quite a lot we need to all fill each other in on..."

Further away, Moon led Star to an isolated corridor of always, and after casting a basic wandless spell that told the queen the two weren't being listened to, she turned to face Star with a very serious expression.

"Star, I need you to tell me everything."

Chapter End Notes
Well, I hope everyone reading this enjoys dialogue and dream sequences! Right, I'm sorry for making this chapter so heavy on exposition between the characters, but a lot of important concepts needed to trade hands between all the players here. Plus a few Bill-meddled (or were they?) dreams to make sure everyone's got their personal demons on their minds for the upcoming adventure they'll have to face. I hope this plot still makes sense to everybody reading and I welcome all your opinions on it. Thank you for reading.
"...I'm telling you mom, after we talked over breakfast Dipper spent the day helping me with a magic problem. That's it." Star told her mother insistently. The two were still clustered in a dusty corner of this wing of the Butterfly Castle, Queen Moon having quite sternly demanded to know everything about the day her daughter spent with the younger Pines man.

"What manner of magic problem, exactly?" Moon asked, a quizzical eyebrow raised up at her heir and daughter.

"Just... you know... fine tuning a little defensive magic. Gotta be on our guards with Bill about after all!" The princess replied anxiously. Having just gotten over a fresh guilt trip about the death of her mentor and a disturbing trip through the depths of magic, all Star wanted to do was leave this experience behind as a solved problem and felt increasingly uncomfortable as her mother questioned her about it.

"I see... and what exactly did this 'fine tuning' consist of?" Moon asked skeptically, looking at her daughter with an impassive face that none the less cracked with worry in a few places. "Am I to take it that the so far circumstantial magic knowledge of our visitors from earth is genuine then? Did he know what he was talking about?"

"Absolutely." Star replied confidently, without a moment of thought about it. Looking down at her wand and biting the bottom of her lip before adding on "I mean, a lot of the time I still don't really think I know how this wand works, it feels like crazy stuff just sort of happens because of it and I have to sort it out just by instinct, but Dipper... he sounded like he could take it apart and put it back together he knew so much about how it worked. Everything he said worked as well." Then with a voice and expression that was simultaneously annoyed, dismissive and regretful, Star muttered "Would have come in really handy while Toffee was living in here..."

Moon, however, looked startled by Star's explanation. "He... understands the wand? To what extent? Star, did Dipper attempt to manipulate you into letting him use the wand?" The Queen asked, a tone of both royal and motherly concern to her voice.

"What! No no no no!" Star answered defensively while waving her hands in front of her. "I didn't mean the wand in particular, he just... seems to understand what magic is really well. Talkin' bout wavelengths and frequency and 'energy to matter conversion,' whatever that is, uh..."

Moon's eyes were becoming narrow at this point, as her suspicion was beginning to mount. "Yes, and all the extra equipment he'd brought in helped in with all those things?" She asked, and when Star's eyes widened in response, she followed up with "I'm not as old and blind as you think Star. You brought those three straight to me after you dug them up somewhere, and the bags they had on them were completely insufficient to hold all the equipment scattered around that room. One of them must have returned to earth to collect more equipment at some point, and I am presuming it was Dipper, just this afternoon. Am I wrong?"

Star was visibly nervous now, and with a noticeable tremble responded. "Uh... those backpacks were bigger on the inside?" with a noticeably fake and nervous smile. When Queen Moon simply glared at her, Star swiftly cracked. "OK, you're right! Dipper remotely activated his portal and went back to earth for the extra equipment to help me! Okay! There!"

Moon did soften her expression a little at this, lightly tilting her head into one gloved palm as she gave her daughter an almost glum look. "Star, I'm sorry about that, but as your mother I'm worried
about you." She explained, concern on every word. "Why are you suddenly so protective of this earth boy's secrets? You've only just met him, and I can tell him and his elder are keeping secrets from us."

Star, in turn, visibly softened, making an effort to argue less with her mother after their recent adventures together. "He... he asked me to not talk about the portal much, I'm sorry." Star remarked, nervously wrapping some of her long blond hair around a finger. "They just want to keep a low profile since they're hunting Bill and all..."

Her voice becoming more firm now while still retaining an air of understanding to it, Moon responded with "I can understand that Star, but surely you can understand that we need to keep some degree of knowledge about them as well? Hekapoo is getting quite worked up about a source of dimensional travel she has no knowledge of, since it is her purview after all." Then, with a little note of humor, Moon added "It would be best if you could just tell us now rather than let her try to get the information herself."

Chuckling a little, Star answered "Yeah, I guess you're right. Well, okay, based on what Dipper explained to me, they have a big gate back on earth that sits in one place and opens portals to anywhere else in the multiverse." Clearly struggling to put it into exact words, she continued with "Like, imagine the dimensional scissors were the size of a house, so you couldn't carry them anywhere but the house IS the portal! And they built it largely by themselves and the rest of the world doesn't even know about other dimensions existing."

"How do they get back after they travel to a different dimension if they can't bring the magic device with them?" Moon asked, momentarily struck by genuine curiosity.

"They've all got these little disks they carry that have switches on them. Throw the switch and a portal opens up back to earth." Star replied.

"Interesting." Moon answered, eyes narrowing as she rubbed her chin. "And, in your opinion Star, do you think it is likely that these humans invented this device by themselves? Does it seem within their... capacity, to do so? Based on both your time with Dipper and your previous experience with earth?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Star answered, perking back up! "They've got tons of amazing things on earth, I think it's pretty great! And with a human who knows as much about magic as Dipper does? I'm sure they could figure this out. Plus, he's only the student! Who knows what Stanford could really do!?"

Moon did not share her daughter's enthusiasm at the description of the earth dimension, but none the less adopted a lighter tone towards her despite sounding somewhat weary and sarcastic with her daughter. "Well, I'm sure all of that will be very useful for the eventual diplomatic evaluation. You should visit the library sometime and dust off the political treatises on dimensional first contact. Depending how what rate of advancement the humans are working on, it could very well be your duty as queen to welcome them to the interdimensional stage and provide evaluation to them." Then, with a somewhat tighter curl of her lip, the ruling queen added "In addition, I would suggest you try and make such evaluations from a more... objective, point of view. Emotional distress is a perfectly normal thing Star, but it cannot influence your decisions as queen." Then, with an outright nasty snap of the voice, Moon remarked "Particularly not when there potential lechers hanging around."

The princess seemed confused and a little taken back by her mother's last few sentences, and these feelings were written onto her face. Before Star could try to articulate though, Queen Moon cut to her point, speaking much more bluntly. "What I'm trying to say, Star, is that you must not allow this... Pines boy, to take advantage of your current, desperate desire for an earth boy. Your feelings will pass, but mistakes will not." As Star began to stutter denials in response to this, Queen Moon
simply pierced her with a withering gaze and continued speaking. "After all, he has so much to potentially gain from you: military secrets, access to the magic wand, better trade deals for earth, forbidden lore, and of course... well, what do all boys his age want? Some you know what..."

"WOW! Okay mom! Point made! Trust no one! It isn't like that! I'm telling you!" Star burst out, her face getting progressively redder and redder as her mother prodded at all her recent emotional troubles and then began insinuating. Huffy and flustered, the princess made a transparent attempt to change the subject by hurriedly asking "Look, what did you mean earlier about, what, evaluating humans?"

Moon, of course, saw right through her daughter's attempt to shift topics, but felt like the emotional outburst Star was undergoing indicated that she had gotten through to the girl, and knowing there would be very few other times Star would be actively asking about her future royal duties, decided to play along with her daughter. "Well Star, it has been some time since it last happened, but when the Kingdom of Mewni comes in contact with a new species of sapient beings, either within our dimension or outside it, it is the final duty of the queen to decide if they are monsters or not." The monarch explained with an almost casual tone of voice, though Star suddenly felt her emotional humiliation flushed away by a chill down the spine. "She will consult with numerous experts and diplomats of course, launch inquiries, hold summits, the process can take months. I'm not immediately familiar with the exact steps and methods of course, as my reign has never had such an event, but the relevant tomes on the process are within your reach, stored in the royal library."

"And... you think it might fall to me to make that decision about humans some day?" Star asked, a clear tone of worry on her face as her hands wrapped around the wand, holding it close as a security object.

Moon, however, seemed nonplussed by the question. "If they're building their own dimensional portals, then one of us is going to need to. It all depends on how quickly they're actually developing." she explained, then added dismissively "I wouldn't worry though. Based on my own impressions, I suspect they will prove themselves higher than monsterhood. Even if I don't quite trust these three humans we are hosting right now, good ones clearly exist and your father and I were both impressed by some of their technology during our visit."

"Hey mom..." Star asked, nervously chewing the inside of a cheek for a moment before continuing. "...What actually is the difference between a monster, and say, a demon?"

This question actually seemed to rouse Moon from her lecturing mode for a moment, as she looked down at Star with complete surprise. She felt like her daughter had just asked her what was the difference between a bucket of water and a piece of fruit. "Star... I thought that would be immediately obvious?" The queen responded. Out of the thousands of questions and potential talks she's imagined and planned to have with her daughter, in relation to her potential future struggles as both a queen and a woman, this wasn't one of them. It had never occurred to Moon that Star would need this explained to her. "Monsters do not create kingdoms Star. They do not have the intellectual capacity for art, economy, magic or rulership, unless it is fostered onto them by an outside source. They are..." Suddenly, Moon's words were a little less certain, remembering her surprising encounter with Buff Frog while on the run. "...not, inherently immoral or evil, but intellectually, they will always be inferior to the Mewman people and their allies, and would be best served submitting themselves to our directives." She finished with a confident note.

Despite this being a less harsh stance than what she herself had once believed, Star found herself troubled by the blunt condemnation coming from her mother, and sort of quivered uncomfortably in place at it. Her mother picked up on this in short order, adding that "I understand that's not the most precise explanation, but if you'd like I can arrange a meeting with the kingdom's monster expert, Dr.
Jelly Goodwell, I am confident she can put any doubts of yours to rest."

"Thanks mom." Star replied somewhat flatly.

"You're welcome Star." Moon answered on a brighter tone. "Now, is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

"No, I think I'm good."

"Excellent!" Moon said happily while clapping her hands together. "Now, speaking of demons, I need to oversee preparations for the upcoming Silver Bell Ball. Have a good evening Star!" The princess let out an audible huff of disgust as her mother walked away, before looking out the window and realizing it was quite late by now.

"Wow, I really did just spend the entire afternoon with Dipper after all." She mused to herself, while looking through a window at the setting sun. Blinking briefly, Star smiled when it hit her that there was no dead Glossaryck staring back at her. "Time well spent!" she mused while twirling her wand around, newly confident in her defensive magic. Beginning a walk back to the refurbished barracks, Star briefly had a worried expression of her face but swiftly cheered herself up. "Mom's just being a big unfair booger, as always. I'll wish my friends a good night then head to sleep myself."

After a moment however, she looked down at her magic wand with a more troubled look, and glanced from side to side to make sure her mother was no longer present. "I am glad she didn't find out about Dipper taking you for a ride though."

Inside the barracks in question, while the queen and her heir had been having their conversation, Stanford Pines had initiated a conversation between himself and the two teenagers in his care about the recent actions of all present. It proved to be a swift, frank explanation of previous events by everyone involved.

"...And when I woke up I noticed Pacifica was hurt, so I used the wand on her. It didn't come as automatically as when I healed Great Uncle Ford, but, well, you're awake and active now..." Dipper finished explaining, going over the last of recent events. With a sad look, he looked Pacifica in the eyes, and spoke apologetically. "Paz, I'm... I'm sorry I left you sitting like that for so long, I should have healed you right after I healed him, but, I, I just..."

The blond girl just gave the teenage boy and understanding look and put a warm hand on his shoulder. "Hey, it's alright," She stated. "It sounds like you got really crazy hopped up on magic back there, and weren't really, well, in control of yourself." Then, with a little giggle, she added "Besides, I feel fine now, so your second go worked. Better late than never!"

"But, Pacifica..." Dipper mumbled with guilt, "...I let you fall asleep while you potentially had a concussion! And, I had to do magic brain surgery on you! That's both way more complicated than what I had to do for Ford, plus I didn't have the whole ethereal guidance thing going on so if something goes wrong it's all my fault..." Both other humans in the room recognized the warning signs of Dipper getting close to a self-loathing spiral, but the lone girl stopped his chattering by leaning forward and hugging him.

"Dipper... you can't be so hard on yourself." Pacifica said warmly before drawing back to look Dipper in the eyes. "You did an amazing thing for me back there, and I know you did the best anyone could have in that scenario. And I know that because you're Dipper Pines." Drawing back ever further and taking her hands off the boy's shoulders, the blond teenager adopted something of a jokingly haughty tone before adding. "After all, I'd accept only the smartest and most capable person in the world to be my best friend."
Going quiet for a moment as a soft, warm light filled him up inside, Dipper smiled a soft but genuine smile before leaning in so the two were hugging again, this time with him hugging her. This seemed to take the blond girl by surprise, as her face dropped from amused to mortified as it fit into place over his shoulder. "Thank you for that Pacifica." Dipper said with a sort of needy affection. "You're the best."

"Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no no nonononono! It wasn't supposed to go here! I can't do this to Dipper!" Pacifica frantically thought to herself, but was frozen in place and unable to disengage, despite judging it the moral thing to do. Luckily for her, Dipper ended the hug of his own violation when Stanford spoke up.

"I agree with Pacifica, as a matter of fact." The old scientist explained. "You frequently sell yourself short Dipper. You are one of the most exceptional individuals I have ever had the good fortune to know so personally, and if anything about or magical fixes goes wrong, I'm will be certain it was something no one could have changed." Then, Ford pressed a hand to the section of stomach that had been punched through not long ago. "For the moment, everything feels perfectly normal on my end. Better than new even, I've had a budding hernia in this section of my stomach that's completely gone now." He remarked idyll while squeezing a section of skin through his shirt.

Dipper was feeling really pleasantly warm inside as some of the most important people in his life filled him with confidence, to the point a small tear rolled out of one eye. "Thanks you two. That really means a lot to me." He responded, while wiping it away. "And if anything else goes wrong, well, we've got the brains between the three of us to conquer anything, right?"

"Undoubtedly." Ford responded, while moving to the center room table. The warm atmosphere dimmed in the room as it was obvious by the older man's posture that it was time to talk business. The teenagers didn't mind however; the moment didn't feel like it had been cut short or anything, they had had it and were ready to move on.

Ford was making a half-hearted attempt to wipe off the layer of his own blood that had coated their complementary magic map of the country, and quickly gave up when the obvious was confirmed: Using the center table as an impromptu surgical bed had resulted in the map being ruined. With a hand on his chin, Ford began to ruminate. "We need to figure out who exactly Bill was advertising those weapons to. I had hoped we could consult this map and simply investigate the settlements closest to the ambush sight, but I don't actually know if it would include maps of monster settlements as well. Wherever it is though, it must be close, since it seems like everyone arrived on foot..."

Dipper opened his mouth to reply, but stopped when a distant sound tickled his ear. "Do you guys hear something?" he asked, and moments later got an answer.

"WOOH, OKAY, QUEEN BUZZKILL IS GONE! HOW'S IT HANGING ALL!?!" Star announced boldly as she kicked down the door to the barracks and stepped in with an extremely excited look on her face, only to falter somewhat as everyone inside was looking morose and contemplative, turning towards her with bewildered faces. "Uh, right, sorry about that..." she remarked while gently closing the door behind her. "So, what's up everyone?"

"Not much, just, you know, Great Uncle Ford and Pacifica filled me in on what they ended up discovering." Dipper explained, first to respond and take control of the situation. "They found evidence Bill is behind the dead knights, and we need to investigate all the monster settlements closest to the transaction site." Then, he gestured limply towards the map. "Unfortunately, our map is a little... unreadable right now, and I'm not sure if it had monster settlements on it anyways..."

Star's cheek marks briefly became light bulbs as she hit on an idea. "Oh, that's no problem!" She said excitedly. "I can introduce you guys to the kingdom's monster expert tomorrow! I'm sure they could
"That would be most helpful Princess Butterfly." Ford responded next, keeping a guarded but still pleasant tone with the girl. "Might we discuss the exact details over breakfast tomorrow?"

"Oakie-dokie! Sounds great!" Star responded happily, taking steps backwards while pointing her fingers at the group. "Sleep well everybody!" She said goodbye before delicately opening the door and then slamming it shut as she left. After a moment of silence in the renovated bedroom, Ford took his glasses off and wiped the lenses with his shirt.

"It is rather late, isn't it?" Ford asked no one in particular while seeming to notice that fact for the first time. "Perhaps we should get some rest. It sounds like we have another expedition on our schedule tomorrow."

The two teenagers hadn't really noticed until Ford made mention of how late it was, but both were rather tired, Pacifica letting out a yawn while Dipper's eyelids got heavy. "That's... huuuuuuuh... weird, we just woke up..." The blond wondered, but Ford had a quick answer. "Restless sleep, common when dealing with magic, nothing to worry about. You two decide who uses the divider first, I'm going to set up an alarm clock and more dream interceptors."

On the other side of the door, Star hadn't fully walked away yet. She was leaning against the wooden barricade, holding her wand tightly in her hands and trying to reach a decision. Looking down at the tool of magic, she whispered to her the family heirloom like it was a confidant to her deepest secrets. "Tomorrow. I'm going to try and make it work tomorrow."

That evening passed without further incident for any of the castle's sleepers, and when the morning came around the earthlings were enjoying another royal breakfast alongside the princess, with the king and queen absent once again. "...though ah did ruhn inta mahm on thah way here, anh she told meh how tah get tah the expert's office." Star was explaining the queen's absence and recent actions with her mouth still full of food. Pacifica and Ford had trouble understanding what she was trying to say the entire time, up until she swallowed near the end of her sentence, but Dipper had been following along the entire explanation and nodding gently when appropriate.

"And you don't mind securing us more transportation once we identify the most likely settlement?" Dipper asked, then rubbed his arm nervously. "I mean, we did kinda lose the last one..." In response to this though, Star just gave a dismissive wave of the hand while putting more food in her mouth.

Further conversation was cut off, however, as a dimensional portal abruptly cut itself open in the dining room. A faint breeze carrying soft embers rolled forth from the gateway, and soon after Hekapoo of the Magical High Commission stepped through. "Your majesty." she greeted Star formally, before turning a much harder look at the three humans. "Earthlings." she added offhandedly. Then, the master of the scissors focused her attention on Stanford.

"Doctor Archmage Stanford "Ford" Pines..." Hekapoo rambled off teasingly, with an air to her that she was in control and knew something no one else in the room was aware of. "The Magical High Commission of the Kingdom of Mewni is issuing a summons for you. We have some questions we'd like to ask you, in the name of extra-dimensional security. The summons is effective immediately." Without missing a beat, Hekapoo cut another hole in the world, this one leading to a clearly different dimension based on the lack of drifting embers, one of which had ignited a napkin that Dipper was frantically trying to extinguish.

"Hey, hold on a second, you can't just..." Star spoke up indigently, before Stanford held up a hand and offered his own rebuttal, cutting the princess off with his deep voice.
"It's alright prin... Star. I appreciate your support but I have no problem answering a few questions for the proper authorities." The man explained with steely confidence. "Lecturing is something I have quite the talent for as a matter of fact."

Speaking as if she was trying to reassure her, Hekapoo said to Star "No worries princess, it's just a formal debriefing of yesterday's events. Your mother will be there and everything." But the tone of scissor smith still had a disconcerting edge of superiority to it. Nonetheless, Star did sit back down at this statement.

Ford got out of his chair in short order, wiping off his lips with a napkin while giving the two human teenagers at the table a knowing look, causing their expressions to shift from concerned to determined. "Don't worry yourself about me children, I'm sure this will be cleared up in short order. Stay safe while I'm gone." He instructed with a very deliberate tone, and soon after had stepped into the portal, leaving the teenagers alone in the dining hall.

"I can't believe her..." Star muttered while folding her arms over her chest, while Dipper and Pacifica seemed calm after taking a few moments to steady themselves. Dipper, in particular, was getting out of his own chair and slinging his hat on while his posture shifted into work mode. With a mildly nervous smile, he looked right at the princess and tried to reassure her.

"I wouldn't worry about Great Uncle Ford, he's survived worse than her. Besides, he already came out of one meeting with your Commission, hasn't he?"

In response, Star got up and grinned a little. "Yeah, you're right!" She looked over at the two humans and proudly pointed a thumb towards herself. "Well, it seems like the chains of command fall upon Princess Star today!"

"Looks like it." Dipper says with a playful tone, as both him and Pacifica smile slightly at the royal blond, happy to see the mission was still on. "So, are we off to see the monster expert then?"

"Yep!" Star expressed with an air of good cheer. "I was actually dreading this as a stuffy journey through records last night, but when I talked to mom this morning she described Doctor Goodwell as 'bizzarely sympathetic' to the monsters, but too much of an expert to actually get rid of." While explaining this, Star had made finger quotes while saying the phrase "bizzarely sympathetic" in a dismissive, mocking tone. "So this might even be fun!"

Pacifica, however, just looked aside towards Dipper, whispering "Is that what she was talking about earlier? I couldn't understand a thing she had said."

"You learn to understand people with their mouths full really quick living with Mabel." Dipper whispered back.

A short walk through the halls and a few wrong doors later, the group of three found themselves admitted to a densely stuffed office room, shelves and book cases and walls covered in samples and maps and literature, which the humans were quick to examine while Star approached the old, short Mewman woman behind the desk. "So, you're Doctor Jelly Goodwell?" the princess asked.

"Why yes, yes I am your majesty. How might I be of service today?" The monster expert replied in a formal, somewhat stiff tone. "I have the latest population calculations and strategic estimates Queen Moon asked for, but I presume you're here for something else? Even if we're in the aftermath of an invasion I doubt her majesty would user her heir as a paper gopher."

Around the room, Pacifica was examining a wall chart showing a small, frog like creature slowly pulling itself out of a body of water, changing in phases to an upright biped similar to a human, then
devolving right back to a small animal and crawling back into a different body of water on the other side of the poster. Dipper, meanwhile, was flipping through a research publication. "Huh, this is all really well organized..." he muttered appreciatively.

"Well, you're right actually. I actually need your input on figuring out where a monster settlement might be." Star responded, placing a folded up map on the desk in front of her, upon which the location of the deal had been marked with an X. "We believe a band of monsters all met at this location, and they seemingly traveled on foot. Do you have any idea where they might have come from?"

Doctor Goodwell adjusted her glasses and looked at the map carefully, a look of displeasure getting on her face as she analyzed it. When she looked back up at Star, the expert spoke with a measured tone, polite but somewhat strained. "In accordance with the demand of her majesty Princess Star, I shall inform you that a prominent monster settlement does, in fact, exist close to the designated location. Right here in fact." Goodwell then proceeded to draw a circle on the map in black ink a short distance away, before hastily speaking up again. "But, as the Kingdom of Mewni's duly appointed monster expert, it is my duty to attach a memo to this information! This settlement is extremely important to our observational understanding of monsters and to the monster ecosystem itself! While it is, of course, not my place to challenge the final decisions of the Queen, I must insist as strongly as my position allows that this settlement not be endangered or interfered with, even in light of the recent invasion!"

The words of the monster expert and the conviction behind them seemed to take both humans in the room by surprise, as they ceased their poking around to look straight at her. Dipper, who had been examining the skull of a monster that he had discreetly liberated from a glass case, spoke up with surprise "Why not? I imagined the monster expert would be the mewman who is the biggest expert on getting rid of monsters?"

"Certainly not, you impudent young hooligan!" Doctor Goodwell responded indigently. "The Kingdom of Mewni's science of Monsterology has come a long way from the barbarity of Queen Solaria's live dissections! While I have, of course, always fulfilled my duty and obeyed the orders of the Queen in monster matters, I am ultimately the strongest advocate for an end to monster interference in Mewni!" Then, with a more wistful tone, added that "They really can be beautiful creatures, if you get to know them. But so few mewmans seem to appreciate that..."

Dipper and Pacifica traded pleasantly surprised looks at this revelation while Star was wide eyed and bouncing on her feet at the explanation. "This is even better than I had hoped!" The princess stated cheerfully, suddenly leaning in really close to Doctor Goodwell's face. "Doctor, I think Mewni treats monsters unfairly as well! I never realized someone so prominent agreed with me!"

Rather than react negatively to Star's invasion of her personal space, the monster expert seemed overjoyed with this revelation. "I KNEW that sooner or later, someone inside the royal family would be enlightened enough to appreciate my advocating for preservation!" She breathed in relief, before suddenly clamping up when she realized what she'd implied about the reigning queen. "Um, that is to say..."

"Ah, don't worry about royal protocol around me Doc." Star replied, leaning an elbow on the desk in a casual fashion. "Let's just say me and the queen don't see eye to eye on A LOT of things. That includes the treatment of monsters!"

Quickly becoming visibly less worried, Doctor Goodwell and Star engaged enthusiastically with each other while Dipper and Pacifica had stopped rummaging around completely to watch them approvingly, the boy even opting to put back a history book he had pocketed and planned to read
later. "I knew there was just something good about Star." Dipper remarked with both admiration and relief, in a quiet enough voice that only him and the girl next to him could hear. "I know great uncle Ford doesn't really like this dimension for some, well, justified reasons, but I'm glad we seem to be finding the exceptions."

Pacifica nodded, a small but warm smile on her face as well. "Yeah, Star really just... gets it. Just how absurd and cruel all this upper class social business can be. And it seems like she figured it all out on her own." She remarked, glancing towards Dipper in the process and unconsciously wrapping her hand around his. "I would never have changed without your help."

While Pacifica hadn't consciously meant to hold hands with him, Dipper certainly consciously felt it, and initially stumbled over a response. "Don't... ah, sell yourself short Paz..." he remarked uncertainly, but was saved from further dialogue here by a faked cough from Doctor Goodwell. She and Star were no longer talking, both instead looking at the humans with somewhat inscrutable looks on their faces, Star seeming more conflicted while Jelly was obviously annoyed.

"As the princess had clearly just stated..." The monster expert remarked in a drawl that gave away that she knew the two hadn't been paying attention. "...The two of you have the most information on the new threat to the monster habitat, is that correct? Would you be so kind as to approach the table and explain it, precisely?"

"Ah, of course!" Dipper replied with a flustered tone, quickly separating his hand from Pacifica's and awkwardly trotting up to the table. The blond would have been right behind him, but her eyes caught with Star's for a moment, and they seemed to share a look with each other while Dipper was hastily explaining things to Doctor Jelly Goodwell. Neither of them were entirely sure what the mutual look meant in full, but both were well aware it happened. Both were roused from the partial trance however, by the sound of the monster expert suddenly speaking in a louder, grievously offended tone of voice.

"That is simply dreadful! Interference with the natural monster ecosystem of such scale and barbarity! It's... it's... despicable!" Doctor Goodwell raged after Dipper had explained the truth of the matter. "Princess Butterfly, rest assured you shall have my full assistance resolving this matter! I propose an immediate expedition to the monster habitat, as soon as you are possibly able!"

"That's great actually! I had planned on spending the day doing this, so we can leave whenever you're ready!" Star answered enthusiastically. Finally, it felt like she was going to make real progress on her goals as a princess!

"Oh, goodness me, it seems I'm the one unprepared then! Well, uh, if you wouldn't mind leaving me for just a moment your majesty, I'll pack everything I'll need for the trip, clear my schedule for the immediate future and close up the office here, then I'll meet you outside!" Doctor Goodwell explained energetically, already starting to zip around her office in a flighty manner, moving things around and taking stock as the three teenagers began to exit the room. "I haven't been this excited for an expedition since the quest for the Inverse Ponyhead..."

Outside the office, Star stood in-between her two human friends, jittering with excitement for the trip they were going to go on. "So, are you guys ready to go on a super fun trip for science and justice!?" she asked the two of them, though her expression was mostly focused on Dipper.

With a nervous laugh, Dipper rubbed the back of his neck and answered "Yeah, this sounds like it's going to be really productive. But, Pacifica, can I talk to you for a second?" His question made both blonds look at Dipper with surprise as he stepped past Star to get closer to the girl from Earth. Looking at her with a deeply concerned and remorseful expression, he asked "Pacifica, please don't take this the wrong way, but I'd feel better if you stay here at the castle while me, Star, and Doctor
Goodwell make this trip."

Pacifica met her friend's look with a mildly grimaced but still sympathetic look of her own, recognizing the emotion his deep eyes were transmitting to her in sincerity, while Star just seemed surprised and a little taken aback that Dipper would ask her to stay behind. "C'mon Dipper, what's bugging you? We'll handle this no problem. Bill might have gotten the drop on me and Ford before, but I know Star and her wand can keep us safe if we meet him again." she spoke with a halfheartedly dismissive tone.

Dipper kept looking concerned however, though Star glowed a little at her friend's confidence in her. "It's not that Paz, I'm sure Star can keep us safe as well, it's just... I don't want anything to risk aggravating the head wound you took recently, especially since I have no idea if I even healed it properly!" As he explained himself, Dipper's voice quivered with a tone of guilt to it, and a shaky hand rose up to Pacifica's head, guided by instinct and finding its way through her incredibly soft, luscious hair to feel the site of the injury, gently stroking the area to look for damage or scar tissue. "Please." He asked her, voice and expression both incredibly deep with concern. "Let's give it some time to make sure everything healed right. I couldn't... I couldn't bare accidentally making things worse for you."

Off to the side, Star felt increasingly uncomfortable as she watched the touching moment between the two from the outside. She gently chewed the tip of her wand while trying to look anywhere else despite not being able to take her eyes off the Earthlings. "How many times did I have this sort of conversation with Marco?" She wondered to herself. "Always so concerned I was going to get hurt even though I can handle things myself, and I'm sure Pacifica can as well, so we'll see how..."

"Okay Dipper, you make a good point. I'll stay behind and make sure I've healed properly."

"Huh?" Star found herself unable to keep in the noise of surprise as Pacifica conceded to Dipper's argument. If the two had heard her though, they didn't show it, instead simply looking at each other for a moment before Dipper seemingly realized for the first time he's put his hand inside Pacifica's hair and hastily withdrew it with a flustered apology. "...But, I don't think any of mine ended like that..." The princess thought to herself, but upon taking a closer look at the human girl's face, it began to dawn on her. Pacifica still looked a little troubled and a little upset at Dipper's request, but stronger than that was blatant concern for him. "She doesn't want him to be worried about her." Star realized. "As much as she wants to go on this adventure, Dipper being at peace and not being worried her safety is more important to her." With a look of disquiet on her face, the princess wondered to herself "Is this why they are so close with each other? Would... would Marco have stayed closer if I let him be my hero once in awhile?"

"Well, I guess that's that then. Good luck out there. And Star?" The princess was roused from her self-introspection as Pacifica addressed her, having gotten closer to the mewman royal as the girl from earth walked away from the office of the monster expert. Star was a little embarrassed at how this had caught her by surprise, and fumbled to look right at the other blond with a forced smile on her face. "Keep an eye on Dipper for me, will you? He can get himself in the worst trouble imaginable if left alone." She asked, a clear tone of sincerity underneath the teasing way she said her request.

While Dipper chuckled at this and playfully argued that he did not, Star just gave Pacifica a determined nod and said "Don't worry girl, I'll bring him back in one piece even if I need to glue him back together first!" before the two passed each other, Star stepping closer to Dipper while Pacifica vanished into the hallways.

"Besides..." The teenager from Earth thought to herself while leaving the two behind, quickly setting
to work on a whole series of personal thoughts. "...Maybe I can get some fact finding done while I have some free time around here."

Soon enough, the princess and the apprentice were alone together, standing outside the office of the monster expert and waiting for a new adventure to begin. "You look happy." Star commented offhand to Dipper.

"Just pleasantly surprised, I suppose." He remarked back, his good spirit audible in his voice. "I was prepared for a lot more pseudoscience when I heard we were going meet the government expert on monsters, but that conversation was refreshingly free of phrenology or creationism. I think I'm looking forward to this, a real scientific expedition!"

Star giggled a little at Dipper's explanation, then gave him a half lidded look and teasingly asked him "I guess we mewmans are a little smarter than your gave us credit for, aren't we?"

With a sort of embarrassed chuckle, Dipper rubbed the back of his neck and answered "You know what, it seems like you guys are. I expected the worst of this situation, but Doctor Goodwell is a most erudite and forward thinking intellectual. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to partake in some stimulating discourse with such a genuinely intelligent, professional scientific expert."

In short order, the Archmage from Earth had been shuffled into a deceptively normal looking office room, seated at the head of a rather basic table while three members of the Magical High Commission clustered around the other head of it: Queen Moon presiding at the opposite head, with Rhombulus and Hekapoo on either side of her. Off to the side, on a smaller table, Sean the security guard was recording everything said on typewriter.

It had started off as a simple debriefing of his expedition with Pacifica and Mewman knight and squire team, and for most of his time there, that's all it was. Ford had offered up everything that had happened, and even drawn a few pictures for the MHC: The insects that had ambushed them, the magical lock placed on the door, some of the weapons that had been stored in the underground bunker, and the face of Bill's newest host. In comparison to the previous hostile atmosphere that had reigned between Ford and this group, this conversation was cordial and professional, the Mewmans only speaking when they wished for something to be clarified. A sizable amount of time based before things got more intense, during the period Ford was being asked for what conclusions he had reached.

"No one here disputes that Bill is possessing a citizen of the Lucitor Kingdom, correct?" Ford asked the assembled commission members, and all three of them nodded hesitantly in confirmation. "Then my conclusion, based on all the evidence that I collected first hand during this expedition, is that his newest host has some kind of position within the Lucitor Kingdom's ruling class, or connections to it, and Bill is utilizing those resources to his fullest, and possibly with their full support."

"That's outrageous!" Hekapoo responded, the familiar flash of fire across her expression. "The Lucitor Kingdom are the staunchest allies of the Butterfly regime, they would never back Bill's activities!"

"Yeah, what she said!" Rhombulus chimed in.

When Ford spoke again, it was obvious he was ignoring Hekapoo and Rhombulus to speak directly to the Queen. "No, they're arms dealers, provided my understanding of your explanation of the two kingdoms' relationship is accurate?" When the monarch didn't correct him, the scientist continued. "Those sorts of people are never staunch when it comes to supporting anything. After all, why have business with one side of a conflict when you can have business with both sides?"
"And besides, he was utilizing some kind of magic weapon completely unknown to either us." Ford continued, deliberately sliding around the subject of the earth weapons. "I confessed quite freely during this debriefing that none of my knowledge of magic encompasses what Bill attacked myself and Miss Northwest with, and based on the fact that none of you gave me a correcting lecture on its true nature, it's clear none of you know what it was either. Now, what would be the most likely source of a completely unknown to human or mewman knowledge, but highly advanced and dangerous, magical weapon? Along with a fully constructed underground bunker in Mewman territory, complete with a diabolical security system?"

"Jackpot." Ford thought to himself when all three visibly flinched despite their best efforts at his explanation. "As long as I keep them suspicious of these Lucitors, they'll be in pursuit of Bill, and as far away from acquiring weapons of their own from Earth.

"Your argument is... logical, but ultimately unfounded, for the moment." Queen Moon spoke, clearly choosing her words carefully. "There are more magic sources in the multiverse than the Butterflies or the Lucitors, after all. Clearly, investigating this strange magic of Bill's is a task we must accomplish with great thoroughness before throwing about more accusations." Despite the denial she was partially speaking with, Ford could tell he'd gotten his idea planted in Moon's head, and was content with this small victory. Her next question, however, took him by surprise.

"Now, on a different subject, we have some questions about Earth we'd like you to answer..."

"Star, I take back everything I said earlier. This woman is an idiot."

It had been a half hour since the princess of Mewni had first walked into the office of her kingdom's monster expert and set in motion an expedition to the monster village, and at the moment she, Dipper Pines and Doctor Goodwell were all cramped into the doctor's tree house research base. The long, overland journey the expert had planned out ultimately proved unnecessary, as Dipper had simply suggested Star lend Jelly her magic scissors to cut a portal to the location as soon as he saw the elderly woman dragging an inflatable raft out of her office. This had allowed them to reach the secret lab in record time, and that, in turn, gave them a quick, close hand look at Doctor Goodwell's methodology, and soon the disappointment set in.

"Yeah, this is... not what I was imagining either." Star admitted, with a defeated tone of voice while somewhat guiltily running her hands over a strand of hair and shrinking somewhat in place while Dipper had run her an intensely smarmy, eyebrow knitting expression. After seeing how genuinely upset she was by how ignorant the doctor actually was though (Dipper's breaking point having been when she described the borderline old west looking village as "a natural rock formation that by raw coincidence had been shaped by natural forces into something resembling a town) the boy lightened up a little, offering Star a more sympathetic expression.

With a sigh, Dipper did his best to comfort the princess in front of him. "Look, Star, I'm sorry this didn't work out like you had hoped, but what matters is that you still know what is true and are holding onto it. No matter what the ignorant say is the truth in its place."

The princess seemed touched by the apprentice continuing to support her in this situation, and gave him a soft "Thanks Dipper." in response. Impulsively, Star began to shuffle forward a little, planning to give him a hug just to see how it feels in comparison, but was interrupted (to Dipper's private relief) when Goodwell abruptly shoved a wheeled diorama of the monster village and the nearby dam between the two.

"So! Based on my observations and monitoring equipment, this mysterious "Bill" fellow hasn't introduced a severe disruption to the ecosystem yet! We're just in time!" She announced with a mix of dutifulness and excited cheer. "I've been considering doing this for some time, but this new threat
has pushed me over the line! It's time to preserve the sanctity of the monster ecosystem once and for all!" She began to rant while pouring a glass of water into the model set. "The natural dam further up the watering hole the monsters gather around has been rigged with blasting equipment for awhile now, and today we're going to set them all off! The river will rise higher than ever, and create an insulating lake around the monster environment, protecting it against any further outside interference, from Bill to the Queen herself!"

"What?"

"Oh boy, here we go."

Star had been taken aback by the sudden, extreme turn of events her interactions with the monster expert had taken, while Dipper simply reacted with dry resignation to this turn of events. "Now, I simply have to press this button..." She continued, creating an instant expression of panic in Star while Dipper simply continued to glare at the Mewman woman, but to her own surprise, Doctor Goodwell couldn't seem to locate her detonator. "Hm, I've always kept it stored there. Did I move it around last time I cleaned in here...?"

With a look of contempt on his face, Dipper quietly muttered under his breath "Yeah, you keep looking you... uh, Samuel Cartwright-talking mother..."

Frantic, Star turned to Dipper and yanked on his arm, cutting hit muttering short. "Dipper, we have to do something! Quick, let's warn the monsters before she figures out where she misplaced the button!" She yelled out, before bolting down the trapdoor ladder that was the tree house's only way in or out, while Dipper watched her go with flat footed surprise.

"Star, wait up! Stop already! Let, let me talk to you!"

Dipper had been yelling things like that as soon as Star ran off without him, and when she finally came to a stop a short distance from the tree house to turn about and regard the panting and huffing earth boy who had been sprinting to catch up with her, she simply urged him to keep going. "Tell me when we get there Dipper, we don't have much time!" She stated, while getting ready to run again.

"Actually, we have all the time in the world." The boy stated matter of factly despite being out of breath, causing Star's attempt at sprinting off to fall short as she stumbled out of surprise. Pulling herself off the ground, she looked at Dipper with a quizzical expression. "But, what about the dam?"

"Dam's not gonna blow up." Dipper said, his voice and expression now confident. With a borderline smug expression, Dipper produced the detonator that Doctor Goodwell was turning her research lab upside down in search of when we came into that place, and as soon as Goodwell started to sound like the kind of idiot who thinks ancient aliens built the pyramids, I got the idea to pocket it. In the name of public safety. We have all the time we need."

"But... what if... we should?" Star seemed genuinely lost for the moment, trying to decide what to say. "This is normally the part where me and Marco would rush headlong into danger, excitement building up towards a race against time finish! But, Dipper just took the wheels off the whole adventure... feels kinda weird. Plus, Marco is the one who gets stuff stolen from him, not him stealing things from people we encounter!"

"But you're not on an adventure with Marco right now, are you?"

The question had come from a second voice in Star's head, a sterner one that seemed to shut down all
her internal discussion. Turning her attention back to Dipper, Star opened her mouth and raised an index finger, only to lower it when Dipper remarked "All. The time. We need." in a slow, firm voice. After a moment of silence between the two, the earth boy abruptly pivoted on his heels and began walking towards a pile of stuff Star hadn't noticed until now, which Dipper had dropped mid sprint to be able to catch up with her. "Now that we're all calmed down, we can think about this and actually plan what we're going to do next." He explained confidently while lifting up the pile of dropped goods to reveal their true nature: Monster costumes! "I figure with these, we can get inside the village and snoop around a little, see what Bill is up to."

"OK, yeah, you make a good point." Star replied uncertainly, but the princess put on a smile despite how confused she was feeling. "Good job Dipper, you're really on the ball today."

With a smile of his own, this one radiating fresh confidence, Dipper offered a genuine thanks to Star. "Now, let's get these things on us and get to work."

Back at the royal castle, Pacifica Northwest was gently stepping through the dusty royal library. By her own estimation, she seemed to be the only person here at the moment, aside from the extremely nearsighted librarian who had admitted her. The old mewman woman behind the desk had clearly mistaken the blond teenage girl from Earth for her own princess, a delusion Pacifica had carefully played along with while deliberately never partaking in it actively. As a result, it seemed like she the run of the place, but still stepped carefully in order to not risk disturbing it.

Through some careful, quiet carrying, the human girl had quickly assembled a reading collection on an out of the way table on the edge of the library. She'd selected the most prestigious looking historical documents she could find, and came equipped with a fresh notebook and several pens to get to work with.

"Let's see, where to start..." Pacifica wondered, having no clear idea how any of the chronicles named by the book covers lined up with each other historically, seeing as this was the history of a completely alien planet she was working with. "Eeny, meeny, miney... You." She decided after a short think, and upon bringing the chosen book closer, cracked an eyebrow in appreciation of the title she'd unwittingly picked.

"Chronicles of Darkness: Mewni's Worst Queen Ever? Well, as good a place to start as any."

A short while after squeezing into the outfits, the human and the mewman moved through the dirty, sometimes vertical streets of the monster village in their two monster costumes: Star dressed as a round, one eyed creature with a horn while Dipper was in a more stiff costume designed to make him look like an insect, consisting of a large paper-mache ant body with six thin wire legs sprouting off it at weird angles, even though the boy's pants covered legs exited out the abdomen for him to walk along on. "Star. I'll admit, I kinda regret this plan." Dipper admitted. "This costume is really hurting my back."

"Maybe we won't need them any longer if we can make contact with Buff Frog." Star remarked sympathetically, but the fact that she had to turn her whole body to face Dipper resulted in her standing with her back to a dark space between two buildings, shaded by an abundance of purple bush growth. A crook cane emerged from this space and swiftly yanked Star into the darkness. "EEP!" Star squeaked out in surprise, but quickly gained a radiant expression under her costume when she saw who it was. "BUFF FROG!"

"Star!?!" The muscular monster said in surprise now that he was close enough to recognize her under the costume, swiftly recognizing the girl and making a point to stow the knife he had in his other hand behind his back. "Is surprising to see you princess! Good, of course! But still surprise."
"I didn't know you were living here until not too long ago, sorry for not giving you a heads up." Star responded apologetically but still happily. "How are the kids doing?"

"Star!? Are you alright!?!" Dipper called from the street, finally making his way into the hidden space in his awkward, hard to see in costume. "Is somewhere here with you!?"

"Ah, Karate Boy, is good to see you also." Buff Frog greeted, even as Star got a blushed look on her face and begun to wave her arms back and forth in a negatory fashion, which the monster couldn't see because he was addressing the human teenager. "You sound strange Karate Boy. More nasally and high pitched than normal. Are you feeling well?"

"What!?!" Dipper asked in frustration, not quite having heard everything the monster said. With a grunt of frustration, the boy punched his arms through the fragile surface of the costume and ripped the headpiece off. "Alright, I have had about ENOUGH of that..." He muttered to himself while kicking the severed any head away, causing it to roll into the street and send an unfortunate monster civilian running and screaming. Annoyance gradually fading, Dipper finally looked up at the monster and the princess. "Ah, hello there. You're the monster with the tracker stuck behind his ear, right? Would you like me to remove that? Star says you're a friend after all."

Buff Frog blinked a few times as it became instantly clear that this wasn't the human he was familiar with. Turning back to Star, the monster father asked her, with a dry look on his face despite the abundance of mucus on his skin, "Ah, Buff Frog understands. Is new Earth Boy, to fill aching void left by karate fighter, yes?"

"NO!" Star shouted back. "Why does everyone think it be like that!?" After a moment of anguished yelling, the princess abruptly shifted focus. She hadn't become any calmer, but did remember what she was there for. "Buff Frog, you gotta get everyone out of here! Some crazy Mewman lady is gonna blow up the dam!"

"Oh, by Crazy Lady Who Watches From Trees?" Buff Frog replied nonchalantly. "We know of her. She blasts holes in dam frequently. Is no problem, easy fix."

"And, again, it's not actually going to happen guys." Dipper added in, annoyance on both his words and his face, and the feeling got stronger when he tried to show off his day saving, quick fingered workmanship but felt his arms simply collide with his bulky costume when he tried to retrieve the detonator again for a flourish. "We're hear to investigate... you know, the threat." With a scrutinizing look, Dipper regarded Buff Frog while scooting closer to Star. "You sure we can trust this guy?"

"You mention threat. Do you speak of merchant?" Buff Frog asked bluntly, clearly having overheard Dipper's distrust but opting not to address it. When both teenagers looked at each other with a surprised look but nodded yes, the monster continued. "Strange man arrive in village recently. Demon blood, monster but not. Speaks of safety, upheaval, revanchism. He speak of many things, but gives us only one thing solid: Weapons."

Dipper's expression was all business now, steely and unreadable, while Star looked a little more visibly worried. "Jackpot." The boy thought to himself. "Can you tell us more about this demon? Who is he dealing with here in the village?"

"He speak mainly with Swaffle, and Swaffle speak to others, but not many. Business is secret." He explained, then with a weary tone, added on "Have seen many demons like him. Very frequently arriving and leaving to Ludo's castle with weapons, armor, general supplies. One time with yogurt machine. In exchange, they take what little natural livelihood we have. Ludo was always eager trader, sure we would capture wand any day now. And they were always eager, appearing the moment we had acquired anything worth trading." With a look at the ground, Buff Frog spat. "Is
foolish. Last visit was after Toffee had taken over. That merchant will never walk again."

Dipper, out of raw force of interest, had drawn his arms back into the costume and popped them out with a pen and notepad in hand, so he could desperately scribble down everything the monster had to say. Star was simply looking with concern as she processed everything he had to say, and asked the next question herself. "Who is this Swaffle guy, exactly? Is that the goat guy's real name, maybe?"

"Nyet. Is new monster, never seen by princess or karate boy." Buff Frog explained, before casting his eyes on the still frantically writing Dipper. "Or new earth boy. Is community leader, in a sense. Initially, I was happy to see someone new step up. Had been informal leader of this town, difficult task, appreciated help. But he grow powerful, quickly. Many in town listen to him, and he puts me back to work as spy. He is the one who ordered me to capture the strange mewmans walking around in costumes." With another stern expression, Buff Frog finished with "Is charming, but fool. Walks the path of Ludo. Will only get fellow monsters killed."

Seemingly caught by surprise, Dipper looked up from his note writing to ask "Wait, I wore this costume for nothing?" in a genuinely distressed tone.

"Da, is not very good disguise. Also culturally insensitive."

While Dipper looked downcast at the answer, Star stepped forward a little and continued the conversation. "Buff Frog, I know this isn't an easy thing, but do you think you could show us where the weapons you're getting from this merchant are? We, we'll, we're hunting him because he might be a dangerous interdimensional criminal, and if he does too much business here I'm worried mom might just burn your whole town down."

"One condition, princess." Buff Frog responded, and Star nodded at him to go ahead and state. "I will help you, if you promise to remove his weapons and make so the merchant never returns." The princess seemed surprised by this turn of events, having been getting steadily more worried she might be at cross purposes with her friend on this matter. Evidently, Buff Frog could read her expression. "I know, is odd course for monster leader to try to disarm monsters. But war has lost its taste for me. The babies, my little ones... I must help create world of peace for them. Monsters like Swaffle, and the demon merchant... They are like Toffee, can see it in his one remaining eye. Everything they do plants seeds of war." Then, with a more casual, humorous tone, he added "Besides, in not too long, YOU will be queen, Star? Maybe we all be friends then, da? Prefer to wait it out, give peace a chance. Good odds this time."

Having his suspicions all but confirmed by Buff Frog's mention of 'one remaining eye,' Dipper stepped up with a fresh question, waiting for the monster to finish his speech by using a nearby stick to sketch a drawing in the dirt: A basic triangle with a single open eye. "One last question..." He spoke up, getting the attention of both Star and Buff Frog. "Do you recognize this at all?"

"Da. Is popular new tattoo in town." Buff Frog responded dismissively, causing Dipper's blood to run cold. "Could never see appeal myself."

"Has anyone who has gotten this tattoo done anything... unusual, recently? Does this Swaffle character have one?" Dipper asked, more direct and inquisitive this time. After a moment of thought, he abruptly scratched out the eye of the recreation of Bill he had made in the sand.

"Swaffle... is hard to tell. Am not certain yes or no." Buff Frog responded quickly, but lingered a bit before addressing the second half of the question. After looking sideways at Star, who was giving him wide, curious, and a little worried eyes, he let out a sigh and elaborated. "Sent one with prominent tattoo through portal recently, very on face. Had tattoo around own eye to complete effect. Only scout to not come back."
"And what were you sending scouts into interdimensional portals for?" Dipper asked, outright accusingly now. Memories of himself and his sister being attacked in the woods by an inhuman figure with Bill tattooed onto their hooded face flooded him, but he pushed those memories down and cooled his feelings off by thinking to how he and Ford had dissected the attacker after the struggle in the woods, how they'd meticulously disassembled them in the frigid, temperature controlled chamber deep underground. "The fruits of that experiment, the large amounts of data we were able to tune the dimensional scanner with, are what brought us to Mewi. Is this guy secretly a servant of Bill?"

The boy's suspicions were not helped by how hesitant to reply Buff Frog was to answer, but caught between Dipper's fierce glare and Star's big, imploring eyes, he eventually gave in, and explained things with a sigh. "Scouts are to... find new home for monsters." With a sad glance at Star, Buff Frog removed his own pair of dimensional scissors from his pocket and looked at them longingly. "Do not be mistaken Princess. I still have great hopes for your time. But, should things go wrong before then... we must be prepared."

While Star just looked downcast at this announcement, Dipper gazed at the pair of scissors with a look of wonder and dread in his eyes. Focusing his attention on Buff Frog, Dipper looked the monster right in the eyes, and spoke with the most grim tone to his voice. "You cannot allow Bill... the merchant, that is, to get his hands on these. I have a strong feeling he already knows they exist."

Looking down at Dipper, Buff Frog felt like he wanted to shiver when he experienced how deep and powerful the human's tone and expression was when he announced that. Instead of shivering though, the monster simply nodded his head. "Da, is good. They will never leave my person." Then, with a lighter expression, he turned to Star. "So, is princess and her new earth boy ready to investigate?"

A short while later, Buff Frog was leading Star and Dipper (The princess had ditched the monster costume completely, while the apprentice had left the head behind and ripped it in places straightening his posture, but otherwise figured his costume would take too long to climb out of) towards a little, out of the way hut on the lower section of the village. Despite Dipper's reluctance to just walk around like this, several of the monsters waved happily at Star as she walked by. The boy simply kept sweeping his steely gaze around the passing monsters in search of Bill tattoos.

When the circumstantial monster leader threw the door to the building open, it was swiftly revealed to be a poorly maintained tavern. Fortunately for the three, it was sparsely occupied at the moment: Just a few habitual barflies (one of which was an actual humanoid fly) completely blind to the outside world by their drinking problems while a bored looking barkeep endlessly wiped the counter with a dirty rag. Buff Frog gestures towards a corner staircase while he went up to the counter to talk to the barkeep, and persuade him to keep quiet about this visit.

The two teenagers were down the stairs in moments, blocked in place by a locked door. Star's first reaction was to whip out her wand and get ready to blast it down, but after a quick flashback of the day's events, wondered if perhaps Dipper had a more subtle solution? When the princess glanced to the side, the apprentice simply gave her a negative shake of the head, so with a big grin Star blasted the door in. When both stumbled through the now unblocked portal, Dipper let out a low whistle at what they had found.

"Yep, Bill has been doing business with these people." the boy remarked while drawing his hands back into the costume to rummage around for something. Star meanwhile stepped around the cellar, examining everything at length: Rifles were stored up against the walls in racks while the sidearms were laid out on a table in the corner of the room and a single mortar weapon was in the middle of the room. The ammunition and hand grenades were meanwhile stored in green metal boxes scattered around the room. "Look at that, they've even got sniper rifles now." Dipper commented while
checking to see if the weapon was loaded. "Well, these guys are officially more responsible gun owners than Bill at least."

Star seemed troubled by the collection of advanced weaponry stored down in the cellar, but her concentration was abruptly shifted when she heard Buff Frog’s thickly accented voice yelling something through the floorboards, though it was too muffled to make out the exacts. The princess had been planning to say something to the boy as he was crouched down by the artillery piece, but instead yelped "Oh no, they're onto us!" and grabbed him by the back of the costume before rushing up the stairs back to the bar. When the princess reached the ground floor however, she stopped in her tracks.

A crowd of monsters had filled out the bar, completely blocking the space between the cellar stairs and the doorway. Two particularly strong monsters were holding Buff Frog down against the bar, while at the center of the crowd stood an individual the two could only assume was Swaffle: He carried himself with the air of a commander, a tall avian humanoid whose splendidly colored arm feathers stretched low enough to resemble a cape when his arms were folded. Sitting above his sizable beak mouth and sharp eyes was a shiny red gemstone that seemed to grow from the forehead, almost blending in with the mangy red plumage that covered his head. The feathers of this fierce looking bird-man withered in some spots on his arms, revealing unsightly boils bubbling up from the lower skin.

"Soooo, the traitor has finally revealed himself, and delivered the Princess of Mewni and her magic wand to my clutches!" The monster leader announced confidently. Star got into a defensive position while Dipper eyed the room and felt his blood go cold: A lot of the monsters in the room had Bill tattoos scattered about their bodies, and the ones who didn't flaunt it had clothing over places it could conceivably be hidden. "Once I have seized the Royal Wand in the name of monster-kind, nothing will be able to stop me!"

"So, who are you supposed to be then, Ludo's understudy?" Star asked somewhat warily. She wasn't as gung-ho about beating up monsters these days as she was before, but this whole situation seemed like an increasingly inescapable battle.

"Who are YOU supposed to be!?" The monster leader shouted back, a bit of chirp to his voice. "Well, wouldn't you like to know..."

"Yes, I genuinely would." Star replied with complete sincerity, cutting off the rant the avian was building up to, which was cut off again when Dipper added in "Actually, I'd appreciate being brought up to speed as well." in a significantly more sarcastic tone.

"ENOUGH!" They yelled petulantly, stomping a foot against the floor. "I am Swaffle! The new leader of the monster army, and NOTHING like that stupid runt Ludo!" He explained, practically spitting the name of his predecessor. "He ruined everything!" taking on a ranting tone of voice. "Things were the easiest for monster kind that they had been for generations, falling right into his fat little lap! The Mewmans didn't think we were a threat, and with him charge we weren't! But then, he just had to go and waste everything on a disastrous attack on the capital!"

Both Star and Dipper dropped their guards slightly as they listened to the monster leader, while Buff Frog just rolled his eyes, having clearly heard all of this before. "Now, the attack has failed and we have nothing to gain for it! Nothing but retaliations, purges, massacres! The mewmans will take revenge for the invasion of their royal city, but we're not going to take it lying down, not with the new tools at our disposal! This time, before the Mewmans can invade the realm of monsters, we will exterminate them first, with the power of our new weapons!"

"Look, I can sympathize with what you're doing here, really. For the record I'm not a mewman by
the way.” Dipper began to explain, his eyes rapidly scanning the entire bar. "But a higher power than this conflict is using you as a pawn. Your weapons dealer is not what he seems and is leading you to disaster. We're willing to help you, but you need to back down." Even as the boy spoke, his town wavered as he realized how weak his own argument sounded.

"New earth boy is right Swaffle." Buff Frog spoke up, even as his head was shoved further into the counter top. "Magic wand will always defeat monsters. We must seek peace."

"Peace will be unnecessary... once I have the royal family's prized possession in MY right hand... and an AK-47 in the other!" Swaffle responded, clearly not buying any of this for a moment. "Monsters... GET THE WAND!"

Everyone in the building seemed to snap into action at the same moment, even the bartender sinking beneath his own counter. Star jumped straight into action, old muscles warming right back up like she'd never stopped running and punching all over the Diaz family backyard. She instantly opened the fight by jumping onto a table, and jumping from there into a flying, screaming jump kick into a monster's face, off which she pivot jumped to land on another grasping enemy. Star Butterfly couldn't help but grin, the rebel princess was back in action!

Dipper, on the other hand, was having significantly less fun. He'd instantly had to duck a punch from a burly beast man twice his size, and when he tried to retaliate by slugging it in the exposed gut, the only thing that ended up in pain was the human's knuckles. "What are you even made off!?" He demanded to know, but further yelling was cut off when the monster grabbed the human by the neck and slammed him onto the bar counter, sending sharp pain shooting through his back. Squirming and panting in place, Dipper blindly reached past his head and earned a narrow escape when his grip clenched on a wooden flagon, then smashed it against the monster's skull over and over again, until the cup splintered into wood fragments and the monster's skull began to leak a thin trail of blood.

As the monster withdrew, Dipper dropped to his feet and reached his left hand down to his left traveling boot, and quickly produced a survival knife out of the footwear. With a violent yell, the teenager rushed towards one of the monsters holding Buff Frog down and sunk the sharp blade into their shoulder. The burly bouncer instantly withdrew in pain, trying to reach his shoulder to withdraw the leaking blade but finding that difficult to do with his strong, swollen, and short arms. His partner took one look at the crazy human who was reaching into his other boot for seemingly another knife, yelled "I'M OUTTA HERE!" and jumped out a nearby window, letting Buff Frog stand up free.

"HE THREATENED MY BABIES!" Buff Frog yelled as soon as he face was pulled away from the counter top, leaving behind a large slime spot as he mucus covered face separated with a pop. In an instant, the thickly accented monster leader charged straight out the door, barreling over anyone who got in his path and leaving Dipper to unfortunately fight alone.

Luckily, Star seemed to have the attention of most of the monsters tied down, easily jumping and cartwheeling around their muscular forms, firing off spells while their boss ineffectually hurled abuse from the sidelines. "Just like the good ol' days!" Star thought to herself, taking the brief moment to enjoy the faded but familiar adrenaline rush. Acting on comparatively new instincts, she trapped a monster flying at her with a jumping kick in a levitation spell and hurled him across the room in Dipper's direction, just knowing on some choreographed fighting level that he'd jump up and spin kick the monster to send him flying like a pinball, not even skipping a beat before resuming the karate chop he was using to drop monsters in one blow.

Instead, Dipper was desperately trying to beat down a sturdy, bear-like monster with one of the bar's wooden chairs, only keeping the fighter on his knees by repeatedly smashing the furniture against its
thick skull, as savagely as possible. He barely saw the thrown monster coming at him at the last second, and barely ducked out of the way in order for the other bar fighter to sail overhead and smash through a nearby window. The monster Dipper had been fighting took the opportunity to tower over the human and roar with blood lust, raising a razor sharp paw for a swipe that could conceivably have taken his head off, had Dipper not risen from the ground while swinging the chair from the floor, into the monster's chin. The hard impact against the bottom of the face sent the creature stumbling onto its back. "WATCH OUT STAR!" He screamed in momentary, white hot frustration, before channeling that anger into several more brutal swings of the chair against the monster's now vulnerable stomach, only stopping when it began to sputter up blood and curled up helplessly.

With a bit of a inner groan, Star couldn't help but think to herself "Marco would have handled that with a bunch more style" only to suffer for her momentary distraction when a muscular monster fist socked her in the stomach, briefly knocking the wind of the princess. This in turn allowed the same monster to grab Star by the neck, lift her up and slam her into a bar table, the cheap wood shattering on impact. "Ugh... don't gimme the death burrito." She muttered to herself as her senses rushed back, just in time to let her process a monster with giant spiked spheres for hands was raising one of said spheres as high up as possible to slam down on her, in an impact that would surely reduce her to a bloody smear. "NARWHAL BLAST!"

"Get UP already! We've got them on the ropes!" Swaffle was yelling at the large number of monsters who were still getting up after Buff Frog had bowled them over, most rubbing their aching heads. "Look at you all, you even get off the floor like losers! ...DO YOU GUYS SMELL SMOKE!?" The monster leader had abruptly caught an unexpected smell, and yelled his question loud enough for the whole bar to hear.

"I can... UH, GUUGHHH!" Dipper tried to speak up, but seeing as a new monster had picked him up by the neck, slammed him into a wall and was currently trying to strangle him, it was rather hard for the boy to get across what he meant. In the end, he resorted to slapping against the wall with his palm, which prompted Swaffle to prompt the monster to stop choking him, but still hold the boy in place. After a couple of deep, gasping breaths, Dipper pointed across the room to the cellar stairway, down which a bright fire was providing distant illumination. "Thermite charge, courtesy of Stanford Pines! Your stockpile is going down in flames!" The apprentice declared in a dashing tone of voice, before uncertainty set over him. "Do you, uh, know who that is, has Bill told you, otherwise that doesn't mean a lot I know..."

With a mortified expression on his face, Swaffle stuttered for a moment before turning tail and running for the exit, a few loose, colorful feathers floating behind him. "FOR THE RECORD I'M NOT RUNNING AWAY, I'M JUST GETTING THE FIREFIGHTERS!" he screamed as he passed. Back at the wall, Dipper and his strangler looked back at each other after the guy they were both following fled the coup, the monster with confusion and Dipper with some degree of sympathy.

"Tough boss, huh?" Dipper remarked with a regretful tone of voice, and when the monster nodded yes, his expression got even more apologetic. "Sorry to hear that." He remarked, before he took advantage of the monster's dropped guard to slide his second boot knife out of his sleeve, raise it up, and jam it straight into his strangler's left eye! Dropped to the floor while his assailant screamed in pain, Dipper crawled away between his legs on all fours.

"Alright, this is probably the most trouble I've ever had with a crowd of monsters." Star thought to herself with a mild tone of worry as she narrowly avoided another swing of the fists. With their boss gone the monster crowd seemed to be doing better in their attempts to catch the princess, getting within hairs width of a grab on several occasions, and it was growing on Star that she had absolutely no fight synchronization with her current dance partner. Still though, she'd already knocked a bunch
of them down, and the remaining ones hadn't caught her again yet. After drop-kicking one monster into three more to create a sore pile of muscle, Star finished that one off with a shout of "RASPBERRY PANZERFAUST!" and a floor clearing explosion. Glancing to her side, she saw that Dipper had meanwhile managed to use the bar's collection of alcohol to set a different monster on fire, and was currently viciously and literally kicking him while he down and trying to complete the third step of stop, drop, and roll. Even with her love of fighting, Star couldn't help but wince at how much pain that three eyes potato monster seemed to be in.

Seeking to maintain her advantage, Star shifted to a more defensive fighting style, going from jumping and flipping around the room to keeping her back clear of threats and throwing spells towards the crowd of monsters. "This might be less exciting, but if I can't count on Dipper to watch my back then I shouldn't overextend during this fight," Star thought to herself with a small chill down her spine. The dizzying storm of rainbows, cupcakes, crystal heart daggers and other colorful magical ordinance slowly whittled down the monsters' numbers while the liberating rush of combat Star had been feeling slowly shifted to a sort of stiff, worried tension. Inside her head, she hurriedly tried to calculate if she was taking them out fast enough.

On the other side of the bar, Dipper was doing similar mental math, watching the crowd of monsters get closer to the princess faster than Star could knock them down. "STAR!" He yelled out, trying to rush across the room to join her with a fresh chair in hand, but lost the improvised weapon and fell on his face when a sharp claw belonging to a downed monster pinched shut across his angle. Dipper let out of scream of pain at the connection, and for a flash of sapient thought was scared the monster was going snap his foot off completely, his last thought before the animals instincts took over. Rolling over despite the sharp pain it caused him, Dipper slammed the metal reinforced hiking boot of his free foot straight into the face of the nephropoidean humanoid with all his might, and continued to jam it over and over even as chitin cracked and eyestalks bent out of shape, not stopping until he was free.

Star, on the other hand, had a confident grin on her face by this point. While her back was approaching a wall, there were only four monsters in front of her at this point, and after letting the lead one get a Narwhal Blast to the face, the remaining three were looking a lost less confident. The newly appointed point man of the group, a giraffe looking humanoid, actually stopped for a moment to look their opponent in the eyes. Star managed to make herself look even more confident then she actually felt, and flashed him a predatory, toothy grin for good measure.

"Oh spack this!" The lead monster groaned before spinning on his heels and fleeing for the door. The two remaining monsters shot each other a swift look before joining their comrade in fleeing the building. That would have been the end of it, had Dipper not suddenly limped into frame and smashed a broken off chair leg into the long, vulnerable neck of the giraffe monster, sending him to the floor clutching the crushed section of windpipe while the other two ran past him and out the door. "WE'LL SEND YOU A GET WELL CARD!" One of them shouted back halfheartedly.

Dipper didn't seem to even notice the two running past him as he lifted his chair leg over his head to take another swing at the monster, prompting Star to rush forward and talk him down. "Dipper, DIPPER! Slow down dude, I think you got him!" She said quickly, and to her credit, her words did reach the earth boy, who first locked his arm up stiff instead of slamming it down, then gradually relaxed and dropped the chair leg after scanning the bar and confirming all the monsters had either fled the fight, limped away after being knocked down, or were limply sprawled on the floor, breathing shallowly and out of commission for the immediate future.

Speaking in-between pants, the apprentice removed his hat to wipe the sweat off his forehead before addressing the princess. "Huh, right, sorry about that. Well, looks like we won, huh? Score 1 for Team Star and Dipper!"
"Yeah, looks like we did. Mission accomplished." The princess responded, giving an uneasy smile with the statement. As much as she was happy that they'd won the fight, something about this aftermath was troubling. "Not bad, but not what I expected when I jumped into action a minute ago." Star thought to herself. "Normally in the aftermath of one of this big, tag team monster brawls I feel pleasantly worked out, good sore, warm inside, eagerly hungry, and closer than ever to... my teammate. This just feels... off. I'm still glad we won, but I don't feel all that warm this time and... I sorta feel bad for some of these guys. That one monster has burns on most of his body! Monster fighting should be for fun..." Despite these misgivings, Star kept up her pleasant front to Dipper. "None of this is HIS fault after all..."

Further words from the Butterfly princess about how they should go get Buff Frog were cut off by sarcastic clapping coming from the entrance to the bar. Swaffle was standing there now, seemingly alone and with an insufferably smug look on his face. "Well, well, well..." he intoned in time with his claps. "Looks like you've managed to best the w, WOAH!"

The avian's villainous monologue had been cut off by his sudden need to duck under a bottle Dipper had hurled straight for his head. "Nice throw." Star complemented without missing a beat.

"Thanks." Dipper replied while carefully stepping backwards, to get him close enough to another bottle to try again.

"You know what? FINE!" Swaffle yelled in a huffy tone of voice. "You know I HAD a whole speech prepared, but fine, we'll jump straight to the part where you two die and I get what I want!" Stepping to the side, Swaffle revealed that a tall, deceptively strong for how lankily built he was, lizard like humanoid, with a long and narrow snout that ended with a bump, sharp teeth glittering all the way down and light tan colored scales, all gleaming in the sunlight behind his back. "Princess, Earth Kid, meet Septarian. Septarian, meet Princess and Earth Kid. Come talk to me when you have the wand bye!"

Dipper watched the monster leader scurry off before the new henchman in front of them leaned his torso forward and crossed his arms over his chest, like he was reeling in stomach pain, before snapping his torso so far back that the upper body was almost parallel to the floor, despite the legs only crunching a little bit. His claws arms had ripped apart the monster's shirt when he snapped backwards, flinging away the material before bending at the elbows to point right to the sky while the monster himself let out a high pitched, ferocious reptilian shriek.

"So, I'm guessing from the look on your face this guy is gonna be a cut above the others?" Dipper asked while his eyes jumped back and forth from the Septarian and the princess.

"Yeah, we might be in trouble. This kind of monster can heal themselves crazy fast, we'll need to..." Star responded, but midway through her second sentence the bar exploded with noise, loud, consecutive blasting noises that left everyone's ears ringing. The Septarian had snapped back to an upright posture just in time for his left eye to explode in a bloody, scale spewing mess. Similar fleshy explosions occurred all over the reptilian's body, a chip blowing off his snout, a ventilating chunk pierced into the throat, four holes blasting through his bare chest, and a kneecap exploding.

The cacophony ended as swiftly as it came, and after shaking her head to try and banish the ringing from it Star looked to the side to see Dipper discarding one of the pistols she'd seen stored downstairs. The princess knew enough about Dipper at this point to just presume he'd pilfered it while they were down there, for all the good it ended up doing: The Septarian had grown his eye back before the human had gotten done shooting. "Right, didn't want to just shoot carelessly in a crowded environment, but now it's time to throw caution to the wind."

"Star?" Dipper asked cautiously. The fire was beginning to climb the stairs now, the metallic scent of
burning beginning to fill the air as the monster primed itself to strike.

"Yes Dipper?"

"I don't suppose fire and acid can turn this regeneration off?"

"I'm sure it would have come up in my life if that was true."

"Right then." Dipper said with a sigh, bracing himself and hopping in place to stretch out. "Do you have a spell you think could confuse him?"

"Uh, yes?"

"Then now would be a good time to use it!" Dipper yelled out, charging straight forward as the the Septarian took off and charged the two himself. Star was briefly struck by surprise, but felt a surge of excitement rush her body as she saw the earth boy gallivant into action!

"One thing that bothers me most in life is that I'll never see that awesome moment where Marco punched a hole in Toffee in person, but maybe this can be a good second!" Star thought to herself, before twirling her wand up, striking a pose with the outstretched arm holding the glowing magical object in the lizard's direction. "JELLYBEAN HALLUCINATION MIST!"

The puff of vapor struck the Septarian moments before Dipper did, and it was obvious the hallucinations he was suddenly suffering had more to do with him almost tumbling onto his back than the snout punch the earth boy delivered. Instead however, the monster bruise managed to tackle his opponent and the two rolled around on the floor in a scrappy brawl. Dipper was blatantly overpowered here, but kept his throat from being ripped out by wrapping his hand around the Septarian's snout and holding it closed. His other hand was a blur, rapidly batting away the claws of his opponent and ineffectually punching him all over his body. Star was forced to just watch as the two struggled across the floor, too tightly entangled for her to intercede safely.

Finally, Dipper managed to knee the Septarian in the groin and disengage from the melee, rolling across the floor towards the exit and getting back to his feet. "Thaaaat... was a lot less awesome than I had hoped..." The princess privately thought to herself, but perked up when she heard the boy yell "Star! The fire! Over here!" and realized the flames were spreading to the surface floor now and jogged over to the entrance, to stand besides Dipper.

"Clever little bugs, think you can smoke me out then?" The Septarian spoke as the smell of smoke cleared his senses. As the monster stood up to his full height, it was obvious the rolling brawl had done very little damage to him, while Dipper was clawed in a few places, though it was nothing grievous for the moment. "Nothing can kill a warrior of Septaria!"

"Okay, whatever that was supposed to be, it didn't work." Star responded bluntly, raising her wand as it hummed with power. "Time to get blasty."

"On the contrary Star, your spell worked perfectly!" Dipper responded, with a level of confidence that could be described as extreme when coming from someone who just survived an alligator attack. Both other people in the room seemed confused by this sudden change of attitude, and as Dipper raised up a hand dramatically, both realized his pinky finger had a string tied to it. He suddenly wrenched the hand as far back behind him as possible, while then yelling "But I agree about it being blasting time!"

The princess and the monster both suddenly followed the string from Dipper's finger to the Septarian's body, though the monster figured things out first: The string was connected to a grenade
pin, while the grenade was attached to the monster's front belt! Dipper had stuck it onto the monster during their jellybean mist colored fight across the floor! Acting fast, the monster snatched the miniature bomb off his waist and chucked it out the nearest window in the blink of an eye! "A proud warrior of Septaria would never be defeated by some insect trick!"

By the time the Septarian had said that however, Dipper had already grabbed Star by the wrist and was running for the door while dragging her behind him. Over his shoulder, the boy yelled "As if I'd try pulling something so paltry! This one comes STRAIGHT FROM NEW JERSEY!"

A sudden gleam in the air caught the monster's attention, and instantly his eyes widened in surprise while darting towards the thrown away explosive, managing to spot that it had several more strings tied to its body. Then, when it had flown far enough away, the monster's eyes widened even farther when he saw the ends of those strings had more grenade pins tied to them! "HOW DID YOU...!?"

Acting from panic, the monster twisted his head far enough back to look straight at his lower back body, an angle that would have broken the neck of a species without Septarian durability and regeneration. His worst fears were swiftly confirmed: More of the earth devices were attached all of his pants, some hung on the back section of his belt and others pinned to his pant legs. The Septarian tried to bend his arms backwards far enough to throw them away as well, but it was too late: They all detonated before he could snap even one off his belt.

Outside the building, the shock-wave knocked Star and Dipper to the ground, a harsh landing salvaged only by the fact that they were already diving for cover. The fire licked at their backs as flaming debris were thrown from the bar in every direction and everything inside was incinerated. After laying on the ground for a few moments, regaining their senses, the two helped each other up before taking a long, mutual stare and the blasted out and still burning down monster bar. Both were quiet for a moment, Dipper because he was breathing heavily and Star because she didn't know what to say.

"What... what did you just DO!?!" The princess was finally able to ask, her tone a mix of admiring, confused, and a little freaked out. "Okay, this fight has officially escalated far past the point of being a fun nostalgic romp."

"Just a bit of Earth magic." Dipper replied dismissively. "A little sleight of hand plus some high explosives I pilfered from the basement. Now, we should go try and find your friend, he mentioned something about his babies being in danger." Then, with a more serious tone, he added "Plus, I think we need to ask him some questions at length. Something about what he said doesn't match up with what your mom had told us yesterday."

Star seemed surprised by Dipper's conclusion, but upon scanning her memories zeroed in what he meant. "Do you mean... when Buff Frog mentioned Lucitor merchants meeting with Ludo? Mom said that those kinds of renegades were rare, but he described it like it happened all the time!"

"Exactly. Feels like there's a bigger game going on here, and Bill is going to be at the center of it." Dipper concluded, and was about to say more when a pained reptile howl split the air. Both teenagers instantly turned their attention away from each other to the entrance to the bar. A raging fire was in full force inside, but of even greater threat was the Septarian slowly limping his way towards the two.

The grenades had obviously done a fine job on him, even if they hadn't killed: The monster was a stick figure in the shape of a biped at this point, massive chunks of muscular, scale covered flesh blown away by the detonation. Bone was visible in numerous places and it seemed like the creature could barely stand on stickly legs, while its head was a pulsating stump. Despite all that, it was still advancing towards the two, refusing to yet die, and regrowing muscle mass and protective scales at
an alarming rate.

Star was instantly on her feet and charging her wand to give it another blasting, but Dipper motioned her to stop by holding up a hand and yelling "Star, wait!" The princess heard his words and froze in position, waiting to hear what he said. Despite the fact that the boy from earth had a sort of forced blank expression that anyone who knew him could tell you indicated he'd been caught flat footed and without a plan, Dipper still managed to speak with some certainty when he said "I don't think more blasting is going to help us. It's already taken a bunch of grenades point blank, and besides: If you set off another bomb in that bar I'm worried it might be obliterated completely, sending the flaming debris all over town and potentially setting more buildings on fire, and I'm sure you don't want that as much as I don't."

The royal wand dimmed as Star took his advice to heart, glancing around to see that the once busy streets had been cleared, and the few monsters she could catch sight of, besides the Septarian, whose hobbling pace gave them plenty of time to talk, looked incredibly frightened by the sudden series of events. "Okay, so, you got a better plan?"

"...Yes." Dipper said with steadily growing confidence after a few moments of nervous silence. "It's all I can come up with at the moment, but... yes! Yes, this will work!"

"Okay Star!" The earth boy spoke up, putting on an air of confidence that was barely holding back his panic. "This is gonna get tricky, so before anything happens, you need to promise me you'll follow my moves exactly once I give the signal!"

"Uhhh, okay?" Star asked, increasingly confused and uncertain of this plan's validity. "What do you have in mind Dipper?"

"The perfect move for this situation!" He replied confidently. "I think it's time to use The Pines Family Secret Technique!"

This instantly seemed to pique Star's interest and curiosity. "You guys have a secret family technique?" She asked with genuine wonder in her voice as her eyes widened.

"YES!" Dipper replied all the more confidently, even as the Septarian was lurching closer and closer. "It's a special technique passed down to me by my great uncle, for use in the trickiest situations!" He explained, causing Star to take a passing glance at her wand before looking back at Dipper, an enthusiastic smile on her face now. "Remember, you need to copy my moves exactly! Are you ready Star?"

"Ready Dipper!" The princess responded excitedly, trying to take the same posture the boy was holding as she stood right next to him. "Let it rip!"

The air between them was silent for a moment, and inside Dipper's mind, the boy was prodding at the wall of false confidence he'd built up to keep his fears and panic dammed up. When that shattered and the emotions washed over him, he used the energy of those feelings to spring into action!

"RUN AWAY!"

"WHU!?" Star spat in confusion as Dipper abruptly spun around on his heels and began running full force the opposite direction of the Septarian, his action completely surprising her. None the less, she remembered what he'd instructed her to do, and took off right after him. It took a bit of all fours running to catch up, but soon enough Star was jogging right besides the earth boy, the two communicating inbetween pants. "Wah, okay, warn me if the plan is, huff, run away next time!" Star yelled back before asking "So, how far do we need to run before you can drop whatever super secret
family spell you don't want to use inside the village?"

"There is... huff!... no secret spell!" Dipper yelled back, wind whipping at his face as he was driven by panic, arms pumping up and down besides him as he ran. "Grunkle Stan always taught me, uff, if you're in a fight you can't win, steal everything valuable and run away!"

"WHAT KIND OF SECRET TECHNIQUE IS THAT!?" Star yelled back, frustration boiling over.

"One that keeps, huff, me alive, that's what!" Dipper yelled back at her. "What, you think I'm, huff, stupid enough to fight that thing with my bare hands!"

"I was kinda hoping so, yes!"

"Whatever! Just keep running until we're outside the village, then we'll try your plan of blasting it again!" Dipper said back, frustration clear in his voice. However, as he began to examine his environment, a new plan began to cook in his mind. "Actually..."

Behind the two, the Septarian had regenerated to the point it could pursue them at full pace, even if a few prominent flesh chunks needed regrowing, including a section of his head. There scent was fresh in his nostrils, and the hunter was in full force.

"I definitely need to demand Swaffle pay me more when this is all over." The Septarian, whose real name has actually been Henry this entire time, thought to himself as he carried out the pursuit. "It's been an easy gig so far, hang out looking all... Septarian to give his monster movement a little prestige, works the muscles for the crowds, show off a little regeneration from time to time... sure I'm glorified political eye candy, but it's a steady gig. Lots of worse ways to make less money."

"But now... if I can bag these two after they sent Swaffle himself running in fear, maybe I can negotiate enough of a bonus that I can finally add that extra bathroom to my house like I always wanted." He thought to himself in an extremely casual manner despite now bounding across the open ground outside the village in full pursuit. "That'd be nice."

The trail finally came to an end at the base of the dam the monster village was built down river from. "Looks like the two Mewmans ran themselves into a little corner. Okay Henry, let's make this quick."

"Well well well little bugs, looks like you're back against a wall." Henry began to speak, deliberately putting on the grandiose airs Swaffle had coached him on. "Surrender the magic wand, and perhaps I'll let you live!"

"You want the wand scalie!?" Star shouted, raising the instrument of magic up to where Henry could see it. "Something doesn't seem right about it... Did I get something in my eyes when I regenerated them?" Any further thoughts were cut off when the princess finished her statement.

"THEN IT'S YOURS!" She shouted, before cocking her right arm back like she was about to hurl the wand to him, causing all previous thoughts to abandon Henry as he primed himself to catch her throw! "I can't believe it was so easy!"

However, when Star's arm snapped forward, she didn't release the wand. Instead, the swing of motion finally let Henry get a close look at what was different about the wand: The body of, the round section above the handle, had purple, thorn covered vines growing out if it and scattering to the floor of the dry canyon. When Star whipped the wand about without releasing it, and screamed out "HERMIT VINE DISCONNECT!" the section of vine growing out of the wand snapped loose and hurled towards the Septarian instead, and since he'd braced himself to make the catch, he had no
"GUAAGGHH!" Henry screamed out as the surprisingly sharp magical thorns dug into his scaled flesh, piercing through still tender, newly regrown body parts. "They've buried into me!" He screamed in his head while trying to pluck one loose, to no avail. "My own invincible flesh... it's regenerating over the injuries caused by the thorns, resulting in the thorns being buried under my skin! I CAN'T GET THEM OUT!" Letting out another wail of pain, the Septarian yelled at the two again "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?!"

This time, the boy stepped up to respond. "We're gonna test the limits of your regeneration, as a matter of fact." He explained borderline smugly at the prospect of having outsmarted such a resilient foe. "You can regrow impressive sections of your biology on the fly, which I assume is accomplished at least partially through innate magic! However, it still seems to be based in the biological process of growth, and growth..." He lectured, while pulling out a small object from inside his vest while Star cut open a dimensional portal. "...Needs oxygen."

With a tap of his thumb, Dipper set off the explosives Doctor Goodwell had rigged the dam with so long ago, subjecting the valley to a flash flood as he and Star jumped through the portal.

Now panicking, Henry instantly tried to jump to the canyon walls, hoping he could climb faster than the water could rise. However, his attempt at movement simply caused deep rooted pain to spike up all over his body as it refused to move. "THE VINES!" he screamed aloud, then let out another wail of despair after visually following each one to where they'd been planted when Star first cast the spell: Anchored into rocks, the canyon floor and its wall. All sufficiently deep enough that they didn't budge no matter how hard Henry pulled.

He was still screaming and panicking when the water hit him shortly after. He continued to scream inside his mind after being fully submerged, in a state of fruitless agony as he felt his lungs and other biological systems give out from lack of oxygen before growing back just to die again due to his Septarian physiology. One of Henry's last conscious thoughts, before even his decentralized nervous system fell into this cycle of living and dying, was a simple rumination of his state, his body no longer functional enough to support something as unhelpful as panic:

"I'm going to be down here for quite some time."

Back in the monster village, the two humans popped back to the village as swiftly as possible, having taken a Quest Buy smash and grab interdimensional shortcut. Between Star's magic, Buff Frog's rallying, Dipper's copious collection of stolen tape and seal products, the strength of the monsters and even a little unexpected help from Jelly Goodwell, a new dam was built just in time at the edge of the canyon, stopping the water flow in its tracks and leaving the canyon flooded.

The happy celebration of this success came to a sudden stop when the old newman woman abruptly ripped off all her clothes and started rolling around in mud while screaming a number of well-meaning but racially insensitive comments. All the monsters awkwardly shuffled away at that point, mood deflated, allowing Star and Dipper to speak with Buff Frog and his baby stroller full of children. The mood rose again when Star decided to make Buff Frog the new monster expert, a great step forward for Mewni, but deflated again when it was revealed she'd accidentally stabbed Buff Frog, and was ruined completely when Dipper noted they had some unwanted company.

Swaffle and his few remaining henchmen were advancing on the group, looking quite perturbed. "Well, well, well, I hate to be the one to spoil your fun, Princess Butterfly, but this is the end for you, the end for your little earth boy, and the end of your traitor! Prepare to... hey... HEY! WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING!?" The monster leader's suave demeanor broke into petulant yelling and foot stomping as the princess ignored him completely and cut a portal open for everyone
else to file through, leaving him behind to rant in the dust. "THIS ISN'T OVER YET!"

When she brought her friends back to the palace, things became a bit of a blur for Star Butterfly, and for the moment, she preferred it that way. The first thing she tried to do was reach out to her mother, but apparently the queen was still busy speaking with Ford and the Magical Commission. Then, she tried to distract herself by acting the royal host to Buff Frog, shuffling him past shocked looking Mewmans and into a set of quarters close to the earthlings’ but that got done quickly, and Buff Frog soon requested to be left alone with his babies for awhile to explain this changing situation to them in private.

And so, Star was left with nothing else to do but either sit around waiting for her mother to become available, or reunite with her friends. Dipper had gone off to see how Pacifica was doing as soon as it became clear they couldn't speak to Queen Moon right away, and now Star felt like she'd be the weird one if she didn't rejoin them. Every step of hers was heavy however, as the events of the day, and her thoughts on them, could finally process for her.

"Dipper isn't Marco, Star." She thought to herself while trudging along the castle hallways, head hung low as the old feelings of longing began to fester in her again. "You spent the whole day hoping he'd act just like Marco while on this adventure, and he shot you down at every occasion. It's time to accept that. He doesn't sync up to you like Marco did, he doesn't have Marco's fighting skills, he's pretty commanding instead of being a gentle voice of reason, and to be honest he's kind of a destructive jerk."

"But I don't want to feel like this anymore!" Star groaned to herself in the empty hallway, her next few footsteps stampy with frustration. "Okay, so maybe he's not 100% exactly like Marco! He does have some similarities! He's an earth boy who plans a lot, is interested in magic and is really awkward socially despite actually being really cool inside. Maybe we could make something work?" She thought to herself, perking up slightly before becoming overcast again. "No, I've seen how he is around Pacifica..." she muttered to herself.

"C'mon, that can't stop Star Butterfly! They're not even dating! Sure, it LOOKS like they're two people who are crazy in love with each other, but if they were that deeply perfect for each other, they'd be openly dating, right!?" She argued with herself, but after a moment, came to a sobering answer. "I loved Marco that much, but I never was able to date him..."

"Only one way to solve this..." Star said with a sigh, before pushing open the door to the castle library. A short ways in, at a table covered in off the shelf books and recently made notes, sat Pacifica and Dipper, going over the large body of information the blond human had collected during her absence from today's adventure.

At least, that's what Pacifica was trying to do. Dipper didn't seem to be able to ask about anything except her current medical condition.

"...And you didn't have any dizzy spells during the day?" The was asking with concern.

"No, Dipper, like I said, I've been feeling surprisingly great all day." The girl responded. A glint of annoyance seemed to flicker through her words, but more obvious was how touched she was by Dipper's bottomless concern for her.

"Okay, but, just to be sure, no nose bleeds either? Because those can seem normal but are actually associated with..."

"Hey, Dipper?" Star cut in, to the other girl's private relief. "I hope I'm not interrupting, but I need to talk to Star for a minute."
"Ah, Star! Hello!" Pacifica spoke up suddenly. Focusing on the princess, her expression quickly fell for a moment while she held up a thick tome titled The Big Book Of Diplomatic No No's: How To Avoid Seeming Like A Stupid Jerk Around Armed People. "Are you aware that all your ancient historical tomes are written for children?" she asked dryly, before tossing the tome to the top of the giant pile of literature she'd managed to work through in one afternoon. With a more serious tone, she continued with "Of course Star, what's up?"

"Uh? Oh, sure, don't mind me, I'll just look at these notes for a bit until you're done. As long as you don't mind?"

With a cute nod, Pacifica gave Dipper the go ahead to look through her notes, and turned her attention fully to Star. "What's going on Star? Maybe you could tell me what actually happened during your trip out?"

"Uh, sure. Not here though, follow me!" Star replied, before hastily pulling Pacifica out of the library by her wrist, and not stopping until the two were on a secluded balcony. The sky had just started to turn orange in the distance, marking the end of another day on Mewni for the humans.

Pacifica was obviously a little weirded out Star had dragged her all the way here for a conversation, but tried to stay polite, albeit with a little bit of sass. "Wow Star, for a so called rebel princess you sure take the whole 'quiet in the library' thing seriously." She remarked teasingly.

Star however, didn't respond right away. She was looking at her feet and fidgeting with her hair a little, flowing blond locks concealing the faint red blush that had gotten on her face. Pacifica could instantly tell something was up with Star and offered a more compassionate tone. "Star? Are you alright?"

"Do you like Dipper?"

The abrupt question nearly bowled Pacifica off her feet and but a red blush onto her face in turn. "Wha... what!?!" She stuttered back, trying to look away from Star over her own shoulder, and with an angry expression forced on her face. "I mean, he's my friend, and all, so of course I like him, but what's..."

"No, I mean do you LIKE him like him, Pacifica!" Star asked more fervently this time, determined to know. "Do you love Dipper Pines!?!"

The girl from Earth was on the defensive now, feeling the intensity of the princess and her own buried feelings welling up all over her, lighting her face with a blush and making her tongue catch on her words. Chewing her lip a little, Pacifica felt a few drops of sweat trickle down her brow as she tried to keep it in, but when she finally had to speak again, could no longer contain the words she'd wanted to say for so long. "YES! YES, OKAY! I LOVE DIPPER PINES AND I'VE LOVED HIM FOR AWHILE NOW!" She yelled out, finally letting the truth loose before settling into an angry glare at Star. "What's it matter so much to you anyways? And don't you dare go running off and telling him, I know where you live princess!"

Star kept her head hung low for a silent minute, processing what had just happened. "Pacifica... I'm sorry I put you on the spot like that. I'm just... struggling with some feelings right now." She said, in a genuinely apologetic tone that managed to soften the human's expression. Soon after, Star looked up at her, bringing another question to bare. "If that's the case, why aren't you guys dating?"

"Oh wow, going right for the self-esteem then, are we Star?" Pacifica asked in an exaggeratedly mean voice to cover up how that had genuinely stung, before rubbing one warm and looking at her shoes with a troubled expression of her face. "Look it's... it's because Dipper doesn't deserve to be in
"Wow, that's a terrible thing to say." Is what popped into Star's head first things first, but when she opened her mouth she ended up saying, in an energetic tone of voice "So, can I date Dipper then?" 

"NO!" Pacifica yelled back, managing to sound scared and angry along with romantically distressed. The intensity of the denial actually made Star step back a little, as she tried to puzzle out what that meant. Luckily, the human blond was forthcoming with an explanation, greatly slowing down from her hasty outburst. "No, I mean, Dipper doesn't deserve to be in love with someone because he doesn't deserve to be burdened with that."

"Ooookay, not where I expected to hear. What are you talking about Pacifica, there's nothing in the way for you guys! No uncertain feelings, no third girl ready sweep in on a skateboard and... take... him... oh..." Star's argument died on her lips as it finally dawned on her. "Oh no, I'M the Jackie in this scenario!"

However, the Butterfly's stunned silence proved helpful to Pacifica, who was able to compose herself and then begin to explain. "I... I was taught, growing up, by my parents..." she began, little hints of pain getting into her voice. "That love was a weakness, a tool to be used. You dress yourself up so that men fall in love with you, then you use that to your advantage, wring them out for every last cent, then move on when needed. Never genuinely fall in love yourself, just use it to hurt people and get ahead in the world of the wealthy." She explained, then in a cold tone, added. "They were very insistent about making me learn this idea."

Star got a very deep frown on her face as Pacifica told part of the story with her words and most of it with her voice. "I mean, I'd know that she knew what it was like since I first really talked to her, but Pacifica... her parents sound awful! I thought my mom was demanding and overbearing, this girl sounds like she'd been raised by St. Olga herself! ...Whoever that actually is..."

"...And I know, now, that isn't right, that isn't what love actually is..." Pacifica admitted, beginning to get tears in her eyes. "...But I don't know anything else. I don't know how to love someone the right way, and if I ever tried to make my feelings known with him... I'd only end up hurting him. Hurting him in a way he's already been hurt before, and doesn't deserve to be hurt again."

With some teary eyes of her own, Star took a few steps forward and offered her human friend a hug, which Pacifica accepted after a moment of thought. It ended quickly enough, but both girls felt it had done its job, "Pacifica... look..." Star began, trying to be encouraging. "Maybe you don't know what real love is, but the fact that you know that what your parents tried to teach you to do isn't it tells me you're already better than the ruthless, rubber stamping, mindless legacy machine they tried to make you into." Then, with a small smile, she added "Besides, I can't think of anyone better for you to try and learn about love from than Dipper. He is really smart after all!"

"He really is." Pacifica said with a sniffl before looking up at her friend. "Thank you Star. But... what about you? I can tell that you, well... you know. And I feel like you'd make a great girlfriend too..."

Star was shocked to the core by this. What was Pacifica doing!? Was she genuinely trying to pass on Dipper, or... "No." Star thought to herself. "That's just the self-loathing talking."

Then, with a deep breath and a look straight into her recent friend's eye, Star Butterfly came to terms with herself.

"It's... no. My feelings for Dipper, are, they're... misplaced." Star began to explaining, running her hands over a strand of hair nervously. "Back when I was on Earth, I had a friend. A great friend, the
perfect friend! But, too late I realized, I wanted to be more than friends with him, but by then... it was
too late, for a lot of reasons. He's a lot like Dipper, in the important ways, but they're actually very
different from each other ultimately. I was... reckless. And careless. And stupid. As usual." Star said,
her tone getting heavier with each sentence as her posture sank. "I just wanted to jam Dipper into the
Marco shaped hole in my heart before I'd even gotten to know him, but now I see how much that
wouldn't have been right. For anyone." With the fakest smile the princess could push, she added
"You two are perfect for each other though!"

Still silent and obviously struggling, Pacifica turned her eyes towards her feet again, prompting Star
to speak once again. "Look, even if it doesn't work out, SOMEHOW, you need to come clean to
him and give this a try at least! Even if it fails and burns out, the pain from that can't be worse than
the pain of seeing your opportunity fly by and vanish forever!" She spoke in an unexpectedly stern
tone, every fiber of her being hoping Pacifica would understand her. "Believe me, I know from
experience!"

The two were quiet again for a little bit longer, neither really able to look at the other, before the last
piece put itself together in Pacifica's head. As her expression became more resolute, she said "Thank
you Star." then reached forward and gave the princess a comforting hug. As the two withdrew, their
eyes connected and the girl from earth made a very heartfelt vow. "I know this must be painful for
you Star, but I really can't thank you enough. I promise that me and Dipper will help you get through
your own emotional trouble, okay?"

Star nodded gratefully at this promise, but after a moment gave her friend a forced smile and
woodenly sarcastic tone of voice. "Yeah, that sounds great, I appreciate it Paz. But not right now!
Right now, you gotta go get your man!"

Laughing a little at Star's tone, Pacifica responded with "I guess I do." before making her way to the
door back into the castle. Before opening it and disappearing, she looked back and offered the
princess one last, sincere "Thank you."

Star returned with a dismissive wave of the hand and a "Don't mention it!" before the feeling of
being alone again really hit her. With a quiet sigh, she turned towards the sunset and set to work
putting her feelings in order enough to go face the new couple.

"Hey Dipper."

Startling somewhat, the boy looked up from his scrutinizing review of the mewman tome to look his
visitor in the eye. "Oh, hey Pacifica! Sorry, you startled me. Even in the quiet of this library I still
have my nose too deep in a book to notice something." He explained jokingly.

"Right." Pacifica responded with a small giggle, grabbing one of the chairs and setting it right next to
Dipper's before sitting down, so they were as close as possible. "Dipper... Mason..." She asked,
using the boy's real name, which he had shared with her in utmost confidence, only to instantly find
it tasting somewhat sour on her tongue and on the boy's own face. "Dipper... I have something I
need to ask you..." she said, her hand sliding up to entangle with his.

The Pines boy's mouth was completely dry at this point, he swiftly found himself overwhelmed by
whatever Pacifica was up to. "She... she used my real name for a second. What's happening!? Could
it be... NO!"

"...And, before you answer me, I am perfectly healthy and of sound mind!" The blond girl said a
little sharply, and based on the small flinch and guilty look it produced on Dipper's face, it had done
its job and made him take this as seriously as possible.
"Where do I even start!?!" Pacifica raged inside herself. "We've been friends for a long time... No, that's too sappy. Dipper, do you think I'm pretty? NO! That will just make me sound superficial! Dipper, more than anything, I want you to take me in your big strong arms and un WHERE DID THOSE THOUGHTS COME FROM!?!"

"DIPPER PINES I'VE LOVED YOU FOR AWHILE AND WANT TO BE YOUR GIRLFRIEND!"

As soon as she said it, Pacifica covered her own mouth while blushing incredibly bright red, a complexion that was mirrored on Dipper's face. The confession echoes through the silent library, and while that would normally be enough to embarrass the girl to death, Pacifica's long day among the tomes let her know that the royal library was completely empty save for the lone librarian and dusted over.

After a long bout of silence between them, Dipper wrapped his other hand around the two that Pacifica had previously connected together. "Paz..." he said, nervous stutter in his voice and a lot of sweat on his face. "I... I can... we can... try that... sure." Looking down at the desk and pulling his hat low, Dipper further explained that "I think... I've had similar feelings... about you."

"What." Pacifica asked bluntly, expression going into disbelief and the blush draining off her face. Her second hand came around and clamped on top of the mess that was now all of their hands together, and she looked straight at Dipper with a stern look of confused disbelief. "You... you've what?"

"I've... had feelings for you, too?" He responded hesitantly.

"For how long?"

"For... for awhile now."

"For. How. Long?"

"Probably since, uh... maybe about one year into my apprenticeship with Grunkle Ford? Maybe... maybe six months in?"

"..."

"Paz..."

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME SOONER!?!" Pacifica suddenly demanded to know. She wasn't angry or violent with Dipper, not in the traditional sense, but her voice had a lot of built up hurt leaking into it. "Do you have any idea how much emotional turmoil we could have avoided!? I... I've looked up to you since the night at the mansion Dipper! If you had asked me out at any point after that night, I would have said yes!"

"Because I thought you deserved better!" Dipper responded back, pressured from being yelled at and a little emotionally hurt himself. "And I don't just mean because you're upper class or anything, I mean you're a great, beautiful person who had the strength of character to change herself for the better, and I'm just... ME!" He said, feeling doubt beset him. "I mean, I'm weak, I'm short, I'm weird, I'm creepy, I smell bad, I live in a basement playing tabletop games, I got this stupid mark on my head, I have a shrill voice, I'm not manly, I sneeze like a kitten, I... I..."

All the anger and frustration drained out of Pacifica's body as she heard Dipper rant about himself, and understood him. Now moving with tender grace, the blond girl untangled her hands from his, then put both of hers on Dipper's shoulders. "Hey... Dipper, it's alright. I'm sorry for blowing up
earlier. That was unfair of me, since, well, I thought this whole time you deserved better as well."
The boy clearly wanted to respond to this statement, but Pacifica quieted him by speaking again.
"Let me show you just how amazing you really are."

And with that, Pacifica leaned across the two chairs put right next to each other, and kissed Dipper
on the lips.

Surprise shook through the boy's body, but rather than make him jump away or break the kiss, the
jolt of surprise just made him melt, helpless against the soft touch of her lips on his. Both being
inexperienced at this though, they needed to separate for air fairly quick, finally giving Dipper a
chance to speak. "Okay Paz..." he said in a voice that would sound playful if it wasn't clear that
Dipper had been made borderline delirious by his first real romantic encounter. "...We can give this a
try. But on one condition."

"What is it?"

"Let me show you how amazing you really are."

The new couple kissed again, this time lead by Dipper, and from her position behind a bookcase,
Star Butterfly let out a bittersweet sigh of contentment at the sight. She still stung a little bit inside,
but that feeling of pain was dwarfed one thousand fold by the joy she felt at the couple in front of her
truly connecting and at her own personal satisfaction at having made the right choice for herself as
well. "I shouldn't be dating now anyways. I just need to give the whole dating game a break for
awhile. When the time is right, maybe they'll help me find someone else." She thought to herself with
a distant but satisfied look on her face. However, a sudden sight caused Star to scowl.

The old, decrepit Mewman woman who was the chief and only librarian here had finally made her
way over to the source of the noise, and appeared to be building up wind to interrupt the new couple.
"Oh, I'm not having ANY of that!"

Using her magic to cross the floor without disturbing the still making out new couple, Star got
directly in the librarian's face and spoke to her with a harsh whisper. "Hi, Princess Butterfly here.
Recognize the wand and the cheekmarks?" When the librarian simply blinked in confusion at her in
response, Star kept going. "So, by royal decree, these two can make out in the library as much as
they want without being interrupted. So, you can just turn right around and go polish the blank
library cards no one ever buys."

Surrounded by paper, the couple broke their kiss again, having held it a little longer this time. Instead
of resuming though, they just took a minute to gently touch their foreheads together, Pacifica having
first taken off Dipper's hat and run her hand through his hair, exposing his birthmark which she
beamed at with pride. For the moment, at least, the mutual doubts and self-loathing that kept this
relationship for happening for so long simply faded away, having melted off their bodies into a
mixed puddle and then been washed down the drain. At that moment all that existed for Pacifica was
Dipper, and all that existed for Dipper was Pacifica.

Both of them thought that was pretty alright.
The dark, gothic halls of the Underworld stand brightened this evening, stone walls innervated with gently winding vines of green blooming with purple flowers, patterned in such a way that they almost seemed to be leading one through the labyrinth, the gentle lavender leaves turning themselves towards the burning heart of the Lucitor Kingdom, growing more abundant with proximity to the infernal light. The familiar wiffs of brimstone were joined by the soft sounds of a choir of beings alien to this world and the gentle hum of the flute, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere.

Through these halls stepped the royalty of many worlds, most prominent among them the Family Butterfly. Walking together, guided through the depths by a frenetic demon in a checker board patterned suit who had been juggling several royal families at the gates before being assigned to bring this one in. The three nobles and their two courtiers stepped lightly through the depths, senses alive and wary.

Further away, beyond the heart of the sun that is the Underworld dimension, a small man with a large crown sits among a beautiful garden, abundant green speckled by all traces of the rainbow growing in every direction. There is no gentle music here, no smell of brimstone and the temperature lacks the pervasive mild discomfort of the rest of the dimension. Here, insulated from the rigors of the Underworld and nourished by a small artificial sun fueled by forsaken souls, under the supervision of King Dave of Lucitor, a small patch of the world above flourishes.

The king is here at the moment, watching with a cracked eyebrow and an otherwise blank expression as squirming caterpillars struggle to dig a shallow hole in the ground before him. "Such a little thing..." He thought to himself while delicately holding a small, tender sapling in his left hand, patiently waiting for the moment to set it down. "...But I must keep my abilities practiced somehow."

He could feel the small creatures below him wigging across his brain. It was the downside of magically transmitting your thoughts and wishes to other lifeforms, that they could enter your own mind in turn, but such small lifeforms posed little threat to the King of the Underworld. "At worst, I might find myself unintentionally picking the salad at tonight's ball, and perhaps that is for the best. That invasion proved a lovely diet for the Butterfly family, it would be unfortunate if we were seen as... lacking in temperance, by comparison."

The insects continued to squirm beneath him, shivering as strange and alien thoughts filled their small brains, ideas they couldn't begin to comprehend dominating their minds, but still, the command to dig overpowered all. The shallow hole was now almost the perfect shape for the growing tree, a perfect work of magical construction. "Just a few... more... delicate... touches..."

"Hey dad."

King Dave's reserved expression abruptly broke into a scowl. His son, Tom Lucitor, had appeared behind him without him realizing it. "Tom." He said curtly, making his annoyance clear through tone alone.

"Mom says it's time to come up, the guests will be here soon." Tom conveyed, obvious annoyance in his voice as well.

"Well, since you've just ruined all the effort I put into planning the growth of this new tree, let's make
Sure your mother's efforts to plan the Ball aren't similarly wasted." Dave said bluntly while bending down, scooping at the incomplete hole in the ground once with his pinky finger before setting the sapling in and covering its roots. Standing back up, he made a little noise of discontent. "Such a shame. Had I gotten that right it would have been a perfect addition to our little slice of Mewni."

Shuffling in place a little uncomfortably, Tom began to speak back to his father with a confrontational tone of voice, though with much less aggression and confidence than the demon prince normally uses when expressing his displeasure. "What's even the point of having the Silver Bell Ball this year? Mewni has just been invaded! I'd be surprised if they even showed up, and we all know the rest of these kingdoms are all jokes..."

Willing a small flicker of blue flame to consume his pinky for a moment in order to incinerate the dirt stuck to it, Dave turned to address his son, taking a deep breath before putting a hand over his shoulder and giving him a smile, both of which were warm and fatherly. "You betray your own political ignorance again Tom." He stated, sounding for all the world like a relaxed dad trying to teach his son how to fish for the first time. "This is the one Silver Bell Ball they can't afford to miss. They've already lost a sizable amount of prestige simply requesting the change of venue, they must make an appearance to maintain an air of confidence and stability." Then, with a more sly expression, he added "And of course, THAT means they'll be bringing one Butterfly in particular with them, no doubt..."

"Dad, c'mon..." Tom remarked with obvious discomfort while rubbing one arm with the other in an expression of nervousness. "...You heard the Song Day, uh, song just as clearly as I did. Princess Star is in love with Marco. I've got no chance."

"And who is this Marco Díaz anyways? This human that you're always complaining about to your mother and I?" King Dave asked with a contentious tone to his eyes, giving Tom a sarcastically questioning look before removing his hand from the boy's shoulder and turning his back to his son, cape swishing in place as he moved. "Simply a commoner from an obscure, politically insignificant dimension. Surely you've gotten close enough to him at this point that he can be removed from the equation?"

When Tom didn't respond, still looking unsure, Dave turned back to his son, imploring him "Do not let all your previous efforts go to waste! Your mother and I have already provided you a number of resources to pursue Princess Butterfly's hand, including total authority over the Blood Moon event, for all the good you managed to do with that. It would have made for an extremely prestigious royal ball you know." He concluded with a more snide tone.

"...I know dad, but I..." Tom spoke up, muttering with shame, but Dave cut him off, turning about to face his son and using the most effective tactic he knew.

"You are Tom Lucitor, Prince of the Underworld! Mewni, it's princess, its kinghood... they are yours for the taking, yours by right!" The king exclaimed, attempting to stoke the rage inside his son. "We are the superior people! Their magic wand is but a singular, trifling trinket compared to the great ocean of souls we command! It is your destiny to bring our greatness out of the depths, to share it with the world! Would you have us submit to lesser beings by denying that?"

Tom's third eye was beginning to quiver, and with an internal smirk, Dave doubled down, striking right where he knew his son would feel it. "Princess Star Butterfly, as I have said many times before, belongs to you! She, despite her great beauty, is a lost, feeble, perpetual youth who will bring ruin to the dimension of Mewni if allowed to hold all power over it. She requires a strong hand, forged in fire, to bring about greatness! That hand is yours my son!" Putting his hand back on his son's shoulder, Dave continued. "Are you going to let some peasant filth from a dead end dimension, the
worthless words of an idiot bard, or the ineffectual Queen of a sacked castle keep you from what you deserve!? Are going to let them deny you the luscious, soft body of Star Butterfly, her velvet lips and warm arms!?

The prince of demons was silent again, but this time, it was born of freshly ignited, deep burning anger. Dave smiled as he felt it ripple through his son's body and up his own arm. "There's that fighting spirit!"

Turning the gentle touch to the shoulder into an encouraging up and down pat, Dave suddenly stepped away from his son and walked towards the exit of the garden. "Now then, let's get to the party, shall we? I'm sure we've kept your mother waiting long enough." Then, with a look over his shoulder, he added "And remember, your anger is a righteous source of power, but it must serve you instead of you serving it."

The two Lucitor royals soon departed the garden, leaving behind the freshly planted sapling. It had grown almost two feet taller since King Dave had placed it in the ground, the discarded caterpillars lying withered around its base. Their life forces had been drained to give the sapling a boost up on life, ripped out by the king and fed to the tree in the short term, and their bodies would be similarly consumed, via the roots this time, in the long term.

Three hours ago

"Okay Dipper, I'm ready!"

Inside the bedroom of Princess Star Butterfly, an extra sized privacy divider had been conjured by magic to almost cut the room in two. On one side of it, Dipper Pines was carefully examining the contents of portable table assembled there earlier, back dutifully turned to the shadow play that could faintly be divined through the screen. On the other side of it, Star had been showing Pacifica Northwest her formal dress collection, and the two had settled on which one the human blond would be borrowing for the night.

Now, with implicit permission given, Dipper turned around just in time to see his new girlfriend step out from beyond the divider in one of Mewni's finest garments. As they'd only been dating for a few days at this point, the sight of her still took Dipper's breath away each time it fell upon her after even the shortest break.

"So, how do I look?" Pacifica asked coyly, fluffing her hair a little and doing a quick twirl to give Dipper a full look, all while stepping towards him. She was wearing a strapless dress of soft blue color, with a deep blue heart covering the front between six silver buttons tied together with gold. The back and sides of the dress were patterned with intricate flower designs that faded into white sparkles near her legs. In terms of cut, it looked like a mix between a hobble skirt dress from the 1920's and a Victorian gown.

Wrapping his arms around her to meet her approach, Dipper looked into Pacifica's eyes and nervously complemented "You look really great Pacifica... I mean, you always look great, but now... wow..."

Although Pacifica was able to meet Dipper's eyes with a steady gaze and a warm smile, on the inside her heart was pounding just as hard as his. She felt like his warm words could lift her off her own two feet. The two could have kept their eyes locked together for awhile this way, but luckily(?) for them a distraction made itself known shortly.

"Told you he'd love it girl!" Star spoke up, emerging from behind the divider herself. She was wearing a three colored dancing dress, the top section soft blue and round at the shoulders with white
trim, while the bottom section of the dress, separated from the top by a white bow, was primarily purple with sections of pink and white lining. Her blond hair was styled up into a pair of buns around her crown, while a trail of gold fell past each eye. "Alright, enough of the mushy stuff, let's get a look at the party favors for tonight's big event!" The princess exclaimed with a playfully mischievous tone as she rushed up to the cluttered portable table.

Looming to her side dryly, Pacifica remarked "You don't look half bad yourself, handsome. Although..." With a flick of her wrist, the blond girl produced a comb and proceeded to give a flustered Dipper one long, slow comb of the hair over his forehead, allowing his birthmark to shine out into the room unobstructed. "There, perfect!" She remarked, before giving the boy a peck on the cheek and trotting over to join Star.

Before joining her friend at the table. Dipper took a few seconds to stand in place blushing, looking at his shoes, and twirling a string of hair coming off his combed hair. He was lacking a hat at the moment, obviously, but was finely dressed to match the girls in the room, wearing a red colored suit (both jacket and slacks matching) with a blue undershirt and a black tie. The tie in question was also patterned with a line of skull and crossbones symbols.

"I still feel like I'm a little tacky looking, especially compared to you guys." He remarked a little awkwardly before joining them on the edge of the table. Star, who was enraptured by what was in front of her, didn't even look behind her when she stated "Don't worry, you'll fit right in at an Underworld party."

"Thanks Star." Dipper replied, and took his own appraisal of the armory spread in front of them. "Grunkle Stan can certainly come through when you need some tools, can't he? And of course, a few home made gadgets as well, courtesy of Grunkle Ford..."

The table in front of the three was covered with enough tools of skulduggery to rob a small bank: Lockpicks, ice picks, miniature hammers, screwdrivers, a few vials of acid, protective charms, brass knuckles, filing equipment, spell detectors, a collapsible crossbow, magic rings, gasoline packs, tweezers, lighters, fake mustaches, a rubber duck, a homemade block of plastic explosive, and a single brightly colored cupcake, glistening with a thick layer of sprinkles.

Reaching out and taking a bite from the cupcake before offering it to the other two, Star asked through chewing teeth "So, you two ready for the most interesting Silver Bell Ball in decades?"

"Queen Butterfly, it is our honor to host you this evening." King Dave spoke genially with a small bow. As the guests of honor here, he had made sure to greet the Butterfly family in person.

"King Dave. The Kingdom of Mewni and myself both thank you deeply for being willing to shoulder the burden of this grand tradition on such short notice." Queen Moon responded, greeting him with equal decorum. Then, she turned her head to the other Lucitor Royals. "Queen Wrathmelior, Prince Tom, our thanks extend to you as well."

"Yes, it is good to see you again Queen Wrathmelior, Prince Tom!" King River spoke up abruptly, much more jovial and casual than his wife. "Hello Dave."

"River." The King of the Underworld said bluntly before turning his attention to the last Butterfly present. "And of course it is our honor to host Princess Star... and her two, um, who are these two... exactly?" Dave asked, seemingly genuinely surprised by the addition of two more teenagers alongside the princess.

"Ah, yes, don't mind them." Queen Moon spoke up quickly. "Considering the very reasons that the Silver Bell Ball is being hosted in your dominion this year, I believed it to be prudent to invest in
some additional security for my daughter and heir. These are her new bodyguards. They may look young but they come very highly recommended, I assure you. They're with her all hours of the day for the duration of the uncertainty in the Kingdom of Mewni, so I hope you don't mind we've brought them along. Not to worry, they blend right into the background."

"I see... yes." King Dave remarked, gently stroking his chin in contemplation. "As always Queen Butterfly, your wisdom is without peer."

"Oh my, I didn't realize things were that bad for Mewni!" Queen Wrathmelior spoke up. One could have interpreted what she said as a slight, but the demon queen in a black dress spoke with too much sincerity for any but the most vulnerable to insults to interpret it that way.

"Mewni has faced worse in the past, and no doubt will endure worse in the future. If it is to ever break forever, perish the thought, it will come from circumstances far worse than this" Moon remarked sagely, and in response Dave muttered a small "Perish the thought." at the idea of Mewni falling. With a more outspoken tone, Moon then stated "Now, River and I would like to sample the refreshment briefly after the trip here. Then, you and Queen Wrathmelior can show us how you've gone about adopting the Silver Bell Ball to your lovely castle."

"It was a rather exciting process, getting ready for all this, I'm sure you're going to love it!" The queen of demons spoke up in response. "When you're ready to start the tour, me and Dave will be over at the blood fountain! Come on dear." With that, the royal couples split apart, leaving the teenagers conversing near the entrance. As the Butterfly family had a moment to themselves on the crowded floor, Queen Moon couldn't help but giggle into her gloved hand after a moment.

"It's been some time since I've had to do something like that." She admitted softly, to which River gave her a warm and proud smile. "That certainly brings back memories."

"You didn't lose any of your touch Moonpie, I can tell you that." The King spoke up. "My clever vixen, always making sure our adventures went so well with her quick words and sharp tongue. I didn't doubt for a moment you could pull it off again." 

"Oh stop it, River." Moon said back playfully. "Our last adventure together like that was almost a decade ago, and I'll need to keep this up all night. Don't count the dragons before they hatch." She explained a little more warily, but then, with a small smile, added "Although, if I might indulge in a few fate invoking words, I hope we don't need any of your old adventuring skills tonight."

"Yes, well... As much as it would be a sign things have gone wrong, I'd be lying if a small part of me isn't hoping I might end up reenacting my first meeting with King Dave sometime tonight. And I could never lie to you." 

Decades Ago

"At last, my quest is complete! I've finally discovered the long lost Nussleinian Matrix! Such a wonder that the ancients could compress so much magic into such a small..."

"JOHANSEN HO!"

"RIVER, WAIT, DON'T RUN! THERE COULD BE TRAPS UP AHEAD!"

"NOTHING HERE BUT A FOUL WITCH IN A DRESS MY DARLING, ATTEMPTING TO STEAL THE ARTIFACT!"

"WHAT, WHO!? YOUR MAJES...AUGH!"
"I've apologized for that Moon, I truly have! Numerous times at that! Yet I can't but feel like he still holds it against me..." River ruminated with a hand on his beard.

"He was trying to acquire a suitable wedding present for his engagement to Wrathmelior." Moon chided back. "He had to limp down the aisle with a black eye because of all that!"

The previously jovial barbarian king's eyes went cold for a moment, as he remembered all that entailed. "Yes, normally he would have had ample time to heal from such a light thrashing, but his wedding to then Princess Wrathmelior ended up... rushed." By now they'd reached the refreshment table and the king had taken a drink of punch.

Instantly catching her husband's drift, Queen Moon took on a cool expression while sampling a drink of her own. "You remember correctly. Depending on if we turn up anything interesting tonight, the great Lucitor tragedy may be due for a fresh investigation."

Back near the entrance, the four youths had been left alone with each other as the two royal couples split up and departed. "So, welcome to the ball Starship, no need for all that formal junk around me." Tom spoke up first, a confident tone to his voice. His third eye swept the Princess' two companions while his main ones upheld eye contact with her. "So, your mom's got you saddled with the old 'ever-present bodyguards' thing now huh? Well, no worries, if you're looking to we can totally ditch these stiffs, I know all the best places to just hang out around here."

Dipper and Pacifica immediately focused their expressions on the demon prince as soon as he started talking with his somewhat oily tones, a pair of hard expressions that did their best to not betray genuine emotion. Star however, just assumed a haughty air, like she would when she would make fun of her mom, and responded by saying "You offer is acknowledged, Prince Thomas, but unwanted. I have no intention of separating from the people who are only here to ensure my safety this evening. Good day to you." in a flat but diplomatic tone, before simply stepping past the demon royal, her two bodyguards shuffling along with her. Dipper and Pacifica both turned their heads over their shoulders though, the human girl giving Tom the classic "point at my eyes, then point at yours" while Dipper did the same but with only one finger, which he pointed at Tom's third eye. Left standing by himself, Tom simply narrowed all three eyes as he watched the others walk away. Behind his fierce expression, gears were turning in his head, and very quickly at that. "I hadn't really expected her to take me up on that offer right away, that was more meant to just plant the seeds for later, but she shot the whole thing straight down. Star didn't express the slightest bit of resentment or annoyance at the fact her mother stuck her with a pair of babysitters who barely look older than she is." He thought to himself, mentally pouring over everything he knew about the Princess of Mewni while offhandedly snapping a finger. "That isn't like her at all. Something more is going on with these 'bodyguards' of hers."

Called by magic in response to the prince snapping his fingers, a smaller example of demon-kind scuttled up to Tom's side. "Yes, Master Tom?" he asked in a professional voice.

"Forget about the princess." He stated, while pointing out Dipper and Pacifica. "Keep your eyes on those two."

Outside the royal palace of the Underworld, ample parking for a large number of lavish carriages had been provided behind the wrought iron gates that separated the domain of the royals from the rest of the capital city. As a result of the stark contrast, the rubbish van parked across the street from the palace, on the wrong side of the gates, drew much more attention than the vehicle normally did when blending into an urban environment.

Inside the spacious back compartment of the vehicle, Stanford Pines was hunched over one of
several monitoring devices the vehicle had been equipped with, on top of its secondary role as a backup escape route. After checking on several magic scanners to see all levels were consistent, Ford activated a modified a walkie talkie and began speaking into it. "Pines 1, this is Pines 2, over. Have you gained access to the ballroom?"

Inside the palace, Dipper's carefully concealed earpiece transmitted the message, and he stepped over to a punch bowl in response, pretending to almost drop his tie into the drink so he could lift it closer to speak into the bug concealed in the cloth. "Access confirmed. Pines 1, Pines 3, Polaris, Meghan and Harry have all gained access without suspicion. Contact has been made with Napoleon, Lilith, and Trioculus. Looking for opportunity to infiltrate." Dipper informed back, but with a sideways glance narrowed his eyes. "Be advised Pines 2, Pines 3 is giving me a sarcastic expression that implies she doesn't realize our professional spy terminology is totally cool."

"Acknowledged Pines 1." Ford spoke back. He was prepared to end the transmission there with a soft smile on his face, but suddenly, the back doors of the van were knocked on quite harshly. "Be advised, Pines 1, potential distraction is incoming. Over and out."

Dipper stepped away from the punch bowl with the conversation over as Pacifica made her way closer to him. "It's a shame we can't really have a dance here tonight." She admitted while getting a drink for herself, her teasing expression gone now. "Despite the whole Gothic Horror vibe this place has going on it isn't a bad party." Taking a sip of her cup, Pacifica added with a dry tone "I should have known I'd end up in hell at some point."

"Hey, same here." Dipper replied with an equally dry tone, and both chuckled a little. Both were fully prepared to keep flirting with each other, but both kept the mission in mind and turned their attention to the Princess of Mewni... Who seemed to be coming coming right at them with... someone "Dipper what is that thing?"

"I don't know, it looks like something Mabel would draw while she's blitzed out of her mind on Smile Dip."

"HEY GUYS!" Star greeted cheerfully while gesturing to her side. "Meet my oldest friend, Flying Princess Pony Head!"

The aloft equestrian cranium gave both humans a disbelieving look then snorted, turning to Star to express said disbelief. "B-Fly, have you been running around and picking up extra earth turds for whatever cray-cray reason!? What is going on with you girl!?" Then, with no acknowledgement of personal space, Pony Head ran both her snout and her horn over Dipper's head, chest and arms, snorting a few times in the process and leaving him feeling very uncomfortable. "He's even got Turdina's awkward, sweaty presence to him as well! Though I bet this one would nail the whole 'girl in a dress' look even better than Earth Turd did!" Then, she looked at Pacifica. "And what the hay is this!? Is this some weird magic thing where you cloned yourself, but then you made the clone, like, ugly, so you'd look better by comparison!?!" Finally, with a more calm expression, she turned back to Star and stated "Pretty slick move there B-Fly, I approve."

The two humans had expressions on their faces conveying that they'd be insulted if they weren't so surprised. "I've only known you for less than a minute and I already hate you." Dipper responded with a very flat expression on his face and tone to his voice. "You may be the worst thing I've ever met in this already pretty terrible collection of dimensions."

"Ah yeah, Pony Head staying on top!" The newly introduced princess cheered to herself, feeling like she'd accomplished something.

"So are you supposed to just be a head or are you the result of generations of Habsburg family
shrubbery nonsense that whittled you down to just that?" Pacifica asked with a sarcastic tone and cracked eyebrow. The reference was lost on both princesses but Dipper let out a single sharp laugh at it. "Nice one Pacifica." He complemented.

"Thanks, that part of the lecture on productive marriages always stuck with me."

"Look, as a floating head and not much else she's probably got a heart the size of a peppercorn!"

"Her lungs corroded and her intestines gangrenous..."

"Pointy head's probably full of water..."

"A single shriveled ovary, black as coal..."

"...and regularly baffles Mewmandom by continuing to live."

Both princesses were frozen in place as the two humans finished their mutual insult chain. Dipper and Pacifica, coming down from the emotional high of defending each other, exchanged a brief sideways glance and began to wonder if they'd messed things up as Star look mortified, but after a moment of silence in the small circle of the otherwise still busy party, Pony Head lead back midair and let out an appreciative, snorting laugh.

"Dang girl, these two spite FIRE!" She exclaimed, before flying in-between the human couple, insinuating herself on both their shoulders while Dipper and Pacifica glared at her. "I feel like I'd be grievously insulted if I had understood any of that. You two got guts!" Flying back over to Star, she looked down on her old friends and asked in a more demanding tone "Alright, spill it B-Fly, they're way too cool to be bodyguards your mom hired."

All three people with regular humanoid bodies reacted with a sudden strike of nervousness as Pony Head chanced upon their true nature, causing the flying royal to let out a snort of satisfaction that made everyone even more nervous looking. "HA! I wasn't actually sure something was up but that just confirmed it! You guys are actually giant losers!"

"Pony Head, please!" Star begged her in a whispering voice, causing the other princess to get a slightly more serious face and turn to her friend. "I can't really talk about it in the crowd here, but... they're here to help." She explained in the barest way possible. "With Tom." She added, in a more disgruntled voice.

"Speaking of the devil..." Dipper remarked dryly, having looked over his shoulder just in time to spot the topic of conversation making his way towards him. In response, Pony Head narrowed her eyes and got a devious look on her face.

"Say no more B-Fly, Pony Head knows the score!" The flying unicorn explained. "Leave this to me!" She announced before flying away from the group and heading straight for Tom.

"Is this our opportunity?" Pacifica asked, looking back and forth between Star and Pony Head.

The Princess of Mewni stood on her heels and scanned the crowd with a palm over her eyes. "Looks like mom and dad have the Lucitor parents tied up. As good an opportunity as any Dipper!"

"Looks like I'm going in then." The boy replied, leaning over to give Pacifica a peck on the cheek before vanishing into the crowd, the opposite direction as Pony Head. The girl from Earth couldn't help but blush a little at this despite herself while Star couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy from shooting across her heart. Scowling and turning her head a little, Pacifica crossed her arms and muttered "Dummy's gonna blow our cover..." while still smiling a little.
Out in the crowd, Pony Head had successfully intercepted Tom, nearly bowling the demon over as she flew into his personal space. "Hey Tom, long time no see!" She exclaimed, flying around his head enough times to make the prince slightly dizzy despite him actively trying not to follow her with any of his three eyes. "C'mon, let's get these stiffs back to life, let's do some dancing!"

From Tom's expression, it was immediately obvious he had no interest in sharing a dance with the flying unicorn princess, but all his attempts to step past her were foiled by her obnoxiously hovering around in front of him. "Hey, good to see you again." He remarked in the most flat, insincere voice possible. "Actually I was thinking I'd ask Princess Butterfly to the honor of the first dance with me tonight, so please..."

"Aww, what's the matter big boy?" Princess Pony Head cooed, instantly slipping into the most demeaning voice in her arsenal. With a devious whisper that would go unheard by anyone except the prince of demons, she asked "Those skinny arms not up to the task of filling up my neckhole and hitting the back once the after party comes around?" Then, getting even closer to Tom's face, Pony Head added "Or maybe something else isn't up to the task..."

Tom's face blanched with naked, unfiltered disgust at the object of his affection's oldest friend, skin crawling so strongly it seemed like all three of his eyes might pop out because of it. "What the actual fu...AAAAUUGGHHH!" His curse was cut short when Pony Head unexpectedly clamped her cud chewing teeth down on his wrist, then flew towards the dance floor.

"C'WMEN EEMON BOH, RWET'S DOONCE!" She yelled out between clenches, full teeth, dragging and spinning Tom around the dance floor by the arm. The demon prince was dragged and bounced like a rag doll as the Pony Head dragged his arm with her mouth as roughly as seemingly possible. Most of the bystanders assumed this was simply how a species without arms danced and clapped politely, a misconception not helped by King Pony Head yelling encouragingly from the sidelines. "GO MY CHILD, COMPLETE THE DANCE OF OUR PEOPLE!"

On the sidelines, Star watched with a blank and slightly embarrassed face, while Pacifica sipped her drink with a sardonic expression on her face. "So, that's your oldest friend, right?" The blond from earth asked as the cup left her lips.

"...Yes?" Star responded uncertainly. Quietly, and too herself, she added "This is actually unexpectedly helpful of her..."

"Star... even as someone whose comparatively new to the whole... friendship thing, I can confidently say you need better friends."

Five Minutes Ago

Stanford Pines had responded by the rapping on the back of the van he was in by quickly pocketing a few objects from around the interior then stepping back, shouting that he was opening the back doors up, then doing so. When the metal plate on a hinge swung open, he found himself face to face with a pair of scowling, uniformed demons. "Some manner of law enforcement, based on the uniforms and the weapons." He conjectured in his head.

"Right then. Step out of the carriage now, chop chop." One demanded, gesturing with his club. Ford complied, raising his hands up with his palms towards the officers in the process.

"What seems to be the problem officers?" The man from earth asked in the most diplomatic tone possible.

"Told ya' he'd be a bloody mewman." The other officer spoke up. "Only a mewman would have the
audacity to park a disposable looking rust bucket across the way from this season's biggest meeting of royalty, outside the palace of our King and Savior (flames preserve his soul), and then wonder what the bloody problem is when confronted about it."

"So, what's the occasion, butterfly bait?" The first officer to asked, not directly responding to his partner's successful guess. "Looking to snap some pics for a trashy tabloid? Planning to open that coat of yours in front of some royal majesty or another when they leave later this evening? Or perhaps you've got a load of unregistered fertilizer in the back of your carriage there?" He questioned, looking Ford up and down the whole while. With a tone of sneering annoyance, he added "You know, the lads and I got standing orders to go easy on you sods, cut down on diplomatic incidents coming from beat up tourists. But, given the severity of the possibilities, I don't think the chief would mind a mewman getting booked black and blue, not today of all days. Am I right mate?"

"Right as burning rain corporal. Even if he is just some namby-pamby bug-blood looking to slum it up among the 'civilized monsters' and raises some fuss with Ol' Queen Mooner about getting some sense beat into him, I'm sure it'll slide today of all days." The second law enforcer answered. "We were all told to treat event security with the upmost seriousness after all."

"Now gentleman, there's no need for all that." Ford responded, sounding as diplomatic as possible. "I can assure you I'm not here to cause any trouble, and any problems you have with the Kingdom of Mewni I more than likely share with you. They are hardly my favorite people either."

"Ooooh, you a tributary then?" The lower ranked officer asked, a touch of genuine curiosity to his voice while his partner was as hard faced as ever. "You look too healthy to be one of the spider eaten if I'm being honest. You one of those swamp mongrels then? Out here today to support your little consort-king?"

"Alright, that's enough, not like none of that matters, and even if it did you're actually only making yourself more suspicious." The lead police officer explained. "Turn around, hands against the back of the carriage, you are officially under arrest."

"On what charges?" Ford demanded, sounding indignant but it was really just a stalling tactic as he tried to work out the last step of his escape plan.

"Bloody hell if I know you bleeding todger. The King's Justice will work out what you're guilty of after we bring you in." The lead officer responded, his professional tone slipping with hints of annoyance and aggression now. "Now, turn around, hands on the carriage!"

"Alright, I'll cooperate." Ford stated, turning his back as instructed. However, when the second officer stepped forward, holding his club ready in his hands instead of a pair of handcuffs, the experienced adventurer jumped into action. Moving with speed you wouldn't expect from someone so old, Ford sent the elbow of his raised left arm slamming into the face of the approaching officer, crushing his nose flat into his face. Ford followed it up by spinning around in a half circle, slamming the fist of the exact same arm into the exact same face, a crumpling blow that knocked the demon to the ground.

The lead law officer burst into action, taking his subordinates place before he'd even hit the ground. He also had his club in hand, and had flicked a small switch near the base of the handle that caused the upper section of the stick to erupt with green flames. "STOP RESISTING!" He screamed, taking a swing at Stanford's head, but the old man managed to dodge the blow, resulting in the weapon leaving a smoldering dent on the back of the van instead.

Still ducked under the club swing, Ford delivered a straight armed punch directly to the elbow joint
of the officer's swinging arm, causing the limb to snap straight with a painful sounding crack. The more experienced officer let out a small hiss of pain and dropped his club as a result of this, but was still otherwise combat ready, which he proved by throwing a left hook counter punch.

This swing actually managed to catch Ford on the jaw, sending him stumbling back a foot and a half, but then the police officer made a critical mistake: Instead of pressing the attack, he scrambled to recover his club, thinking that would allow him to end the fight as quickly as possible. This, however, gave Ford the opportunity to produce something much more effective from inside his coat: A dart launcher!

The air powered projectile that sprang forth has a sterile needle on the front and a cord connecting to the gun trailing behind. It buried itself into the demon's exposed neck and pumped him full of an alchemical sedative, before the wire conducted a stunning electrical charge into the being's body, resulting in him limply crumpling to the floor.

However, as soon as the senior officer had folded, the secondary officer was back on his feet, charging at Ford with his club held up in the air and ignited. However, the charge was sloppy and angry, allowing Ford to easily slip into a fighting stance while dropping the stun gun, grabbing the demon by the upper arms before he could bring the club down, and using his own energy to hurl the officer over Ford's own shoulders! And of course, since the van was directing behind Ford, the end result was the officer's face smashing into the metal door as strongly as if he'd charged straight into it.

Ford spun around and caught the guard before he fell, slamming his face into the van one more time before letting him collapse into a heap atop his partner. Both were out for the count now, allowing the veteran dimension traveler a moment to relax.

"Always knew keeping my Plutonian Judo sharp would pay off." Ford thought to himself, but the thoughts of his past abruptly made him shiver despite how warm the city he was standing in was. "That was a dark time. To know I was sitting in the exact same solar system as the Earth I needed to return to, but Pluto had no spaceships and the fixed position portals of Mi-Go seemed to lead anywhere but the third planet. I was as far away from home as I'd even been, even as I watched it in the sky."

Shaking his head to banish those old thoughts, the senior scientist made a quick examination of the two guards to make sure they'd be out for awhile, then made a cursory effort to drag them out of the street and hide them in a back alleyway.

With the two officers incapacitated for the moment, Ford scrambled back into the van, climbing into the driver's seat while activating all frequencies of his radio device and speaking. "This is Pines 2 to all units, minor altercation has occurred outside the gates. Repositioning surveillance vehicle, over."

Inside the halls of the Lucitor Castle, Dipper stepped carefully through the passages of stone as his earpiece came to life. The halls were surprisingly sparse and quiet here, and it seemed like everyone was at the party. "Acknowledged Pines 2. Pines 1 has successfully left the party, moving to stage 2."

The human boy continued to lurk through the air of brimstone, eyes alert to every corner. He made a point to try each door he passed by, but found most of them curiously locked. "Probably best to not take the risk of picking one until I find one that really looks worth it."

Still, Dipper was getting mildly suspicious that seemingly every door he passed was locked, in what was presumably a normal royal palace full of bustling busy servants, attending courtiers and active nobles. Before he could pursue this line of thought any further though, something caught his eye and the boy tensed up: It was a shadow looming across the wall from around a turn in the corridor up ahead. Someone was coming!
Acting on instinct, Dipper flung himself towards one of the few doors he hadn't tried yet, and miraculously, it opened for him. Ducking inside but taking careful care to not slam the door, the human boy breathed heavily for a moment, making sure to secure the path behind him. When he'd calmed down slightly, he turned around to figure out just where he was, and even by the standards of the Underworld so far, Dipper found the room he was in strange.

It was a fairly small room, and appeared to be used to store an alter of some kind. At the far end of the room the stone floor gave way to a small flower bed, like a section of indoor grass, but stuffed to the brim with blooming flowers, pedals of a wide variety of colors. At the center of the flower bed was a potted tree, not a large one, but sufficiently virile that he could be seen to resemble some manner of evergreen. Both displays of plant life sat beneath a replica of a blood red moon hanging from the ceiling. Dipper sniffed the air after a moment, and the sweet and sour scent that filled his nose confirmed that these were real, living plants. Somehow.

Taking a few steps closer, Dipper was able to observe that the flowers were trampled in regular patterns, like people would tread across the bed before assuming a position of supplication before the tree. "Kinda reminds me of that creepy tapestry Pacifica said her parents used to have. I never did figure out where that came from or what it even meant..." The human boy mused to himself in his head.

"Quite beautiful, isn't it?"

Dipper spun around as the gravely voice entered his ears, and saw that a figure in a red hooded robe had been in the room the entire time. The hood was drawn up, and as a result of that and the room's already minimal lighting, a inscrutable black void sat where the being's face should be.

"I know you've probably already been briefed on its nature, but please, indulge me for just a moment." The hooded figure remarked, stepping past Dipper to stand on the edge of the flower bed. His cowled gaze stared at the tree. "This shrine was commissioned by King Dave early into his reign, as a proclamation and foci of his imperial ambitions.

Dipper stepped behind the hooded figure, watching him warily and sliding a hand inside his suit jacket while the (presumably) demonic abbot kept speaking. "It is strong magic at work here, strong but subtle. The wishes and prayers of his loyalist supporters are spoken here, and the words and ideas inherent in them are projected out into the great weave of destiny, so that the strings of fate might gently sway in the breeze of a whispered prayer, eventually building up enough cumulative strength to change the course of the river of fate with a million small coincidences."

Treading softly on the flowers, the keeper of the shrine explained that "The flowers represent the Butterfly Kingdom. A world of beauty and wonder, of splendor, but of no true substance. They are an empty deck of cards upheld by a singular queen, and that will he their downfall." Reaching the center of the flower bed, the demon ran a clawed hand up and down the trunk of the tree. "This represents the new world Prince Tom will create by taking the Butterfly Princess as his own. Their empty splendor will be given purpose by our industry, to create something new and beautiful, yet strong and productive. Where the flowers tread on below are weak, frail things that serve no use beyond aesthetic, this tree will one day be grown to a tower of mighty oak that bears life and gives fruit. The expanding trunk will pierce through the soil of Mewni as it grows out of the Underworld, a world tree that will unify the realms!"

Finally casting his gaze up, the abbot gazed upon the moon replica hanging above, his hood sliding back on his head slightly as he took in the sight. "And that, of course, is the actual magical foci, a figure of fate that will hopefully resonate with our imperial song and tune the cords of fate in favor of our noble cause."
Abruptly, the abbot turned around and walked off the flower bed towards Dipper, speaking with a more informative tone versus his previous solemn reverence. "The history of this magic is quite interesting actually, it was first documented by..." his breath caught in his throat as the demon monk finally got a straight look at Dipper and realized he wasn't a demon. And that he was slipping on a pair of brass knuckles.

Even through the hood darkened cowl that obscured the abbot's face, an expression of surprise managed to register with Dipper.

"Time for a dose of Iconoclasm." The human said in an attempt at being menacing before hurling his brass boosted fist into the hood of the ritual minder and felt a reassuring mix of flesh and bone yield against the impact. The demon collapsed to the floor under the force of the impact, decked straight onto his back. Holding a boxer's stance for a few more moments in case he got back up, Dipper gradually relaxed when he realized the demon was out for the count. After a moment, he grimaced at himself and muttered "That was an incredibly lame line Dipper..."

After shaking that off, the human boy finally got a good look at the mysterious shrine keeper, and found himself both wincing and a little disappointed at the truth: The hood of the robe had been thrown back by the punch Dipper had given the demon, revealing that, instead of a menacing visage, the now dented and leaking face under the cowl was soft and unassuming despite being blue in color and sort of naturally lumpy, and was adorned with a now broken pair of glasses.

Blinking in shock Dipper wondered aloud "Did I just punch out a harmless history nerd? In my quest for knowledge, have I become the very thing I've always hated?" Gently stepping over the shrine keeper, Dipper turned his rumination towards the collection of plants and the magic itself. He found himself scowling slightly at the sight.

"I'd be wary of soul merchants trying to tune the cords of fate under the best of circumstances..." he muttered with the venom only personal experience could synthesize all while reaching around inside his suit. "...and when they're doing it to try and force together a good friend with someone terrible? Well, that just cinches it." With a bottle in hand, Dipper stayed his hand for just a moment of contemplation. "I might need this gasoline for something more relevant to the mission..." he mused, but then tilted his hand the rest of the way and began to drench the flowers and the tree trunk in flammable liquid. "...But I'm willing to take that chance if it helps Star." When the bottle was empty, the Pines Twin paused again for a moment, struck by a memory, but swiftly went back to work by striking a match.

"Should have handled Gideon like this when we first met, all that time ago..."

Back on the dance floor, Princess Pony Head's diversion had finally ran its course, and while the decapitated equestrian was soaking up the attention at the center of the dance floor and bending her neck in her best imitation of a bow, Tom had stumbled away as soon as her teeth had released his wrist, muttering something about needing a bathroom and a tetanus shot.

Having moved away from the refreshment table but still with their back to a wall, Star and Pacifica had watched the entire dizzying drag dressed up as a dance with grins on their faces.

"Okay, you know what? I'll cut her some slack." Pacifica remarked after a moment. "Flying Princess Pony Head might be a vain, insulting jerkass, but..."

"Buuuuuuuuut?" Star asked in wonderment, eager to hear what Pacifica had to say next.

"...She's a vain, insulting jerkass who knows how to create a hell of a diversion." The blond from earth concluded. This briefly caused Star's face to fall, but she accepted it in short enough order. The
two stood next to each other contently for a few moments before Star started a new conversation.

"So, are noble parties like this on Earth?" She asked Pacifica.

"Well, to start with, we don't call ourselves nobles on Earth, the preferred term is socialite." Pacifica responded, before it struck her that she still identified with the upper crust of the human species, even though her family had been ruined since Weirdmaggedon and she basically lived in a run down tourist trap working as a scientific assistant these days. Before she could ponder this further, Star spoke again.

"Is there any noteworthy difference between the two?"

"Not really, no. Although earth parties like this usually have more drugs going around."

"Gotcha." Star stated a little awkwardly, not sure where to take the conversation from there. Luckily, Pacifica picked up the slack in that department.

"So, Star..." The blond human began. "...I understand you had a book of spells at some point, right?" She regretted the question right after asking it due to Star becoming visibly glum at the mention of the old book, but the princess none the less answered the question and didn't project any hostility towards Pacifica for asking.

"Yeah, I did. But I let it get stolen, and because of it getting stolen it got destroyed." She explained, keeping her answer as concise as possible.

Pacifica winced a little, and after a moment of debate decided to press on in an attempt to cheer Star up. "Okay, sensitive subject, I'm sorry for probing. But, I wanted to let you know, if you're, well, interested... we've got a lot of spells documented back on Earth. I could share them with you, if you feel like you need the boost."

Despite still being visibly glum over the memory her friend had called up, Star still smiled at Pacifica. "Thank you, that's great of you to offer, but it wasn't just spells that were lost. Each chapter of the Royal Book of Spells was carefully inscribed by a past queen of mewni, talking about not just all the magic they did, but their thoughts, their feelings, the history they lived in... it was more than just a spell book, it was "a priceless piece of cultural history and royal legacy," as mom never gets tired of reminding me..." Star snorted, before looking down at her own shoes, disappointed in herself. "And I never appreciated it. And then I got it destroyed."

"That sucks." Pacifica responded, bluntly but in a genuine attempt to comfort Star.

"Thanks." The princess responded, obviously downcast at the statement but still not angry at her friend.

"If it's any consolation, there's a collection of books I value a great deal as well." Pacifica explained, causing Star to perk up and pay closer attention. "It's a collection of Journals, documenting the research the Pines family conducts into the supernatural. I've actually done a bit of writing for Journal #4 at this point, which I guess... makes me... part of the... family." The human girl's voice gradually stuttered and slowed down as the realization hit her, all while Star got an increasingly cheesy grin next to her.

"Ooooh, I guess it does, Pines 3~" Star teased, leaning in close to Pacifica's face, which caused the human to take a large gulp of her drink and look away with a briefly cross expression.

"Anyways, what I was trying to say was that if you ever need help restarting your whole royal spellbook thing, I'm sure I could arrange you access to the Journal collection." Pacifica offered
wholeheartedly, before joking that "But only if you promise to cite correctly!"

Star grinned a little at the joke, but it was an otherwise very warm, very appreciative smile.
"Pacifica... thank you. That actually does mean a lot to me, that you would help me clean up a mess I made like that. I... I think I'll have to take you up on that offer at some point. Is there anything I can give you guys in return for this?"

Pacifica held up a hand while taking another drink, before saying "Don't worry about it Star, no payment is necessary. Scientific information deserves to be free, it's right to share it." After saying this statement, the human teenager sloshed around what was left of her drink and looking at the small amount of liquid in the bottom. All the while smiling to herself about how natural and how right that statement had been for her when she spoke it.

"Well, then I promise I'll do everything in my power to keep them safe and not lose them when they're in my custody!" Star replied, trying to make a joke about the situation to cheer herself up. However, this time Pacifica became slightly morose at the statement.

"That would be for the best, yes. It'd be a terrible thing for the Journals to be lost, and it's already almost happened twice." She explained, and as a result Star winced sharply.

"Ooooooh, sorry, didn't mean to push a button there." She apologized sincerely.

"I mean, the first time they came back through the pure luck of random magic nonsense, but then Mabel says they should just throw them down a bottomless pit? Let all the effort put into making them, all the good they could do just to waste like that? Thank goodness they shot that idiot down."

Pacifica was muttering to herself in a grouchy tone now, but snapped out of it when her eyes shifted sideways and saw Star again. At that point, the human became instantly apologetic. "What am I gripping about though!? You actually lost your important book!"

"Geez, thanks for reminding me. At this rate you're gonna sound just like my mom." Star said in a playfully sarcastic and grumpy tone.

Pacifica let the air hang silent for moment, then snatched Star's drink out of her hand and drank it all in, swished it around her mouth, then swallowed it in one big gulp, symbolically trying to wash sounding like Queen Moon out of her mouth. Despite having her drink stolen for the sake of this short gag, Star still laughed at it. This, in turn, caused Pacifica to giggle a little, enjoying a mutual laugh with her friend even if it wasn't as vigorous as Star's.

Across the ballroom, Queen Moon and King River had just stepped off the floor after enjoying a well practiced but still invigorating dance with each other. It had been a swift step, as after the guided tour of the ball by the Lucitor King and Queen had been interrupted by a servant rushing up and whispering something to the King. A quick dance gave the guests of honor the perfect excuse to briefly retire to a corner with a pair of drinks, where they were unlikely to be interrupted.

"Still though, I am sorry." Pacifica still made sure to apologize. "I was trying to talk to you about one of your problems and then just start muttering about something of mine that isn't even an actual problem, just a scenario where a problem could have happened."

"Ah, it's alright! Don't sweat it!" Star replied encouragingly. "And for what it's worth, you've already made this Ball a lot more tolerable than the majority of these stuffy dances have ever been for me."

With a glint of curiosity in her eyes, Pacifica found herself compelled to ask "And what made the, presumably few, balls that were just as if not more tolerable than this one? I've never been to a ball in a different dimension before this, so I'm sure all of those parties were bereft of my stunning charisma
and engaging conversational skills." injecting a bit of fake, playful ego into the end of her statement.

"Oh, nothing the hosts had planned, that's for sure." Star replied mischievously, leaning in to talk with Pacifica. "It's always the accidents that make for the most exciting events. Let me tell you about the time my attempt to arrive at an event on the back of a pure white warmicorn went off the rail due to a harmless piece of chewing gum I'd brought with me to stave off some boredom..."

Moon pantomimed laughing at something River had said so as to bring one of her rings close to her mouth, seeming to laugh into the back of her hand from a distance, but in reality she was speaking into the transmitter device hidden into the jewelry. "Pines 2, this is, ugh, Meghan. Napoleon and Lilith have left the dance floor. Possibly investigating your 'minor altercation.' Over." Her earpiece remained silent, causing the monarch to scowl slightly.

"Are you sure we should be doing this dear?" River asked, a tone of genuine uncertainty to his voice. "The Lucitors are some of our strongest allies, and now we're, well, spying on them, all on the word of a monster and this... Pines Family, who I know you have doubts about." With a stronger tone, he added "Of course, I'll follow whatever you think is best dear, but... your choice here has surprised me."

Moon had discreetly been releasing a noise baffling spell from her palm to thwart anyone trying to listen in, and when her husband finished voicing his concerns she responded with an understanding and somewhat worried tone. "I absolutely understand your concern, and to be honest with you I haven't doubted a decision of mine as much as this one for some time." As she continued to speak, the look of concern on her face got more prominent. "And yet... something is going on here. Something HAS been going on for far too long. Toffee knew how to destroy the wand, River! He knew how it could be destroyed, and how to place himself inside it! How could he have known that? How is that even possible?"

With a troubled brow of his own, River responded by saying "Yes, those are... troublesome questions, and outside the Kingdom of Mewni and the Magical High Commission itself, no one possess more magic inside our political sphere than the Lucitors. But why would they be helping Toffee with something so... cataclysmic? Do they truly possess that kind of knowledge in the first place?"

"King Dave is a Mewman himself River." Queen Moon reminded her husband while rubbing her chin. "One whose origin we've never quite managed to pin down with any certainty. He simply... appeared on the political stage one day, comforting the lone survivor of the Lucitor dynasty with an unconditional, passionate romance. It'd be blazingly suspicious if the idea of a lone Mewman exterminating an entire demonic lineage wasn't utterly far fetched. There is much about him we don't know."

"But what would they have stood to gain should Toffee have won?" River asked worriedly, getting less sure of his own skepticism. "After all, the Lucitors aren't monsters and Dave himself is a Mewman!"

"A new market, perhaps. One more favorable to their interests." Queen Moon mused. "Perhaps they had some miracle super weapon they planned to offer to us when we were on the verge of being wiped out, in exchange for a radical change of political dynamics. Or maybe a new monster empire would be better customers for an arms industry."

"All that is assuming the monster was telling the truth." River noted warily.

Moon looked distant for a moment, but eventually stated "I found his story very convincing."
Two Days Ago

Queen Moon leaned back into her chair, letting out a long and weary sigh at the assembled sight in front of her. "Star just seems to be making a habit of dragging complete strangers into my office as of late."

In front of the Queen of Mewni, her daughter and heir was standing in front of a complicated crowd of characters, whose outrageous nature even the tradition bucking and sometimes clueless princess seemed to be partially aware of, as her eyes cast back and forth over the group with a nervous smile on her face.

"So, Star..." Moon asked dryly, bringing her head back up to address her private audience. "What is it you need to talk about today?"

To Star's right, Dipper Pines was struggling with the large cork board he'd managed to fit into the room, upon which were numerous pictures and paper scraps pinned to the surface and connected to each other via a dizzying rainbow of colored string. The string connections got thick enough in places to obscure the meaning of the display ("If there even is one") but as far as Moon could discern it proposed the existence of a grand and centuries old conspiracy involving the recently deceased Glossaryck, the Magical High Commission, the Corn Shuckers Guild, Bill Cipher, Queen Moon's own venerated ancestors, Boy Bard Bands, St. Olga's Reform School, and aglets.

To Dipper's side, Pacifica Northwest had hauled in a cart full of books from the royal library, all of them brimming with sticky notes the girl had placed during her investigatory reading of them: Red was for factual inconsistencies, green marked vague and legendaric writing in place of historical accuracy, blue was for uncited claims and yellow was for spelling errors. Each book was crammed with a wide collection of all four colors. Next to her, Stanford Pines was trying to assemble a projector.

To Star's left though, was the most surprising guest of all: Buff Frog, standing before the Queen of Mewni, tall and without fear, a baby carriage besides him as his little ones stretched their still new legs by hopping all about the room. One splashed itself over Queen Moon's desk before hoping along again, at which point the older woman leaned forward with a withering expression.

"So Star, here are the facts as I understand them." Queen Moon began to speak rhetorically in a tone that was both sarcastic and annoyed, but mostly disappointed. "Upon my recommendation, you did, in fact, visit the Kingdom's Monster Expert, but rather than learning anything from her, you proceeded to lose her out in the wilderness. Then you decided the best way to remedy this situation would be to appoint a monster, who does not meet the qualifications of the post, to a position which you as princess do not actually have any sort of legal authority to make appointments to. A new appointment whose first act as Monster Expert is to level accusations against a generations old ally of the Kingdom of Mewni, which is a matter completely unrelated to his sphere, even if his appointment was legitimate." Leaning back in her chair for a moment with a stressed expression, the queen concluded her statement with a simple question. "Does that about sum things up?"

"Well... yes?" Star replied with uncertainty. "Look, I know this all seems like a mess at first glance, but when we all sat down and talked about it, we figured out something was going on here!" She tried to explain, before shifting her gaze sideways and loudly whispering "Dipper, work your magic!"

The boy from Earth was, unfortunately, struggling with his poster at the moment and lamenting the fact he didn't have a tripod to mount it on. "Uh... just a sec Star..." Before he could compose a response though, Buff Frog stepped forward, resolve in every step, and began to speak.
"Moon Butterfly, I come before you today hoping you will hear my words, and listen. I speak to you here not as monster to mewman, or proletariat to bourgeoisie, but as parent to parent." At this, Queen Moon straightened up a little and regarded Buff Frog with curiosity. Though her connection to the monster hadn't lasted long, she'd gotten enough sense of him to know he wouldn't pledge by his status as a parent lightly. "And I speak as parent who wishes to leave a time of peace to the children. Just as I know you would not want Star to inherit a world of conflict." With a slight hint of anger to his voice, he added "I have no more love for the likes of Toffee, and Ludo. They would burn down all of monster kind to ensure Butterflies are trapped in the fire."

"But there is more to this game than Toffee and Butterflies and Ludo." Buff Frog explained while beginning to step towards the Queen's desk. She had briefly turned to look at her daughter with a softer expression as the monster explained himself, then turned a careful glare back to him. "I could speak of the weapon merchants, the traders and bargainers that regularly came from the Underworld, in numbers greater than what you know. I conducted hundreds of meetings with them as right hand of Ludo. However, think this will be better example."

Without any flourish, Buff Frog produced his most valuable material possession from his pocket and placed it on Queen Moon's table.

"Dimensional scissors!" She gasped in surprise, before turning narrow eyes against the monster in front of her. "Where did you get these!?"

"Same place as weapons and vending machine. From Lucitors." Buff Frog explained simply. "Was good deal, two for one even. It was these scissors, and the pair Ludo possessed, which let him attack your daughter, Queen Moon. It was these scissors that let Toffee attack your daughter."

The monarch seemed to be struck silent for a moment. She still had doubts as to the origin on the object in front of her and the other mentioned pair, but mention of her ancient enemy and the terrifying realization of how easily he could have attacked her daughter at any time gave Moon pause. It was a pause her visitors took advantage of, as Dipper was the next one to speak up.

"Star told us about how Hekapoo wards all her scissors in order to detect if they're being misused. Thing is though, her wards aren't very good." He explained boldly while stepping up to the Queen's desk. He lifted the scissors up by the handle with one of his hands while the other began to point out various small details. "It's a basic rune programming system sketched into the steel of the blades themselves, small enough to not normally be seen unless you're really looking. They draw the energy they need to operate through the microscopic, nanoseconds until collapse portals the scissors open up just when they're being handled, the ones on the end record each portal opening that reaches a predefined size, and when too many happen within a set time period, this rune here sends a message off to Hekapoo." Dipper explained. Moon was squinting at the scissor blades as he talked and could faintly see what he was talking about.

"Pretty common amateur mistake from someone who isn't used to having to think about security due to being individually powerful." Dipper spoke up, actually causing Moon to blink a few times at what he was implying. "See, the way it's set up here is that this rune is deactivated most of the time, and comes to life when a message needs to go out. If she were clever, Hekapoo would set it so that this thing is always on, always transmitting to a second rune system that will alert her if it stops receiving the signal. From there, set the wards on the tips to turn off the signal rune for a second then turn it back on when an overuse is detected." Gesturing for Moon to look closely again, Dipper tapped the signal rune. "This rune has been permanently broken. It will never turn on and signal Hekapoo again due to the damage it has taken. The end result is an untraceable pair of dimensional scissors."
At this point, Moon had taken the scissors out of Dipper's hands with one of her own, and was using her other gloved hand to compare her own pair of scissors to the one owned by the monster. "Of course, it's not an easy task, damaging such a powerful magic item forged by the flames of an expert, and Hekapoo is still an expert, even if she's a bit lacking in her knowledge of programming security." Dipper explained, not even phased by the object being taken from him and pacing back and forth in front of Moon's desk. "It couldn't have been easy to accomplish something like that of course, you'd need something powerful to scuff such a high quality example of runesmithing, not to mention magical. Something like, say, the sort of fires that are used to weld together magical weapons, or alchemical acid potent enough to shape and dissolve souls."

By now, Moon had compared Buff Frog's pair of scissors to her own, and the human seemed to be telling the truth: The specific rune he'd pointed out was noticeably scuffed in comparison to the matching one on her pair of scissors. She set both tools down on her desk and seemed to withdraw for a moment, not really looking at anything in particular as she tried to sort out all the information she'd just been given. The crowd assembled in front of her all looked nervous as they waited for the queen to reach a conclusion, though Ford did offer his apprentice a look of pride.

"Your majesty..." Pacifica spoke up carefully, stepping forward with a book in hand. "...There's more to it. This is a tome about diplomatic conduct between the various kingdoms of your realm." she explained, while setting the book in front of Queen Moon and flipping to a specific page. "In here, a section that explains which stereotypes about kingdoms are acceptable to joke about under what circumstances, it mentions one about the Lucitors, and it says under 'origins' they have a history of accidentally dropping their magic scissors into lava and then needing to awkwardly ask Hekapoo for new ones. Described as 'acceptable for light teasing between nobles of equal posting.' Is that true?"

"Of course!" Moon said abruptly, finally hitting on a question she could answer. "Why, King Dave joked about his family history of butter fingers just recently, when I asked to move the upcoming Ball to his palace. He commented offhandedly that he was the first King of the Underworld the scissors were actually properly sized for." Then, Moon went quiet again as her expression shifted at a rapid pace as she thought long and hard about all the information she'd been given, expression getting more and more perturbed the longer she contemplated everything. It lasted long enough that a nervous Star took a few steps towards her mother's desk, softly asking "Mom? Are you alright?"

That brought Moon back to focus. "Never better Star." she said through gritted teeth, before fixing her gaze on Buff Frog. "You mentioned having conducted hundreds of meetings with Lucitor representatives, correct?" The Queen asked, and before the monster could answer, she followed up with. "Tell me about them. All of them."

Away from the dance floor, in a private bathroom that was outright hidden from the guests to the Silver Bell Ball, Prince Tom splashed his own face with water and stared at himself in the mirror, trying to psyche himself up after his encounter with Princess Pony Head.

"Come on Thomas, get your head in the game!" He spoke to his own reflection. "Your spies have told you Marco is out of the picture, and you didn't even have to go through with the whole torture thing to make it happen! This is the perfect opportunity to slide right back in and sweep Starship off her feet, show her what she really needs!" Blinking at himself a few times, he added "She's emotionally devastated by loss! Dad always told you that's the best place to pick people up from!"

"Umm, Master Tom...?" A timid voice came from the entrance to the room, the speaker a small demonic servant of some variety.

"WHAT!?" Tom exploded abruptly, inwardly mortified at the idea of someone having caught him
struggling with something as simple as this and burning that mortification into raw anger.

The other demon shrank in place, cowering at the steadily rising fire surrounding the prince. The natives of the Underworld had a natural resistance to fire, but in the case of Tom that just meant being burned to death by his anger would be a longer and more painful of a process for a fellow demon then most other forms of death. Mustering all his will to survive, the servant stuttered "T...There has been an, an incident in your father's study! I was told you would want to investigate personally, s...sir!"

Tom's anger only mounted in response. "And why, in the name of the Great Asmodeus, would you not bring this information TO MY FATHER INSTEAD!?"

"His Majesty and the Queen are preoccupied Master Tom, a disturbance in the city!" The domestic servant rushed to explain as the prince stomped towards him. "A...and the one who requested you be told this, we have been told to follow all his instructions!"

Instantly, the fires went out as Tom's burning anger was replaced with a look of annoyance. "Ah, you must mean that one." He muttered nastily. Looking back at the servant, he dismissively ordered him to depart, an order the demon obeyed with record speed. Grimacing to himself and looking in the mirror one more time, Tom snarled "What has that yellow jester decided to annoy me with tonight I wonder?"

After leaving the bathroom, Tom flagged down a passing guard. "Soldier, go to my quarters and retrieve a locked box from the third right drawer of my dresser. Bring it to my father's office." With the command given, the two parted, Prince Tom walking in silence until he reached the sight of the disturbance. When he finally arrived, all three eyes blinked in confusion.

"Why is there a Mewman boy collapsed across the floor of my father's study?" Tom asked. Whatever he'd been expecting for a disturbance, it really wasn't this.

One of the guards minding the scene held up an empty wine glass. He, and the other soldiers minding the office, bore much more formal looking armor, patterned with the royal red of the Lucitor family and bearing ceremonial silver pauldrons across the shoulders. "As far as we can guess my prince, this glass of wine got spilled at some point, he slipped on it, and knocked himself out cold." Then, with sudden awareness, he pointed to a spot on the floor. "Mind the wet patch mi'lord, it's right over there."

Tom let out a weary sigh. "Ugh, probably some drunk who wandered off from the party. Alright, flip him over and get him out of here." He commanded, but as soon as the first part of his command was completed, the prince's whole body stiffened with angry surprise and he gestured for the guards to stop. "That's Star's bodyguard." He said, at a loss for meaning. "What is he doing all the way back here!?"

"That, uh, would explain some of the things we found on him m'lord." One guard spoke up, gesturing to a small number of knick-knacks on King Dave's work desk. "Only a cursory search so far, but he does seems fairly well equipped for..."

"Throw him in the acid bath."

Tom had spoken the command with cold anger in his voice. In truth, he'd stopped listening to the guard as soon as he'd pointed to the collection of equipment and cast his third eye over it, only for the eye to catch at the sight and return to stare at the gear, joined by the other two in the process. Then, all three of them had shrank with rage as gears began to turn in Tom's head again.
Among the small collection of saboteur's tools and a collapsible crossbow, something stood out to Tom. The device itself was a magic detector assembled out of ordinary household objects, a handheld vacuum cleaner with integrated magic detecting circuitry, while a light-bulb and car speedometer attached to the outer casing provided readings to anyone using it. The speedometer component was what stood out to Tom, he recognized it from the earth vehicles he had encountered during a visit to that dimension.

His eyes widened as things came together in the prince's head. "That thing is made out of objects from the Earth dimension." He thought to himself, casting his eyes on the boy sprawled over the floor, who visibly at least seemed to be a similar age to Tom. "He's not a Mewman at all, is he!? What's he doing here? This... Earth Boy."

At that last thought, Tom gave his order with a shudder of anger, then stormed out of the room. The assembled guards scrambled to attention, working together to haul the captured intruder off the floor and carry him to the most dreaded chamber in the castle, but their prince wasn't evaluating their performance. Instead, he was striding with confidence towards the servant from earlier, who had acquired the box and arrived at the office, just as instructed.

Taking the container without a word, Tom delicately extracted the glass bottle that was inside it, three eyes regarding the bubbling, corrosive looking red liquid inside with an expression of confidence and delight. In the background, his guards shuffled away with their prisoner, but Tom was smiling and ignoring them. "She'll be mine now." He thought as satisfaction rippled down his spine before stepping off towards the dance floor. Everyone was in such a shuffle in fact, that they completely missed it when a spindly figure emerged from a filing cabinet in King Dave's office, then stepped into the corridor, looking quite pleased with itself.

"Alright, run along then Horns, Pine Tree!" Bill whispered to himself, his host's only remaining eye bouncing back and forth in its socket so he could watch Tom depart and Dipper be carried away by guards. "No matter if you escape or not, I'm still ahead of the game! Although, is that a nosey mouse I spy?"

Everyone completely missed Bill emerging from his hiding place in the king's office, everyone except for the unfortunate servant, that is. Tom had stormed off without giving him any further instructions, causing him to simply stand around stunned and unsure where he needed to be at the moment, which was unfortunately enough to seal his fate. The castle courtier tried to take a few steps back and whimpered to himself as Bill strode towards him confidently, a hazy figure of gold slowly materializing around his stolen devil body.

"You however, I'm gonna do this to for fun!"

Two Months Ago

"...And a twenty pound bushel of freshly harvested sanicle herb. I trust everything is to your... satisfaction?"

Tom Lucitor was standing in a circular chamber deep in the Underworld Palace, one of the many ritual room employed by the royal family. The room bore all the common marks of a demonic ritual, blood drenching every surface, animals nailed to the walls and such and a cracked brass bell hanging from the ceiling, but the center floor of the room was unusually lacking in sharply curved pentagrams painted in the ash of the innocent. Instead, pink and yellow childrens' chalk had been used to draw a complicated diagram where pink hearts emerged from an interlocking of yellow gender symbols in the vague aesthetic of a bramble. And instead of a great demon or elder being at the heart of the ritual, Tom had apparently summoned a shlubby middle aged man with a mullet and fake looking wings on his back.
"Yep, it all looks pretty good dude." The Summons replied in a laid back voice, taking a sniff of the green herb and sighing with contentment. He placed the plant matter back with the other offerings (a set of tacky gold necklaces, two cartons of the finest quality eggs from the Lucitor family's private collection of geese, an extremely toxic sample of Woolandian mistletoe, several boxes of top shelf alcohol, and a magical belt and crown that bore the same enchantment) and turned back to Tom. "Well, as promised, here it is! A little something to spice up your relationship!"

As the being spoke he slowly lifted up a clear colored beaker of fluid from his rope belt, where several more bottles with various colors of fluid sat precariously attached. Tom eyed the bottle enviously with all three pupils, eager to hold it in his hands. "However!" The spirit of attraction spoke suddenly while raising up a finger, causing Tom to almost flinch from the delay. "Be careful with this, and try to make use of it as quickly as possible!"

"Why, is there a shelf life to this stuff?" Tom asked, suddenly troubled and curious.

"No shelf life man, but this stuff is potent, and can be dangerous in the wrong hands. Believe me, I've seen lesser potions than this cause a lot of trouble." The summoned man explained, causing Tom to visibly relax and even grin a little. "I mean, don't rush your lovely new wife into anything or anything, but the longer you leave this laying around, the bigger the chance you have of misplacing it. And absolutely don't go priming it until you're sure it's go time, otherwise someone else could end up physically obsessed with you."

"Right, of course." Tom remarked, nodding a little. Then, he frowned. "Now, when you say prime it..." The prince asked a little nervously. "...Does that really mean what the book said it means?"

"You better believe it man! Gotta get YOUR essence in there after all!" The summoned creature replied, grinning like a frat boy that had pulled a prank on the demon prince instead of a cosmic being. "By the way dude, a word of advice: Don't miss. If you do, it's gonna be a lot harder on her to actually drink this thing, and moving it into another bottle will probably spill some, and then all the concentration ratios are off."

"Noted." Tom said with a minor gravel of disgust to his voice, but was all and all still visibly pleased with the deal he had conducted. Adopting a more formal stance, he looked straight on at his private little conjuring and thanked him. "I'm sure this is going to be a great help to us. We've talked about this at length, and while we both love each other, the whole, you know, arranged marriage thing can sort of cast a damp blanket on the honeymoon bed, if you know what I'm saying?" He spoke smoothly and slickly, every word managing to sound like the casual truth. "I apologize that the new Mrs. Lucitor couldn't be here as well, I know she'd want to thank you in person."

"Hey man, surprise tax protest blockades sound like a real hassle! Besides, there's no need to thank me, well, outside of these fresh party supplies that is!" The being answered, taking his place at the center of the ritual circle with his tribute and pulling two bottles of liquor out of the top box. "Adding some fire to arranged marriages is a basic level parlor trick for me. I've done it enough times I could do it in my sleep! And sometimes I have!" The ritual abruptly began to reverse, soft pink flames igniting on the edge of the drawing and drawing inwards. "LOVE FOR THE LOVE GOD!"

"Yes." Tom muttered, taking a very appreciate glance down at his latest acquisition, feet splashing through ritually spilled blood as he moved to the exit. "Love for the Love God indeed."

Back on the dance floor, Star and Pacifica had been doing their best to play the roles of princess and bodyguard, working through the crowd and exchanging the necessary formalities. They had even started to have a degree of fun at the event, laughing at each other's jokes and enjoying the company. The mood abruptly soured however, when they spotted Prince Tom approaching their position, seemingly looking to confront them while their backs were to a refreshment table.
"I don't suppose we can sic Pony Head on him again?" Pacifica asked sideways to the Princess of Mewni. Star, in turn, glanced sideways over her shoulder to observe Flying Princess Pony Head getting cheered on by other young royals as she tilted her head back to drink an entire bowl of fruit punch that was only being held up by her teeth. Looking back to Pacifica, Star simply remarked "Doesn't seem like it."

"Hey Starship." Tom greeted, having finally crossed the distance to the two. "What do you say you and me get our formal dance of the night out of the way? If we wait too long our dads are probably gonna start swinging at each other." He spoke the last sentence like a joke, but there was something of a coldness to Tom's voice, making it a joke that lacked any of the warmth of humor.

"Uh... I think we should wait to do that. You know, make it a sort of grand finale to the evening?" Star replied back uncertainly, while thinking to herself "Hopefully by then the sort of disaster all my efforts can't go without will have triggered and we'll all be running away from the fires without me having to actually dance with him."

"Eh, not a bad idea, but I think we should do this... sooner." Tom stated, taking a little step forward towards Star. The princess automatically stepped back in response but bumped against the refreshment table, while Pacifica had begun to glare at the princes with unrestrained disdain. "Is is because you want to look for your bodyguard instead? I noticed the boy in the red suit is missing."

Despite her attempts to control her response, Star felt a bead of sweat form on her head at Tom's statement. "Oh no, I'm not worried. He's around here, uh, somewhere! You know how bodyguards are, fading into the background is a skill after all, not a liability for them!" Star was obviously nervous when she spoke, while Tom kept up a silky smooth, relaxed expression, looking for all the world like he was casually chatting about the weather.

"Well, maybe he's a little less highly recommended than you initially thought." Tom stated, dropping the bomb as casually as possible. "My guards actually stumbled upon him in the back offices. Now, nothing serious is going on, yet, he was probably just sneaking off to do some drinking, but I think it'd be best we get our dance out of the way so you and me and can work out his release. In private." Both blonds were showing signs of nervousness now, and Tom's placid expression took a victorious tone to it, the insinuation in his words clear as day. "I'd hate for our parents to get involved in this, I'm sure your mother wouldn't approve of whatever whacky scheme you came up with here and my dad has quite the temper, you know, and can be sort of paranoid. Had a pizza guy executed last month thinking he was a revolutionary."

Openly nervous now, Star and Pacifica looked right at each other, unsure of what to do, but the princess quickly burst out "Sure, okay then! Let me just... cool down with a drink, to get ready! I'll meet you out on the dance floor!?"

"I await your arrival, Princess Star." Tom responded with a tone of smooth silk, before stepping away from the two. Instantly, Star spun around to the drink she'd poured herself before the demon prince had approached and swallowed it down in one gulp, trying to steady her active nerves. In response, Tom's expression shone with delight despite his best efforts, but fortunately for him, his two targets hadn't noticed his change of expression.

"Pacifica what are we gonna do!?" Star asked with a panicky tone while pouring up another drink to try and calm down. "They've got Dipper!"

"Okay, okay, calm down, freaking out won't get us anywhere." The human girl responded, obviously quite worried herself from her tone of voice, before she activated her communication device, with much less subtlety than it had been used the rest of the evening. "Pines 2, this is Pines 3. Pines 1 has been captured by Trioculus, over." She spoke into the ring on her finger.
On the other side of the line, Stanford could detect the radio crackle to life at the edge of his hearing, but the sound of Pacifica's voice was swiftly drowned out by the police sirens filling the air as he lead the carriages of Underworld Police Department on a looping chase through the city in the surveillance van. "I'll have to pick up later, sorry!" He said to no one in particular, before swerving the wheel hard to try and lose them in the intake system of a magma driven steel mill.

"No response, damn it." Pacifica breathed harshly as she finally gave up trying to reach Ford. "Alright, Dipper's in trouble, we need to do something to get him out of this and put the ditch on Prince Creep over there." She muttered, glancing to the side to see Tom was giving the two a dorky wave from the center of the dance floor. However, Pacifica's eyes widened and her tone got softer (though still filled with concern) when she noticed Star was waving back to him. "Star, are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm good." The princess responded, breaking the wave. "I'm thinking... let's play Tom's game, for now. I'll go out, dance with him a little while you look for Dipper, and maybe he'll tell me something useful?" She explained with an increasingly spaced out expression. "That'd hardly be the worst thing in the world, right?" Star's face had gone from spaced out to dreamy admiration by now.

Pacifica, on the other hand, wore an expression of total bafflement, flavored by contempt. "Star, what are you talking about!?" She replied harshly while clasping the Butterfly's shoulder, only to draw back when she felt her fingers sink into the princess' skin, her muscles having relaxed into butter. With a growing look of horror on her face, Pacifica scooped up the cup Star had been drinking from, and whipped out a pair of Groucho Marx glasses, put them on her face, then squeezed the nose to activate the magic detection system built into the lenses. The girl from Earth nearly dropped the cup when a strong magical aura could be seen clinging to the bottom of the container, like leftover liquid. Pacifica quickly removed the device and put both hands on Star's shoulders.

"Star, listen to me." She spoke curtly, as the princess began to get a dopey expression on her face. "I'm not demanding you just get over whatever you're feeling at the moment, but Dipper is in danger! You remember Dipper, right? Your friend! You need to try and focus so we can help him."

Pacifica's words set off a struggle across Star's face, and when the princess looked away from the prince across the room to her friend, she seemed to sober up considerably. "Right, I need to... go somewhere private. I can use my MAGIC to find him!" She detailed, still not all there.

"Yeah, we need to get you somewhere private for a lot of reasons..." Pacifica muttered, angry and frustrated though of course not at Star. "She's been drugged somehow, or something with magic, and I need to get her out of here..."

"Hey, don't worry Paz!" Star spoke up, while raising her wand up besides her own increasingly pale and sweaty face, which bore an increasingly loopy expression. "MAAAAAAGIC will get us out of this!"

Deeper into the castle, a pair of just two guards transported Dipper into one of the kingdom's most feared rooms on a gurney, the wheeled bed proving much more adept at handling the still unconscious human teenager than the six stumbling guards could. Demons, you see, are extremely durable and even mildly regenerative as a species, though not to the extent of Septarians. Combine that with their innate fire immunity, and executing them proves to be something of a challenge. However, the Lucitor establishment had developed a winning formula generations and generations ago.

The room was a simple cube, metal walls in front of a square pool dug into the floor. Most victims where anesthetized and already zipped up in a body bag before the execution was carried out, so
security features were minimal. A small table was built onto a wall, in case the person had to be stripped of any protective charms or objects before being tossed in. Along with that, the only other feature of the room was two other gurneys stored in here and some knobs built into the walls, like sink faucets but without a pipe between them, with the actual tubes they opened positioned a distance away to feed the currently empty pool when released.

After wheeling Dipper in and making sure he wasn't waking up, the two guard set to work turning the faucets and then watched the pool fill with the kingdom's finest alchemical acid, the really strong stuff that even the industrial plants didn't utilize for being too dangerous to work with. It was a fairly slow fill, as even with the eye and mouth protection both guards had donned before entering, no one wanted droplets of the stuff splashing all over the place. Besides, it wasn't like their prisoner was going anywhere.

"Dipper...Dipper!"

A familiar voice at the edge of reality, obscured by the thick ooze that seemed to coat every pore of... what, exactly? Dipper Pines realized there was nothing at all stopping him as he returned to reality, returning to a swimming head as his consciousness chased the familiar tone whispering to him. Who was it that whispering in his ear, with that pleasant, familiar voice?"

"Star?" He croaked out, with a hoarse whisper. As much as his throat hurt to talk, the pain saved him, as Dipper didn't yet remember he needed to stay quiet and a healthy voice would have been heard by the absent minded guards watching the pool fill and trying not think about what they were about to do. It didn't even occur to Dipper that it was weird for Star to be floating in front of his face, talking to him.

On the other side of her latest use of the All-Seeing Eye spell, Star grimaced at the sight of Dipper but nearly fell off her own feet as a wave of disgust hit her. "Dipper, look, stay quiet!" She told him in a harsh whisper, as the boy got sharper and sharper by the second. "Tom's goons have dragged you off, you need to get out of there!"

"Star, what...?" He breathed out, but quickly sobered up after taking a look down his body and seeing the two minions with their backs turned to him. He whipped his head back to Star, planning on saying something, but couldn't help but wince. "Star, you look terrible!" He spat out bluntly.

He wasn't wrong though, as Star had gotten steadily paler, sweater and even jittery the longer she stood cramped in the public bathroom stall she'd cast the All-Seeing Eye spell in. The princess could feel a haze building up behind her eyes, clouding her thoughts and numbing her nerves, but as long as she stayed focused on Dipper through the magical viewer, she could beat it back with her concern for her friend. "Don't worry... about me. I can handle this, but you need to get out of here! Tom is trying to blackmail me with your safety, you need to bail!"

That was the final push needed for Dipper to clear the fog from his eyes and burn off the weight placed over his mind, mental cement shoes drying to drag his brain to the deep sleep. "No one uses me against my friends." He thought to himself, feeling determination flow over his body, and he looked right back at Star and whispered "Okay, I'll get out of here and make my way back to you, and we can..."

"NO!" Star whispered harshly. "You need to escape with Ford, go to Plan B! Don't... don't worry..." she said, struggling through a dizzy spot that did nothing to discourage Dipper's worries. Star then collapsed for a moment, catching herself on the rim of the toilet with her arms. Dipper tensed up in shock at the sight, but soon enough, Star lifted her face back to the All-Seeing Eye, a confident grin on her even as she was completely pale, flustered, and sweating profusely. "I've got my parents AND Pacifica to help bail me out of this, while you're all on your own! Focusing on saving yourself,
I can handle a demon!"

Dipper looked at her with concern for a moment, but ultimately his internal struggle came down on Star's side after little thought. "Alright then. I've got confidence in you two! See you all back at Butterfly Castle!"

With all the necessary information conveyed, Star ended the All-Seeing Eye, removing Dipper from her sight and the drain from her wand. Instantly, the haze in her mind surged forward without a mental focus to drive it back. In a daze, Star responded to the spell disappearing by muttering "It's a date, Tom." With all her strength, the princess lifted herself from the toilet rim and turned around to leave the stall, only to run face first into the still locked door in front of her. Despite this being absurdly minor compared to some scrapes the rebel princess had taken in her life, her weakened state made it so this bowled her over. "Auuuggghhh, Tom, help me!" She cried out from bathroom floor, voice a delirious warble as a small trail of blood began to trickle from her nose.

Groaning and struggling to her knees on sedate, sensitive muscles, Star tried to regain her senses. Everything felt so strong now, the mild chill of the tile below feeling like she'd dunked her leg in an ice chest and the small trickle of blood on her nose feeling like a gushing laceration. The mild lemon scent applied to give the bathroom a pleasing odor felt like a burning chemical weapon invading her blood free nostril. "Carry me away Tom!" Star gushed, swooning around the seat of the toilet like it was the balcony of an imposing castle she was imprisoned in, just waiting for a noble knight to come rescue her! It was all Star wanted at the moment, and the part of her brain screaming this was all wrong was slowly getting caked over by the magical haze.

It was still there though, enough to give Star a moment of doubt as she looked at her sickly reflection in the bowl of water in front of her. "What's happening to me!?" She cried in desperation, even as her lips began to tingle and feel swollen, aching out for the soothing kiss of a demon.

At that exact same moment, Dipper found himself also looking into a body of liquid, with a displeased look on his face, though the Pines Twin wore a more resigned grimace of disgust.

It had begun simply enough. As soon as Star's face blinked out of existence, Dipper sprung to action, mind already racing to plan his escape. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite as returned to reality as he had initially thought, as in that short moment, the human had forgotten about the two guards he had been trying to keep from noticing him by whispering during his talk with Star.

Any lingering fogginess was dispelled for good though as the two guards sprung to attention in response to someone coming to life behind them, Dipper's dress shoes clattering against the polished metal floor. Both spun around as fast as possible, embarrassed and angry at that the fact that their casual chit-chat while waiting for the acid bath to fill had so thoroughly distracted them.

Unfortunately, this proved to be a second mistake. The further back-most guard accidentally slapped his partner across the face with the ornamental pauldron of his armor due to the size difference between the two as both swung around. This small displacement, combined with how surprised both guards were and the precarious placement they both were in, was enough to make the unfortunate guard lose their footing and tumble into the acid bath, which by now was close enough to filled to fully submerge a humanoid.

The guard began screaming as soon as he hit the acid, flesh peeling back faster than it could regrow, and the sustained howl of agony sent adrenaline shots through both other people in the room, and was eventually silenced when the corrosive fluid got into the fallen guard's throat, reducing his insides to bloody paste.

The still standing guard lunged at Dipper, screaming a battle cry of fear and anger. The human
thought quickly however, and swiftly grabbed the gurney he'd been laying on a moment ago and slid it between him in the guard, causing his charge to end when his waist hit the gurney and he double over it. Undeterred, the demon soldier attempted to wrest the person mover out of the way, and after a short contest of strength with the human teenager, flung it to the side to clatter against a metal wall. Looking truly furious, the demon soldier drew a sword as Dipper took a cautious step back.

However, before the standing guard could charge away from the edge of the bath, the fallen one made a desperate, and ultimately unfortunate attempt to survive. He had managed to briefly rise above the surface of the acid mixture, completely silent due to his lungs corroding away almost entirely. As small patches of skin tried to regrow themselves while the acid was eating away at exposed muscles and even seeping down to bone at this point, the demonic flame inside gave this guard one more attempt at life. He cast a shrunken hand out of the acid bath, trying to pull himself out by the edge.

Unfortunately, all the demon's eyes had been melted to cataracted piles of goop, slowly seeping out of the eye sockets and stuck around the still relatively solid lenses. As a result, his reach for safety was a blind one, and instead of the edge of the acid bath, his melting fingers grabbed onto the leg of his partner, who recoiled in fear and practically jumped out of his skin at the sensation.

Too many nerves melted away to tell the difference, the soldier in the bath yanked his gripping arm down, trying to leverage himself against the floor to haul his body out. Instead, his fellow guard came tumbling in on top of him.

Dipper stood and watched the bubbling pool of acid calm to placidity for a few moments, both because he was shocked by how fast that had all happened and because the practical side of his brain wanted to make sure they weren't going to climb out after him. While processing the whole thing, Dipper's face ran the gamut of grimaces from disgusted, regretful, dismissive and eventually troubled. Finally coming to terms with it and certain no one was going to climb out after him, Dipper meticulously returned the gurneys to their original positions and turned off the acid faucets, muttering a quick "Forgive me if I don't join you."

He had briefly patted down his suit's pockets as an afterthought to check what gear he still had, but Dipper stopped in his tracks when he felt something he didn't recognize. Looking confused, the boy reached inside his inner suit pocket to find it was stuffed full of letter envelopes! And not just any letters, sealed letters addressed to the King of the Underworld!

"I don't remember finding these..." He thought to himself with a concerned look on his face. "...In fact, I don't really remember much after that weird shrine. I was moving around the hallways again, and then...?" Shaking his head, Dipper stuffed the letters back into his suit. "Whatever, I can have Great Uncle Ford check my brain later. For now, I gotta get out of here."

Tom was getting annoyed by how long it was taking Star to yield to his threat and come dancing. He'd already lost sight of her for a bit when he had to get off to the side so someone else could use the main dance floor, but was relieved when she finally entered his field of vision, walking right towards him. Relieved enough that he completely ignored how stiff and unnaturally neutral her posture and expression was.

"Princess Star..." Tom asked graciously, while extending a hand to her. "...May I have this dance?"

Star didn't answer aloud, instead doing so by extending her arm and taking the prince's hand. The whole Ball went silent as the dance floor cleared out. All eyes were on them, and both pairs of parents watched with particularly rapt attention. Tom took the lead in the dance, but instantly, something felt wrong.
The Princess of Mewni was limp and stiff, shuffling with every step as the two began to circle around the floor, trying to build the dance's speed but feeling like he was dragging a weight along him. "Something's wrong, she should be all over me after the potion I gave her." Tom thought to himself as the steps continued. Already, murmurs were beginning to move through the crowd. "If that potion has hurt Star I'll summon that Love God again just so I can skin him aOUCH!"

As the repetitive, monotonous steps continued, Star had unexpectedly crushed one of Tom's feet during a close section. Temper flared in all three eyes as he involuntarily glared at Star for a moment, and despite how quickly the prince regained control, the crowd had taken notice of both the foot step and the hateful flash of expression it evoked. When his own was back to being a controlled expression, Tom examined the face of his dance partner: It was neutral, unnaturally neutral for such an expressive person. Even her cheek marks seemed dull and uncertain, not glowing with life like they usually were.

Tom attempted to dip Star down, but she straight refused to cooperate with that section of dance, forcing him to do all the work to lift her back to a standing position. The two royal families were glaring at each other with increasingly tense expressions now, the two fathers in particular seeming to be one spark away from coming to blows.

"Okay, something's gone wrong here. Time to bring out the big trebuchets." Tom thought to himself with an increasingly nervous glance around with his third eye. The assembled royals were already gossiping among themselves, the dance in front of them so stiff and awkward that they couldn't even wait to return to their own castles before indulging in speculation/slander. However, Tom attempted ignore that, briefly turning the dance's awkward nature into an advantage by letting his body go on autopilot while he tried to focus his mental energies into his third eye. "Now, just a little spot of hypnotism should bring some life to this party."

Retaking active control of the dance, Tom took an abrupt, sharp step that Star clearly wasn't expecting, as the jolt of surprise she expressed from it was the most emotion she'd registered this whole time. Tom locked eyes with her, his more normal two locking hers down while his third peered straight into her mind, and began to transmit. "Weird, it's foggy in here. Something, huh, feels wrong about..."

All Tom's thoughts dissolved into psychic static when Star abruptly rammed her right index finger into his third eye.

"Big mistake! I've blinded bigger, creepier demons in my time than you!" Star yelled at Tom as the two separated, Tom stumbling backwards as he felt his brain go haywire, built up magic frizzing out and causing small fires while Star stepped back with a defensive posture that belayed the put on confidence she had yelled that with. Confused, Tom muttered "Star, what happened to your voice...?" before he was drowned out by his father.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!?"

From his place on the sidelines, King Dave had exploded with rage, looking as though the only reason he hadn't vented his wrath upon someone was because he couldn't decide between Moon, River, Star, Tom, Wrathmelior, or the closest servant. However, even his titanic inferno of anger was damped by surprise as the last person anyone in the room expected took to the dance floor.

"OH, YOU WANNA KNOW THE MEANING OF THIS!?"

This time, the speaker was another Star Butterfly, who despite looking much more run down than the one who had danced with Tom, seemed much more recognizable to those that knew her. She had shouted her shout in a dazed, gargling tone of voice, and her long blond hair was wet and clumpy,
needing to be pushed out of her eyes several times during her walk across the room. Her heart
stamped cheeks were puffed up and huffy, while her dress was ruffled and damp near the neck, and
she nearly fell over several times during her exceedingly angry walk across the room.

"Wait, Star, what is...?" Tom began to stutter, face rapidly shifting back and forth between the Star
he'd danced with and this new one, and to the prince's misfortune, happened to be looking right at
the new Star when she commemorated successfully crossing the floor by spitting the mouthful of
water she'd been carrying in her cheeks right into his face. "EEUUEGGHH!"

"There, you can take back whatever you tried to poison me with!" Star screamed accusingly. "I hope
the toilet water washed it all out!"

The crowd of royals burst into an uproar at this point, a single step away from exploding into a full
on riot as everyone rapidly took a side.

"What does that Butterfly brat think she's doing!?!"

"How dare the Lucitors try and poison a royal guest!?!"

"This courtship is a scam!"

"Is this how the Butterfly's repay their hosts!?!"

"THE AUDACITY!"

"I still don't get why there are two Stars!"

"WOOHOO! CIVIL WAR!"

"HERESY!"

"NO ONES EXPECTS THE MEWMAN INQUISITION!"

"CAN SOMEBODY PLEASE EXPLAIN THE TWO STARS?!?"

"Yo! King Dave! If you're shopping for new trade partners sometimes soon the Spiderbites are open
for business!"

"FRUSTRATION GETTING BIGGER!"

"How long have you guys had toilets!?!"

"HOW DARE SHE SPIT AT THE PRINCE'S UNHOLY FACE, UPON UNHOLY GROUND,
ON THIS UNHOLY DAY?!?"

"Gas the Butterflies, race war now!"

"WE MUST SEIZE THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION!"

"...fear, and surprise, and ruthless efficiency, and an almost fanatical devotion to the queen..."

"It's treason then!"

"SANITY IS FOR THE WEAK!"

"...Did someone spike the punch?"
"PRINCE TOM! PRINCE TOM! I'LL MAKE OUT WITH YOU!"

"THE SHIP WAR STARTS NOOOOOOW!"

"TOFFEE DID NOTHING WRONG!"

"Bloody Mewmans!"

"Hey, don't stop paying attention to me, Princess Pony Head!"

"ENOUGH!"

By this point King Dave had exploded into an outright pillar of screaming soul magic in an attempt to control the crowd, a task he was barely succeeding at. The Butterfly parents were trying to work their way through the crowd to get to their daughter, while Wrathmelior was actively on fire at this point, barely restraining herself with the knowledge that acting on her desires would flash incinerate most of the crowd as well as Star.

The Princess of Mewni, for her part, was quick to realize how heated she had made things, as the delirious haze that had blinded her sight seemed to retreat as soon as the water splashed onto Tom's face. Tom, in turn, couldn't even feel angry at this point, as he was still bowled over by the sudden arrival of a second Star, shocked at the fact he'd been spat on, was still loopy from getting his third eye poked mid-magic use, and was steadily growing afraid of the princess in front of him as she looked more and more aware of her surroundings and increasingly angry with him. Essentially, he was too baffled and stunned to be mad right now.

"Star, should we answer at least one of this questions?" The Star who had danced with Tom asked, now speaking in what was clearly the wrong voice. Giving a curt nod of her head, the damp Star gave a brisk wave of her wand, causing the glamours on her doppelganger to fade away in a sparkle of light, revealing Pacifica Northwest underneath the magic. A basic enough charm, aided by the fact the two teenage girls already had a lot of physical similarities. "Is Dipper alright?"

"He's fine." Queen Moon spoke up as her and River burst through the crowd in a rush. "I contacted Stanford while we were moving through the crowd, he's moving to extract Dipper. We need to get out of here before this crowd erupts into violence!" Then, the Queen looked over to her husband. "River?"

"On it." He replied quickly while producing the royal couple's pair of scissors and cutting a way out. "Though I myself would enjoy a spot of crowd violence."

Moon turned to her daughter, then froze for a moment, letting her true concern for the young girl break through. "Star?" She asked gently, stepping closer. "Are you okay?"

The question seemed to strike Star solid, and the weight of the night's events came crashing down on her finally clear head. With an usually quiet, somber response, the princess remarked. "I... think I'm good. I just want to leave now, but... you're sure Dipper is going to be okay, right?"

Moon couldn't help but smile at Star's endless compassion for her allies. "I can tell for a fact Stanford will move soil and sky to get him out of here. We need to do the same." She replies comfortingly, and then, in a moment that surprised the weary queen, Star leaned forward and gave her mom a hug, one that Moon swiftly returned. Soon enough though, the mother ended the hug. "It's time to go Star." She said, as they were the only ones left to take the portal.

"Hey, Starship, wait, I'm sor..." Tom made an effort to address Star before she left, finally out of his daze, but from the moment he started speaking the princess was spinning around while her wand
energized with green light, but by the time the instrument was up and aimed, the prince had already been blasted across the room by a blast of energy launched from Queen Moon's still smoking palm, green fire quickly dying out.

"You'll be hearing from us soon enough." Moon pronounces icily to the combined Lucitor family before she and Star shuffled into the portal themselves, which soon sealed itself behind them.

Across the room, at the refreshments table Tom had been blasted into and collapsed under him, the demon prince was swiftly plucked up and put back on his feet by his mother, who had swiftly strode through the much smaller crowd as soon as he'd been hit. "Are you okay Thomas!? Are you bruised anywhere? Don't worry sweetie, your father and I will sort all this out with those nasty Butterflies..."

From a distance, Dave watched his wife attend to his son with a satisfied look. "Good, a little show of compassion should help keep the crowd sympathetically inclined towards us." He mused, before turning about to address the other royals. "It is my most sincere regret to announce the remainder of the Silver Bell Ball is cancelled, for reasons I'm sure you all understand. If you would be so kinda as to follow me, we will ensure you are all safely escorted to your transports."

"Thanks mom, but I think I just need some time to be alone. If I might be excused from the Ball?" Tom asked his mother as soon as he was standing steady again, not insincere in his gratitude but with another purpose in mind then what he had said. Queen Wrathmelior was quick to excuse her son, and without any more words, Prince Tom skulked off into the castle depths.

"That Earth Boy is still around here somewhere."

True to Tom's guess, Dipper was still making his way through the castle halls, trying to reach the escape position he and Ford had agreed to over the communicators. However, that plan was based on the incomplete maps of the Lucitor castle possessed by the Butterfly Family and only studied by the humans over a few days, meaning Tom was able to catch up with Dipper easily enough.

Watching the human from the shadows, Tom felt the fire building in his arms, aching with anger that was fighting and boiling in an attempt to get out, to explode free and turn his rivals to ash. "Just a little closer, and I'll burn you to a crisp." He thought to himself, grinning with anticipation by now. "It won't be as good as getting to kill Marco would be, but I'll take what stress relief I can get."

"HEY THERE HORNS!"

Tom nearly jumped out of his skin as he was abruptly made aware someone had followed him from the shadows just as he'd followed Dipper. Surprisingly, the human teenager hadn't heard the loud greeting, but was unwittingly making good use of it by continuing to move forward while Tom came to a stop. Taking a deep breath and exhaling forcefully, the prince took a moment to center himself before turning around and addressing his visitor.

"Hey Bill. Can this wait? I was right on the verge of solving a little problem of mine."

"Yep, you had a really good shot at roasting that defenseless teenager! Good show!" Bill complemented gracefully. "But, and I know this is weird coming from someone whose told that guy to make like a Pines Tree and burn to the ground, I gotta stop you here."

Tom was getting upset again, the familiar, infuriating feeling of denial creeping up on him, but was also slightly confused. "Wait, you know this guy?"

"YEP! He foiled a bunch of my plans too!"

"Then why're you interrupting me!?" Tom snarled at the one eyed demon in front of him. "I'm gonna
go solve our mutual problem right now!" He announced, but suddenly realized he couldn't move. All three eyes looked downwards when he abruptly realized he was in terrible pain.

"Well because I need him to deliver all the sensitive documents about your father's arms industry that I stuck in his suit after knocking him out to the Queen of Mewni!" Bill explained, saying like it was the most casual thing in the world, and also like he hadn't just conjured Holy Diver and smashed its fist through Tom's stomach.

Garbling from the blood building up in his throat, Tom fell straight to the floor when Bill withdrew the ethereal fist and stared at the double demon in front of him with disbelief. "What... what are you doing!? Why have you done this!?" He demanded.

"Oh, don't be a drama queen Horns. Your dad is gonna be enough of that." Bill replied nonchalantly. "And don't worry about that little flesh wound, you'll heal from it in no time! In fact, since I'm such a good friend, I'll make sure you won't even remember this pain!" By now, Bill was standing over Tom's body and pointing a finger at his face.

"Mind Eraser, Pew Pew!"

By now far ahead of the three demons, Dipper burst through the last set of doors between him and his destination, leaving him on an open air balcony with an admittedly magnificent view of a nearby lava river. Holding his tie to his lips, Dipper stated "I'm at the extraction point."

"Understood Dipper. I'll be with you shortly."

The human teenager was able to hear it before he saw it, a deafening cacophony of wailing sirens and clattering hooves. Over the horizon first came the surveillance van, wheels run so ragged the rubber was peeling off in strips, and second came an enormous number police carriages pulled by skeletal horses, in desperate pursuit of the fugitive who'd been leading them around the city all evening.

However, even the most stalwart and dedicated of the law enforcement officers pulled the reigns on their skeletal steeds as the van showed no signs of slowing down in front of the lava river, and by the time the Earth vehicle plunged into the lake of fire the entire pursuit force, which had built up to enough force to police three counties, had come to a shocked and horrified stop.

Dipper however, looked nonplussed by the turn of events, simply checking his watch until Ford appeared through an interdimensional portal that soon formed next to his apprentice, Buff Frog's pair of scissors in hand. "Are you alright Dipper?" were the first words Ford spoke, all while putting a comforting hand on his great nephew's shoulder.

Smiling gently up at his mentor, Dipper replied "I am. I did learn from the best after all." Then, an idea crossed his mind. "Hold on a second" he remarked, before arming the plastic explosive he'd had on him in the suit's most carefully concealed pocket the whole time and tossing it through Ford's portal, which soon after sealed shut. In the distance, the lava river suddenly erupted for a moment as the bomb went off underneath the molten flow. "You can never dispose of evidence too thoroughly, right?"

With a small chuckle, Ford answered "That sounds like something Stan would say. Not that he'd be wrong of course." while cutting open a fresh portal out for the two of them. Soon enough, both of them were away, leaving behind chaos at Castle Lucitor.

Three Hours Later
"Even though I had my suspicions before hand, I can barely believe it. All these years..."

Queen Moon had uttered those words in despair as the last of the letters Dipper had recovered fell from her hands to her desk, joining the other opened and read correspondences. The Queen's head collapsed towards the desk and needed to be caught by both hands being propped up by her elbows. King River placed a gentle hand on his wife's back, while the rest of the room (everyone involved in the mission plus Buff Frog) looked on in sympathy. "...All these years and the Lucitors have been selling weapons to monsters behind Mewni's back."

Everyone in the room, even those with less than full sympathy for the Kingdom of Mewni, stood quietly, up until Star broke the silence. "Mom..." she asked, voice uncertain. "What's going to happen now?"

After a long moment, Queen Moon simply admitted "I don't know." with a frustrated sigh. "Our alliance with the Underworld goes back generations, but from the look of things they've been violating it from day one! And after that incident on the dance floor I doubt personal negotiation can resolve this..." Instantly, Moon regretted her harsh tone and tried to give her daughter a soothing expression. "Star, I'm sorry. Don't feel like this is your fault. What Tom tried to do to you was monstrous. Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Star responded. The smile she cracked was obviously nervous, but Moon didn't think she should press the issue at the moment. "I knew I'd get out of that trouble, because I've got my two best friends from Earth watching my back!" Star continued, now moving between Pacifica and Dipper to throw her arms over both their shoulders. Though she was putting on a bright smile on the outside, inside, Star felt chilled to the core. "Suddenly, I understand why Marco was so against me going to the Blood Moon Ball. I... I really wasn't fair to him about that..."

Despite still being concerned for her daughter, Moon did find herself smiling warmly as she turned to the two human teenagers. "Yes, I must thank you two with all my heart for what you both did to protect my daughter. I... I must apologize for the suspicion and ill-treatment I have shown you so far. Henceforth, you shall all be welcomed guests of Mewni!"

Dipper just looked a little uncomfortable at this despite smiling a little, and coughed into his fist. "I mean, I didn't do all that much..."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. Just thinking about keeping you safe helped me fight that crazy brain cloud Tom stuck me with." Star replied, genuinely complementing her friend. Then, she turned to the human girl. "But, Pacifica... I can't thank you enough. You took a massive risk to help me out back there, and I really want you to know how much I appreciate it."

Pacifica in turn smiled warmly back at Star. "I was just trying to do what was right and help my new friend." She replied, looking a little nervous from the attention. "And I know that if our roles were switched back there, you'd do the exact same for me."

"Awww, you guys are the best! Group hug!" Star called out, before pulling the other two teenagers in tight, taking them both by surprise and leaving them briefly out of air. Opening her eyes, the princess looked at her mother and added "And don't worry mom, Doctor Pines tells me everything has come back good!"

"Well, let's not jump to conclusions." Ford spoke up, a little reluctantly. "While I did determine the source of Star's immediate trouble at the Ball, some of the tests need longer to finish, and I must wait for that time to make a definitive statement." He explained before going silent for a moment. Moon looked troubled at this, and reluctantly asked "And what, exactly, did Tom do to my daughter, and are we sure it's gone?" Then, she instantly cast her eyes over to her daughter and hastily added "As
"It's... it's okay mom." Star answered after a quick moment of thought while releasing her two human friends. "Doctor Pines? Go ahead and tell them everything."

"Yes, well, in short, as far as I can determine, Star had been drugged with a love potion." Ford explained bluntly, thought it was obvious he was trying to be delicate. Being direct and clinical simply came naturally to him regarding matters medical and scientific. "As far as I can tell, a very... physical one at that. However, based on my analysis of her cheek swabbing and preliminary blood work, I can safely say it was completely neutralized. The magic of the potion was brewed specifically to, um, boost intimacy between consenting couples. When Star violently rejected the potion by washing her mouth out with toilet water and spitting it back on the person who had... tuned to the serum to themselves, the magic was nullified and the potion rejected." He explained firmly but reassuringly. Then, he quickly added on "At worst, the only lingering effect is that you'll likely need to urinate more frequently for about a week, at most, as your body and natural magic does its best to flush the remaining, but I assure you, powerless, potion out of your system. And that is, of course, presuming nothing else comes up on the tests still in progress."

"That is most reassuring, thank you Doctor Pines." Moon responded. Letting out a sigh, she organized the collection of stolen papers to the side and stated "And... everything I said of your wards earlier is true of you as well, Doctor Pines. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive the harsh suspicion that myself and the Magical High Commission treated you with, and will continue to grant your valuable aid to the Kingdom of Mewni."

"It's no worry Queen Moon. You were simply acting cautiously." Ford replied with a neutral tone, then opted to speak no more. After waiting a bit longer for him to say more than she probably should have, the Queen returned to a formal stance and glanced back down at her paperwork.

"Yes, well, if there's nothing else, I must respectfully ask to be left alone." Queen Moon spoke up, weariness beginning to weigh down her tone. "I have quite a lot of work to do from now on. Star?" She asked, looking straight at her daughter. "From here on out, you have full permission to conduct the pursuit of the criminal Bill Cipher without any oversight from me. While I may need to request assistance from you or your friends in the future, in all matters regarding Bill Cipher you no longer need to ask my permission for anything." With a suddenly more stern look, she added "Use this responsibility wisely Star. I grant it to you largely because I have enough on my plate as it is."

"I will mom, thank you." Star replied, the gravity of the situation weighing down on her. When no one else had anything more to say, the group shuffled out of the room, leaving the Queen and King behind to forge the future.

Chapter End Notes

So, first of all, right out the gate, apologies to the fans of Tom in the audience, I fully realize I'm doing him dirty here. To explain, I had started formulating the idea for this part of the story during Star Vs. season 3, seeing all the conspiracy stuff emerge and thinking about crossing it over with my existing Gravity Falls story, helped by numerous hints and hypothesis that they're in the same universe. At the time, I sincerely believed from the bottom of my heart, and had believed since season 2, that Tom was faking all his character development, and that the Tomstar revival in Club Snubbed onwards was a massive work by the Lucitor family, and was going to be the actual hidden threat of the
season, as Eclipsa seemed more and more innocent the longer we looked at her.

I was wrong about that. It took me until the season 3 finale, where Tom had an easy opportunity to dispose of Marco and be free of him forever, to realize it, but I acknowledge I am wrong about this, though I will mention my opinion of him, after riding a great deal in light of this revelation, did drop a fair bit after "Curse of the Blood Moon" reveals he full well knew something unnatural was affecting Star and Marco but stayed quiet about it. My depiction of Tom and his family here are based on guesses from earlier in the show that have since been proven wrong. However, I have chosen to still write them this way because I think this is ultimately a more realistic direction than where the show went. The reason it took me so long to come around on my initial guesses is the incredibly strong skeeze factor I had gotten off Tom in his introductory episode, to the point he was actually my favorite villain on the show because I wanted to see him get pummeled so much. Maybe it was me reading too deep into things or maybe the writers went stronger than they had intended, but I was always surprised and impressed by the episode Blood Moon Ball, not for all the shipping stuff, but because of what a crazy unsubtle metaphor for date rape and abusive boyfriends it came across as to me. You know, a sort of "Holy hell, I can't believe they got a character that's so blatantly an attempted rapist on The Disney Channel". That's a rough taste to wash out of your mouth.

If it's any consolation, I have lightened my depiction of Tom himself here significantly compared to my original outline of this crossover and early drafts of scenes I would write down as they come to me no matter how far away that actual part of the fanfic is. Originally, he was even worse in this section of the story and I've put much more emphasis on him being a political tool of his father. Speaking of which, I must give credit where it is to do blackwolfwrites and their excellent story "The Sign of the Moon," which inspired some of the details of King Dave's portrayal here.

Again, I apologize to any and all fans of Tom who take issue with this chapter, and hope that you might still be invested enough in the story to continue reading. Either way, I thank you for completing this chapter, and I wish you all well.
"...Okay, next time, we'll try and get her with the ol' rigged 'Do You Like Me?' survey."

"For the last time, we're not doing that. Are there any other deities of love and affection we can try and conjure to get our hands on another love potion? I really feel like we were close with this last one, despite how bad it went."

"Well, there is this literal Goddess of the Blood Moon whose number I have, but she's not taking my calls right now, and after your first stunt I'm certain she's not gonna be taking yours either."

"...That's a real thing?"

"Depending in which reality you're looking at, and from what angle, yes. It's all about whose reading, and whose writing, you see."

"As always Bill, you are a shining, crystal clear geyser of endless knowledge and guidance."

"That sleight of hand trick I taught you worked out pretty well, didn't it?"

"For all the good it ended up doing! What went wrong with the Love God's potion anyways?"

"Damned if I know. We could go ask him, but it doesn't really matter, does it? It's gonna be a lot harder to trick him out of a second one, and it's not like One of Hearts is ever willingly going to drink something while you're in the same building as her ever again."

"If we meet that polyamorous tub of lard again I'm going to be too busy burning him to death to ask him any questions."

"Kid, take it from me: Online dating has made his whole existence an empty torment. Killing him would honestly be doing the guy a favor at this point."

"So what am I supposed to do then? The Silver Bell Ball, our winning move, was a disaster! Dad says wars could potentially break out because of this. Sanctions for certain, at least. We were so close to success, but now things couldn't have gone any worse!"

"Hey, maybe the Underworld needs a good war to shake things up around here, you've been isolationist for too long considering all this evil magic you've got just laying around! Besides, you're looking at it all the wrong ways Horns! A disaster is just an opportunity that most people are too fettered to take advantage of!"

"Even when the disaster befalls me?"

"ESPECIALLY when the disaster befalls you! That means you've got the sympathy vote now!"

"What, from Star? She probably hates me more than ever after the Ball!"

"Oh, calm down Horns. Royal marriages are NEVER about what the couple in question actually feel about each other, it's the peanut gallery that matters. In that regard, you're actually doing better than most."
"Wait, really?"

"Yeah, absolutely! You've got a real, genuine attraction to One of Hearts, am I right? Most royal suitors aren't even running on that when they go around poisoning and cursing and murdering their way into relationships. It's all driven by boring stuff like reunification campaigns. Or taxes."

"Somehow, I don't really think that's going to help me with this."

"Not in the present, sure, but in the future, your romantic's soul will pay off big time! 4D Chess my friend! Once you've Dyson Sphere'd up the target of your affections, she'll eventually come around and realize what a great guy you are, once the messy stages of the engagement are over and you show her how genuine your feelings are. I mean, she's a princess Horns, what are her options? Her REAL options? A lying, duplicious scumbag of a prince whose having their strings pulled by their politically influential parents, or you? A lying, duplicious scumbag of a prince whose having their strings pulled by their politically influential parents who will shower her with genuine love and affection once she's safely in your arms?"

"Gee, thanks, don't flatter me too much old man."

"Do you really think I've still got a chance though? When it comes to actually reaching that point I mean, everything you said about love and the afterwards makes sense. I've still got a rash where Queen Moon blasted me, and if she's not going to grant me her blessing, it seems like it's just not possible."

"Well, I got two bombshells to drop on you in that regard Horns. A: Through the power of The Great Satan, anything is possible, so jot that down. B: In the words of a great matchmaker: If a relationship isn't working, force it!"

"That... that doesn't sound right somehow..."

"That's just Marco and his weak Earthling morality infecting your brain! True morality is relative, and nothing says 'I love you' like going to absolutely any length to make someone yours! Murder, torture, soul magic... the fact that you're willing to undergo those efforts and take those risks in pursuit of someone PROVES you're the better partner! Unless of course, you're scared that some puny Earthling might outdo you if the two of you were to go... sword to sword."

"Ooooooh, did I touch a nerve?"

"...I should have tortured him to death when I had the chance. I took him at his word that he and Star weren't a couple, and figured becoming his friend would get me in good with her."

"But it turns out he lied to you, didn't he Horns!? We all heard the truth on Song Day! Well, life lesson then, playing the nice guy never pays off, and you miss 100% of the people you don't mercilessly torture to death. Hey, that's actually two for one, but no worries. I'll let you keep the extra one, since we're such good friends."

"I hope I'm not interrupting something important, as improbable as that idea may be?"

King Dave had stepped into his son's bedroom, where Prince Tom was having a heart to heart talk with Bill Cipher while the two played a few rounds of Inheritance Of The Tomorrow on Tom's imported from Earth game system. The prince put his controller down in order to stand up slowly and address his father, while Bill abruptly mashed out a combo to crush Tom's now idle character with a bright yellow dump truck and win the match before springing to his feet and saluting the King of Demons.
If Dave was annoyed by this, he was too composed, or simply too used to Bill's antics, to betray it, even as his son looked nervous. "I don't suppose you two have made any progress on providing me with grandchildren?" He asked with a deeply sarcastic tone.

"We're working on it Once and Future Queen, we're working on it! You can't rush genius you know!" Bill answered nonchalantly.

The epitaph of the mind demon did seem to momentarily unnerve King Dave, though it was back under control as quick as a flash. Nevertheless, Tom was able to use the brief distraction to get his words in. "For the moment father, we've decided on a wait and see approach. Wait for the political situation to stabilize and attitudes to solidify before taking action."

King Dave gave a small nod of approval. "Very good. For the time being however, study these." He said, while handing Tom a bundle of papers. "It's the official explanation of what happened at the Silver Bell Ball. Do NOT contradict it." He instructed, and without another word the demon prince stepped away towards a chair he could sit down on and study, leaving Dave and Bill to talk.

"As for you, it's time to escalate our dealings. An invigorated monster threat rallying under the banner of a martyred Toffee should be enough of a fire to keep relations with Mewni from cooling." The King explained. "The shipment is at the usual place, and besides the usual collection of weapons this one has two dissembled trebuchets and six hellfire potions. Make sure they get distributed to the most radical monsters you can find." Then, with a harsh tone, added "And Bill: Indiscretion will not be tolerated."

"Not to worry, I get the feeling those Butterflies have got a lot distracting them at the moment. The stuff will be delivered on the double!" Bill responded with a knowing grin before bending his possessed form into another unnatural looking salute. "You have my promise, the Mewmans will be shocked at how well armed the monsters are!"

"So, are you ready to, give this a try? If you want to stop, we don't have to do this, I'll understand."

"...Yeah, I think I'm ready to start. We're a couple now. Let's give this couple stuff a try."

Dipper and Pacifica were currently sitting on a bench together in an out of the way section of the royal garden. A degree of neglect had seized this section of the grounds in the aftermath of Toffee's invasion, and the two humans were taking advantage of this fact to try and get to know each other better.

"...Right, okay." Dipper said with a gulp. The only mitigating factor of how nervous and flustered he was feeling was the fact that Pacifica was quite clearly feeling much the same, both of them faintly blushing and having trouble making eye contact with the other. "Dearest Pacifica..." He started, but instantly slapped himself mentally. "That's going way too hard way too fast, we're not getting married or anything!" Even more visibly nervous now, he backtrack stuttered to saying "...You uh, want to make out? Just a little?"

Despite how painfully awkward this attempt at flirting was, Pacifica actually had even less contextual knowledge of how normal people expressed casual affection for each other, and as such rolled with it. "Hey there, uh... Dippen-Dots?" Brief panic seized the girl as she wondered "Oh crap do poor people even still eat those!? Quick, overpower him with blatant physical affection!" With closed eyes and a lean forward, Pacifica borderline yelled out her next line, needing to get it all out before she lost it. "Yeah, I'd be... down? To make out with you. A lot. P...plant one on me!"

The air was frozen between them for a moment, Pacifica quite clearly being the more flushed and embarrassed of the two now. Dipper, on the other hand, despite feeling guilty about it even before it
happened and trying to fight it as much as possible, couldn't help but giggle in response to his
girlfriend's own attempt at flirting.

The boy's laughter abruptly died off when the blond girl began shaking him by the top of the vest he
was wearing. "DON'T YOU START LAUGHING AT ME PINES!" Pacifica yelled out, clearly
more panicked and confused than genuinely angry. "You want a kiss!? You think you deserve it?!
I'LL KISS YOU SO HARD THE LIPS OF THE COMMON TRASH WILL FEEL LIKE
SANDPAPER!"

"Pacifica! Pacifica! Calm down! Please stop shaking me!" Dipper asked, still smiling a little despite
the situation as his girlfriend slowed down. "I'm... I'm really sorry about that Paz, I tried as hard as I
could not to laugh, but... I mean. It was pretty funny." Then, after an awkward moment, he added
"Plus, uh... Dippen-Dots is something Mabel calls me. So, you know... the mood was kinda dead
from the get go."

Now looking mortified, Pacifica turned herself around on the bench the two were sharing so as to not
be looking directly at Dipper. Despite a number of thoughts running through her head that summed
up her emotions at the moment, the human girl just let out an indistinct groan of frustration and
embarrassment that got the general idea across. She did, however, lighten up when a soft hand settled
on her shoulder.

"Hey, don't get so upset. I'm not mad at you. This is a learning experience, after all." Dipper said
comfortingly. Slowly, Pacifica turned back to him, then abruptly enveloped the boy in a hug, which
he quickly returned.

"I never really thought about how great this feels, but this feels... pretty great." Dipper mused to
himself. "A lot of hugs are too crushing or awkward, but this feels just right somehow. She just sort
of... melts onto me, like a big warm blanket." On the outside, the boy was smiling contently.

"I need to have Dipper hug me more often." Pacifica was thinking to herself in a similar train of
thought. "He's steady to hug without being so strong it feels like you're grabbing a rock. I like how
my arms wrap all the way around him and while I still feel stable hugging him, he's soft enough that I
can feel all my worries flowing off into him when we touch." Similar to the boy in her grip, the
blond girl had a placid smile on her face.

The two stayed like that for a quiet moment, until Pacifica opted to break the silence. "I'm... I'm sorry
for exploding on you back there. That was... the parts of me that I want to be better than, and I can't
just scream and shake you whenever I get angry."

"Hey, like I said, no big deal. It was an extreme moment, and I really shouldn't have laughed at you."
Dipper replied, suddenly sounding nervous. "It, uh, reminded me of when we first met, sort of."

"Thanks Dipper." The girl answered with a grumpy tone of voice, clearly not seeing that as a
compliment. The boy, in turn, realized immediately the impact of what he had said, and let out his
next words in a poorly thought out, panicked stutter.

"No, I mean, besides all that, it was sort of hot!"

Both of them fell silent again, both blushing extremely red now, but before either of them could
breach the awkward topic of conversation the sound of heavy footfalls pervaded the air. A practical
company of Mewman guards were storming through the royal gardens, paying no mind to the
blushing teenagers as they moved with steely expressions towards their point of convergence. As a
result Dipper and Pacifica looked at each other with fading blushes and puzzled expressions, both
inwardly cheering "Thank goodness, some sort of disaster!" The two took off towards a different
neglected section of garden where the guards were all gathering at. When the two got there, the sight waiting for them took everyone by surprise.

"Star! Are you alright!?” Came the concerned voice of Queen Moon before anyone could say anything else.

"Mom?"

"Star! What's going on!?” Dipper asked, clearly confused.

"Dipper? Pacifica!" Star yelled in response, clearly surprised. "I dunno, I was just talking to this nice lady here and then..." The princess trailed off, before yelling with surprise and anger "OMNITRAXUS! STOP PULVERIZING THE NICE LADY!"

"STAR!!" Moon shouted, both concerned and a little frustrated. "That's not a nice lady! That's ECLIPSA!"

"THAT'S Eclipsa!?" Pacifica asked reflexively, eyes widening with surprise. Dipper suddenly looked sideways at her.

"Wait, am I missing something?"

"I did some reading Dipper, I'll explain later."

"Good afternoon. Queen Moon, Hekapoo, Omnitraxus, Rhombulus, Star, Dipper, Pacifica, assorted guards." Stanford greeted casually while entering the scene, wearing his turtleneck sweater and using his hands to disassemble a crossbow without looking at it. "I take it that this is our intruder?"

"Sir, SIR! You need to turn around, this is an active crisis zone and we are authorized to..." The hapless guard who had been disarmed of his crossbow for pointing it at Ford had followed the human scientist with a raised, chastising finger but was knocked out on his back when the human scientist tossed the disassembled weapon over his shoulder and into the guard's face.

"Stanford!!" Moon shouted, sounding offended.

"Great Uncle Ford!" Dipper said with a reassured tone of voice.

"Doctor Pines!" Star yelled in surprise, before suddenly looking apprehensive. With a stiff wave of her hand, she greeted "Hello assorted guards..."

"Alright, all the humans need to clear the scene right now!" Hekapoo demanded.

"Wow, okay. Racist." Dipper snarked in response while not moving at all.

"Hello everyone. Good to see you Moon, you're looking well." Eclipsa said calmly from her place caught in the grip of an interdimensional deity. "How'd the spell work out for you?"

"YOU ARE A WEAVER OF LIES!" Rhombulus screamed out abruptly, clearly having been made upset by the confusing back and forth yelling.

"WHY ARE WE ALL YELLING!?” Star demanded to know, actually pulling her hair while yelling her question.

"BECAUSE ECLIPSA IS EVIL!!" Moon yelled back instinctively, only to catch herself and look mildly embarrassed a moment later.
"Actually I have some questions about that. First one, why are all your important historical tomes pop up books?" Pacifica asked from the side.

"HOW DARE YOU DISRESPECT OUR GREAT INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE!?!" A random guard yelled out. "MY GRANDFATHER WAS A POP UP BOOK MAKER! BEFORE THE NIGHT RATS TOOK AWAY HIS BEAUTIFUL FINGERS!"

"NOBODY CARES YOU BLOODY PEASANT!" Moon shouted, clearly frustrated and upset at this point.

Right afterwards, a gentle voice rose out of the crowd, whispering "I care..."

"Okay, hang on, time out, I lost track of things. Why are we all after Eclipsa again?" Star asked.

"BECAUSE SHE EATS BABIES!" Rhombulus yelled out, causing Star to gasp and Hekapoo to roll her eyes.

"No, we've been over this Rhom, several times!" The scissor smith spat. "You're thinking of Bobipsa."

"Wait, is that real?" Dipper asked sideways to Pacifica, who simply nodded.

"As stimulating as this grand debate spanning topics both philosophical and historical has been so far, could someone please give me a concise explanation of who Eclipsa is already?" Ford spoke up wearily. "The intense magical surge you all set off interrupted a delicate experiment of mine you know."

"WAIT, ECLIPSA!" Moon gasped, turning her attention back to the queen of darkness, afraid she'd escaped while everyone was bickering.

Such fears were unfounded however, as Eclipsa was right where they'd left her, and was even waving an arm in greeting. "Not to worry my dear Moon, I'm still here. I just didn't want to be rude by interrupting," Eclipsa answered, still caught in Omnitraxus' grip. "Go ahead and sort out whatever problems you all have, I can wait. I really don't mind this, honestly. It reminds me of the time my monster husband would hold me in his big... strong... meaty hands..."

Everyone was quiet for a long, uncomfortable moment as Eclipsa grinned at them. Omnitraxus was the first to speak up.

"Can I... can I let go of her now?"

A short while later, the Magical High Commission had cleared the gardens and shuffled the women of the royal family to a clinical setting to test Star for the possibility of being evil. At this point in their testing, the princess was sitting in a wheelchair while Hekapoo directed a monkey to pick fleas out of her hair.

"Evil fleas!?? Star asked with disbelief.

"Yes, I concur, quite preposterous."

The four standing figures in the room spun around to see that the three humans had made their way into the clinic despite not being invited. "What are YOU three doing here!??" Hekapoo demanded to know.

"Putting an end to this barbaric mockery of the medical process." Ford replied sternly while tossing a
glass of water in Hekapoo's face to douse her flame so he could push her aside and shoo away the
monkey. He was wearing his longcoat again, and the not doused members of the MHC noticed the
other two humans had some extra objects on their persons as well.

"You guys need to invest in better locks." Dipper added, holding up the picked padlock that had
offered them little opposition.

"Hello Princess Star, how are you feeling today?" Ford asked the princess with a polite, clinical tone
of voice.

"Annoyed, mildly upset, slightly damp, but otherwise good." Star replied, deliberately putting on a
pleasant and cooperative attitude to get back at the MHC for the rigor they'd just put her through.

"Well, that's all we can ask for some days. Please don't blink." Ford spoke while shining a small
light around both of Star's eyes. "Please stick out your tongue and let this dissolve." He then asked
while removing a bag of sugar cubes from his pocket.

"Aaaahhhhh." Star's tongue quivered when one of the cubes made contact with it, but she kept to
Ford's request until it had dissolved completely. All the while, the older scientist used a stethoscope
to listen to Star's heart, lungs and wrist. "Oooh, that tasted nice."

"I'm glad to hear. If you were under the influence of a select series of magic compelling agents it
would have triggered erratic heart cycling." Ford replied clinically, while removing a digital camera
from a different pocket. "Now please, say fuzzy pickles."

"FUZZY PICKLES!" Responded Star enthusiastically, and after a moment of checking the spirit
photograph he had just taken, Ford turned to address the assembled MHC.

"Now, in my expert opinion, I can safely say that Star Butterfly, as of this moment, is not
hypnotized, possessed, charmed, overshadowed or dementiated." Ford explained to the Commission
members in a prickly but professional tone of voice. "If she is evil or not is a matter of philosophy at
this point, and not a matter of science. You can stand up now Star."

"No... no she can't! The tests aren't over!" Rhombulus yelled out, standing over a surgical table with
an electrode in the mouth of each of his snake arms. "I didn't get to do my yelling test yet!"

"I suspect you've done enough yelling to last several immortal lifetimes." Ford snakes back at the
crystal headed crusader. "I'd prescribe you a vow of silence but that'd be a blatant conflict of
interests."

Having finally recovered from the shock of someone casually walking up and splashing water on
her, Hekapoo finally got right in Stanford's face and began arguing with him. "Who exactly do you
think you are human!? This is an affair of the Magical High Commission, and we will not tolerate
interference!"

"You shouldn't be asking who I am, rather the more pertinent question is who Star is." Ford spoke
up, causing the MHC members to briefly look at each other in confusion. "...A princess?" Asked
Rhombulus.

"My patient." Ford replied with determination, positioning himself between the Magical High
Commission and the still seated Star. "Queen Moon has entrusted me with her health in the aftermath
of a recent, difficult incident, and I will not allow your barbaric practices to endanger her recovery!
Your mindless blundering could trigger extremely negative residual effects!"

The room was growing tense now, with Hekapoo, Rhombulus and Omnitrixus Prime standing
together and glaring at Ford, Dipper and Pacifica, who had similar expressions aimed back at the magic councilors, while Queen Moon looked more outwardly concerned and had her eyes darting between the two groups. Before the tension could boil over however, Star stood herself up and positioned herself between the two crowds.

"Alright, alright, let's all take a little breather here. In... and out." The princess spoke, attempting to defuse the tension between the two sides. "Ford, I appreciate the help, but I'm sure the Commission are just doing what they think is necessary. Could you guys maybe try explaining yourselves though instead of just giving out orders? All this running around and shouting isn't helping anyone."

"Very well said Star. I agree with you, I think the Commission has perhaps acted... frantically, and we should all calm down." Moon answered in a diplomatic tone, joining her daughter in standing between the two groups. When the queen spoke though, her back was to the Commission and she was directing her speech at the humans and her daughter. "For the benefit of our visitors from Earth, I shall explain a little: Queen Eclipsa is one of Star and I's ancestors, who once ruled Mewni until she was removed from the throne and put in one of Rhombulus' crystals for her crimes. She was an extremely powerful magic user who invented many dark spells, so we must treat the possibility she could have corrupted Star very seriously."

"Well, okay mom, but we only talked for two second, and she was really nice. No big deal." Star responded dismissively.

"It could have been a very big deal young lady." Moon chided in response.

"How? And more importantly, why?" Star asked, clearly getting more frustrated despite her earlier efforts to make peace.

"She betrayed the kingdom Star! She abandoned the people so she could run off with a monster she'd fallen in love with!" Moon explained, sounding scandalized in the process. Behind Star, the three humans were looking increasingly stern and judgmental. When Star spoke next, it felt like she was speaking for all of them. "Yes, yes, I knew all that, right, we've been over this. Kinda selfish, sure, but not a big crime. What happened next? She blew everyone up?"

"No. She was crystallized before she had the chance."

"Wait wait wait wait... That's it? You crystallized her for being in love!?!" Star asked, her indignant tone matching the faces of the humans behind her.

"To a monster Star." Moon replied, like the problem here was the most obvious thing in the world. When that clearly wasn't enough to persuade her daughter, Moon hastily added. "That's not all though! She didn't respect the natural order!" At this statement, Dipper could be heard to audibly scoff. "She experimented with the dark arts, and created her own chapter of dangerous evil magic!"

"A regular The Catcher In The Rye?" Dipper commented from the side.

Letting out an annoyed groan, Queen Moon turned to the other Commission members for backup. "Chime in any time guys." She said with annoyance. "You knew her too."
"Pointing a finger at Dipper, Hekapoo said accusingly, and through narrowed eyes "I can tell you just made some kind of reference knowing we wouldn't get it!"

"Hekapoo, focus!" Snapped Queen Moon. "Anyone have anything more incriminating about Eclipsa? Anyone?"

"Well... I heard her call Rhombulus annoying once." Omnitraxus spoke up, drawing withering glares from half the room and disbelief from one person in particular.

"Wait... she said WHAT!?!" The crystal paladin screamed in shock. "Can you guys believe that!?"

"YES!"

"Huh, for once we all agree on something." Pacifica remarked dryly. "I actually have some questions, pertinent ones even. A few days ago I had a bunch of time on my hands and did a bunch of reading in the royal library."

"You broke into the royal library!?" Moon asked, clearly shocked.

"Oh, she did more than just break into and read inside the royal library!"

Pacifica looked at the floor for a moment with a faint blush while Dipper pulled down the front of his hat. "...Shut up Star." She said, trying to sound angry but unable to muster real hostility for the grinning princess. "ANYWAYS! I read an interesting book about Eclipsa. It was a pop up book for starters, and I was really struck by what garbage it was. Pop up book technology back on Earth is leaps and bounds ahead of Mewni's. Anyways, Chronicles of Darkness: Mewni's Worst Queen Ever has some interesting inconsistencies in it, besides having the semantics of a small child. It claims Queen Eclipsa exterminated the Hospice Lodge, an order of fearless warriors devoted to protecting the people of Mewni at the cost of their own lives."

"That she did! I definitely remember her doing that!" Rhombulus yelled out.

"Three other history books mention them perishing in a suicidal last stand, one hundred years after the end of Eclipsa's reign. I suppose you let her out so she could carry out that massacre, then froze her again?" Pacifica replied dryly. "Mention is made of her inventing a spell called Health For One, which crawls into open wounds and rips out the lifeforce of several beings to heal a single one. A despicable, agonizing spell... that is well documented as being used by Queen Eclipsa's mother, Queen Solaria, well before her own birth, to drain the life out of prisoners of war to restore her own wounded. Unless she invented it in the womb? She's charged with the destruction of the city of Smorgasbord, but on the way here I stumbled across a brochure advertising the city of Smorgasbord as a bustling tourist destination." To cap off her explanation, Pacifica held up the brochure in question, the front page of which had the words A LONG HISTORY OF NOT BEING DESTROYED emblazoned on it in giant letters. "If this is the source material you want to build your case against Eclipsa on, your methodology is flawed and your research is contradictory. Even the obvious propaganda is poorly worded and unconvincing! In short... it all doesn't add up."

The room was quiet for a solid moment, and while the blond human had managed to capture the attention of everyone in the room, nobody was looking at her more intensely that Dipper Pines. "That was crazy hot..." he muttered to himself, which was audible to literally everyone in the room due to the room itself being rather small. When he realized he'd said that aloud instead of thinking it, Dipper abruptly clammed up and looked embarrassed while Pacifica's air of serious rebuking became much the same. Luckily, everyone in the room was much more interested in continuing the political argument than making fun of the teenage couple.
"So..." Star spoke up, trying to put that out of her mind as quickly as possible. "...Sounds like you're all full of crap."

"Star, please!" Moon spoke. The Queen was clearly frustrated, but more than that her voice cracked with concern for her daughter. "Do not underestimate Eclipsa! She's... she's very convincing! She will get inside your head and make you do things you don't want to!"

At this point, Star's diplomatic attitude was beginning to crack and flake away, as she responded to her mother's desperate plea with dripping, venomous sarcasm. "Wow mom, you're so right! She must have made you go to her for help, and it was all her idea to give you a spell to destroy Toffee with!"

Abruptly, the Queen's eyes narrowed and her expression got very cold. "Star. Not in front of the humans." She demanded in a harsh tone of voice.

"No, I think they have just as much a right to hear this as anyone else!" Star replied, stepping closer to her mother and sounding outright angry at this point. "It was entirely up to you to make a deal with Eclipsa for the means to destroy Toffee: A killer spell for her freedom! And now, hey, Toffee's dead as dirt! It almost sounds like you want to dishonor your deal and stab Eclipsa in the back!"

As the conversation continued, Dipper and Ford both got concerned looks on their faces and shivers down their spines, while Pacifica looked to Dipper with an expression of concern. "She never mentioned anything about a deal..." Dipper breathed with concern. This time, the rest of the room didn't hear him.

Moon was looking back and forth between her own angry daughter and the humans behind her, a tense expression on her face. After taking a gulp and swallowing her pride, she abruptly ripped off her gloves, revealing the blackened purple rot that covered them. "Star, look at what her magic did to me! When I performed that spell, I could feel the darkness! Eclipsa is evil Star, I know it. I know you don't believe that now, but if you wait to find out the truth for yourself, it'll be far too late."

The entire room was quiet for almost a minute, as the shock of the queen's withered limbs seemed to take everyone by surprise. The MHC members watched with guarded impatience, Star was looking her mother's arms up and down over and over again. Further back, Dipper had seemingly retreated into a bad memory while Pacifica touched his shoulder. Ford's expression was the most inscrutable though. He simply stared at the dark rot on Moon's arms without emotion, calculations running behind his eyes.

"You know what..." Star began, speaking carefully after awhile to think about it. "...If you're so convinced Eclipsa is evil, give her a fair trial."

"That's ridiculous, her evil is beyond doubt." Hekapoo chimed in from behind the queen, clearly sounding annoyed by the whole thing.

"Well, if you're so confident, what do you have to lose? If she's SO guilty, surely proving it before a court will be trivial." Star challenged back.

In response, Moon put her gloves back on her hands and put her hands on Star's shoulders, looking her daughter in the eyes with an imploring gaze. "Star, we don't have time for this! Relations with the Lucitors could turn hostile at any moment, we can't afford to split our attention between them and some ridiculous trial for Eclipsa."

"If we don't put Eclipsa on trial, then we might as well just surrender to the Lucitors because we'd clearly be no better than them." Star shot back, meeting her mother's imploring gaze with one of firm resolve. "You'd be just like them: A liar who approached someone under false circumstances, took
what you wanted from them to protect your own throne, and treated them like an object that exists solely for your own benefit, who you can throw away when you don't need them anymore." Star's voice was bitter and cutting, and Moon actively recoiled from her own daughter upon hearing it. For once in her life, Moon actually felt small under her daughter's cold gaze as Star held her ground on this issue.

Finally, she let out a sigh. "Very well. We shall have a trial for Eclipsa."

Instantly, Star's cold expression broken into unrivaled joy as whooped out a chant of "DUE PROCESS! DUE PROCESS!"

"But I'm only allowing this because I want there to be no doubt among anyone in Mewni, I'm looking at ALL of you, Star and Earth gang, that Eclipsa is evil and deserves her fate." Moon explained, as she and the Commission began to take their leave. "Now, if you'll excuse us, I have a fresh burden to attend to."

"For what it's worth..." Dipper called out behind them. "...You're going to need more than just race mixing to sell us on that. We come from somewhere a little more civilized."

The door slammed shut without another word from the queen or the Commission.

As soon as they were gone, Star visibly deflated like a weight had come down on her and took a seat in the exact same wheelchair she'd been eager to escape earlier today. "I sure hope I'm making the right choice here..." she asked herself wearily, only to look upwards with a curious glance when she felt a six fingered hand on her shoulder.

"I think you are, Princess Butterfly." Spoke Ford in a warm, proud manner. "That was a very brave thing you did back there. Very brave, and very noble."

"The nerve of those people, acting like they're the ones being threatened even though they hold all the cards..." Pacifica muttered derogatorily, before addressing Star was a warm tone. "You absolutely did the right thing."

"I believe in your decision as well Star." Dipper chimed in, giving her a friendly smile as he spoke. "Truth is the most important thing in the world, it's the base on which everything good is built. Committing to truth instead of just doing what's easy... that's the sign of a great princess."

Star felt overwhelmed at the outpouring of love and support she was receiving from her friends, and with wide, watery eyes jumped to her feet while yelling out "GROUP HUG!" and making good on her announcement by wrapping the whole group of humans into her grip, despite there being three of them, one of them being a much taller adult. The three were initially surprised by the sudden hug but soon enough all three reciprocated, feeling like Star Butterfly really, really needed this. It was an action the princess greatly appreciated.

It was later now. Dusk was settling over the land of Mewni and Eclipsa had been relocated to the old Rose Tower, the sight of her house arrest until the trial could be conducted. The disgraced queen had just settled in when she had her first visitor of the evening.

"Ah, Star, good to see you again!" Eclipsa greeted gracefully, taking a casual seat on her dusty new bed, letting the princess choose to sit besides her or take one the room's chairs. "Your mother explained that I have you to thank for this second chance. She was quite worked up about it you know." The deposed queen explained with a giggle. "I can't express how grateful to you I am."

"Alright, listen." Star answered firmly, not taking a seat at all. "Just because I didn't want you to be
crystallized doesn't mean I trust you. I just want you to be treated fairly. Whatever that entails."

"That's very wise of you Star, and who knows, perhaps I can't be trusted. This was my old room as a matter of fact, did you know that?" Eclipsa replied, standing back up and nostalgically surveying the place. "So much has changed over the years, but luckily, the important things never do." She remarked, while walking to the window to gaze down at the garden. Star joined her there, giving an appreciative smile for a brief moment, before Eclipsa offhandedly added "Like the magic tunes built into the walls here that are slowly draining your strength into mine."

Star actually jumped back in surprise at this, bringing her wand out and instinctively trying to kick up a variant on the magic cancelling complementary wavelength spell she and Dipper had worked on awhile ago, but was made to pause by a disarming giggle coming from the queen of darkness. "Oh, I'm sorry dearie, I couldn't resist! The look on your face was priceless!"

Star kept her wand raised for a few long seconds after this, but gradually found Eclipsa's laughter good natured and infectious, resulting in her stowing the magic implement and chuckling a little. "Yeah, okay, you got me." Then, with a more serious tone of voice, she asked "Eclipsa, did you really meddle with dark magic?"

Biting her lip and wondering a little before speaking, the former queen answered "Meddle is such a... loaded term. I prefer to think of what I did as experiment." sounding slightly defensive and a little evasive but still understanding of Star's hesitation. "I did invent a number of new spells, and many of them were dangerous yes, and most of them were made to advance my personal interests, but to this day I fail to see the difference between my 'dark' magic and the numerous dangerous spells created by other queens. Have you happened upon an entry in the spellbook called Monster Arm by chance?"

"Ooooh yeah..." Star exhaled, obviously feeling a little down all of a sudden. "I know that one all too well." In response, Eclipsa tensed up a little, clearly apologetic at having touched on a sore subject.

"If you don't want to talk about this, just say so, but if you're okay thinking about it... think back to that. What, in your opinion, is really the difference between the Monster Arm spell and my All-Seeing Eye?" Eclipsa asked gently. "What makes one a completely moral use of magic and the other an unforgivable crime? Did they feel different to you when you cast them?"

Despite the serious philosophical questions being posed to her, which she was taking seriously, Star was briefly stunned by Eclipsa's implication of her using the Eye. An expression, like that of a child with her hand caught in the cookie jar, bloomed on her face as she hastily denied it. "Wha... what? No no no, I never used the All-Seeing Eye spell!" She said guiltily, due to remembering all the times she'd used to spy on Marco and Jackie.

"Now now Star, I'm not judging you, but here are the facts, as I understand them." Eclipsa responded, sounding very coy now. "Your mother let slip during her explanation to me that you'd seen my chapter of the spellbook. And, despite your best efforts, our conversation in the rose garden earlier quite clearly gave away the fact that you were there to watch that... how did Moon pronounce it, hugh-mahn?, couple, that ended up coming running to the disturbance hand in hand, who you are personally familiar with." Then, with a small giggle while she covered her mouth with her palm, Eclipsa stated "I can do the math. A peeper with access to the All-Seeing Eye spell having casted it at least twice is a sure bet in my book."

Blushing brightly and feeling so mortified she had to sit down on a chair, Star held her head in her hands and realized what a wreck she was. "It's true though. I'd followed Pacifica and Dipper to the garden without them knowing because I wanted to see it first hand... I wanted to try and feel what
having a best friend who will hug and kiss you would feel like, even if it was from a distance. And this isn't even the first time I've done this..."

However, while following the two from a distance, Star had stumbled across Eclipsa, and to not look like a weird creeper engaged the woman in conversation, which proved to be genuinely interesting enough to hold Star's attention until her mom and the Commission had shown up with the guards. "We talked about... looking at something so beautiful that it hurts because you can't have it for yourself, but you can't look away because you don't want to live your life without it. I mean, she was polite enough to use the metaphor of a beautiful wild flower that you couldn't bring to a garden or reproduce without killing it, but it was really obvious I was talking about a romantic relationship." Star realized soberingly that her secret was out. "Oh corn, how did I not realize now obvious that all sounds!?" Letting out a moan, she continued to think to herself "Love is pain. Love is pain and so is life."

The princess was roused from her descent into despair by a withered but warm hand settling on her shoulder. When Star looked up, Eclipsa was giving her a wide, warm but mildly nervous smile, the look of someone about to explain that they'd done something mildly bad that they didn't actually regret. "Like I said Star, I'm not judging you. I may have used the All-Seeing Eye spell... less than responsibly one or two times. Or a dozen."

Just like that, Star felt her mood and even her body to some degree get lighter. Mortification turned to relief as she felt this state of secrets settle between her and her... friend? "Do I want to call Eclipsa a friend yet?" Star thought to herself, before an idle thought crossed her mind. "Sharing secrets is actually really relieving when you're not getting judged for them."

Feeling a small smile get back on her down face, Star stood herself up. "That's... reassuring, I think."

"Well, I don't know if I'd call myself reassuring, but I want you to know Star, I can relate to your situation." Eclipsa explained. "Once upon a time I also wanted something that seemed to be completely beyond me, I wanted it so bad that it hurt. I did what I had to do, for me, to get to it, even if I had to bend a few rules in the process, because I knew if I let the opportunity pass I'd never get the chance again." Star seemed briefly off put by this explanation, but when Eclipsa's face shifted to one of pure, joyous content instead of becoming smug or villainous, the young princess felt a genuine connection to the older woman. "And even if the end result was me being where I am now, I don't regret any of it. Better to have reached and missed than to have stayed one's hand forever."

The words resonated deep inside Star, and though she felt a connection between her and Eclipsa solidifying, the pit in her stomach suddenly made her want to be alone. "Eclipsa... that was a beautiful thing you just said. I really wish I'd heard it a long time ago though." Stat lamented, causing the queen of darkness to give her a pitying look. "Look, I... it's getting late, I need to go. Thank you for being so open with me."

"Of course Star, I was happy to." Eclipsa answered in a sympathetic tone. "It was wonderful speaking to you, and please, I must beg you to come back at some point. It may be a selfish demand of mine but I'm worried I might go stir crazy without someone to talk to, and I have some lingering doubts that your mother is ever going to visit me."

"Oh, no worries, I'll come back at some point." Star reassured while opening the door out of the bedroom. "Just.. tired right now, and need to think. Goodnight, Eclipsa."

"Goodnight Star." The freed prisoner answered back, before laying down on her bed once the door had closed and Star had walked away, at which point she mused to herself. "Now, I wonder who my next visitor is going to be?"
The answer came a short while later when Eclipsa could hear a small, short conversation muffling through the walls. As soon as the words ended, Dipper and Pacifica entered the bedchamber together, having gotten past the guards with a letter of authorization signed by the princess herself. The boy carefully closed the door behind him while the girl kept her eyes on the dark queen all the while. Eclipsa, for her part, greeted them warmly.

"Children, welcome, welcome!" She spoke warmly, offering up chairs for them to sit in before seating herself on the bed. "I feel like a popular young maiden again, just the center of everyone's attention at all hours of the day!"

"We'll keep this on a professional basis then. I'm Pacifica Northwest." The blond human introduced herself as her boyfriend stepped over to stand beside her. "And I'm Dipper Pines." He greeted, before explaining "We're magic researchers from a dimension commonly known as Earth. We'd like to ask you some questions to expand our knowledge basis, and in exchange we can offer a degree of legal assistance with your upcoming trial."

"Oh, what inquisitive minds you little ones have!" Eclipsa remarked with the tone of a small child looking at an adorable puppy. "No need for the legal advice you two. It's been some time since I've talked to anyone remotely knowledgeable about magic, and simply having some discussion about one of my interests is reward enough." Then, with a more joking tone, she added "Just be careful how long you spend around me, or the Commission will have you running around their ridiculous tests."

"I appreciate your concern, but we already figured out how to cheat all of those." Dipper responded with a sincere tone to his voice.

"Oooh, devious. I approve."

"So, Eclipsa." Pacifica spoke up, starting the interview. "I'm sorry to say that history has not painted you favorably since your imprisonment. You are frequently decried and accused of various crimes in numerous history texts, but the details of them don't always add up. We're more inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt, but we do need to ask you some questions before we can really go through with that."

"Oh, I always figured I'd go down in history like that, no need to apologize." Queen Eclipsa remarked, laying flat on her back, head on pillow on her bed while speaking. "As long as I can progress towards my goals and dreams, I don't mind how history paints me." At this point, she sat up and turned to face the two. "Go ahead, I'll answer some questions."

"Alright, so, to begin with..." Pacifica began the conversation as Dipper readied a pencil and notepad to jot down all the queen's responses. "...Despite information on your reign being inconsistent across documented Mewman history, all sources agree you were a powerful magic user who experimented with something called Dark Magic. Can you first confirm or deny working with Dark Magic, and then explain to us what makes it different from regular magic?"

Eclipsa seemed pleased by the question offered up to her, and began her explanation with a closed eyes smile. "Well, I always did love to experiment with magic and cook up new spells, so your first one shall be a solid confirm, but as for the second..." She trailed off briefly, indicating a more complicated answer. "...If you want more information on Dark Magic, you should probably talk to the Magical High Commission, they seem to make up the rules about what is or isn't dark." She answered with a somewhat sarcastic tone, before getting more serious. "When I was still the princess, which was when I had the most time to study and invent magic, there were forbidden spells that were deemed too dangerous, but they came from a multitude of sources, there was no universal 'Dark' behind them. Some were banned for being too dangerous, or too powerful, while others were simply
politically inconvenient. Then, after my imprisonment, my whole line of work was declared 'Dark' and locked up in the spellbook, as far as it's been explained to me. Even a harmless little spell I made to determine how much life a living body has in it."

"What about the fact that your most prominent spell inflicts a physical toll on the caster?" Dipper asked next, referencing the rotted arms of both monarchs of mewni. "What is the root of that aspect of the spell?"

"Great acts require great power." Eclipsa said dismissively. "I wasn't in a position to make all my spells perfect, I frequently had to settle for good enough given how fraught with enemies my reign was. In a way through, it sort of makes it a heroic power, don't you think?" Eclipsa posited, causing the two humans to look sideways at each other in curiosity. "The spell demands sacrifice in exchange for its great power. This makes it unlikely that someone would end up abusing it, as to take up the burden of the Darkest Spell is to sacrifice one's own health and lifespan to defeat a powerful enemy. You would have to truly believe you and the ones you care about are under threat to use it." Then, a little more teasingly, she added "Moon seemed eager to trade when I first met her, but she seems to have gotten cautious and deflecting with adulthood. How unfortunate. Perhaps she's simply less comfortable with the idea of sacrificing for her people than she wants to believe about herself, and that's the real feeling of evil she felt welling up as she cast my magic."

Dipper had scrawled down every word, following intensely on the trail of Eclipsa's explanation. Then she casually added something that made the boy drop his pencil. In a teasing tone of voice, she remarked "Of course, to foil the body rot, I could just steal one of your bodies and just fly away after REALLY ruining this one."

Her tone was playful and she'd meant the statement as one of her usual dark jokes, but based on how the two humans reacted Eclipsa instantly and visibly regretted what she had said. Pacifica and Dipper both tensed up immediately, but the moment was somewhat ruined when both of them took a step forward and to the side to try and put themselves between Eclipsa and their partner, resulting in both of them bashing their shoulders into the other and both of them letting out a small yelp of pain as a result.

Both looked at each other, arguing entirely through facial expression over who should step back and be shielded by the other, but before they could reach a conclusion Eclipsa spoke up again, her tone a mix of apologetic and completely taken by what was in front of her. "I'm sorry you two. That was just a joke, but I take it there are some bad memories in that area?"

Both were guarded for a moment, Pacifica looking to Dipper to see how much he wanted to reveal about his experiences, and after a moment, he simply nodded his head. "Yes, some... bad memories. Look, you couldn't have know though, let's just move on."

"Of course dearies, but I must say if either of you are haunted by bad memories, the way you both stood together there tells me they don't stand a chance again you." Eclipsa complimented, causing both humans to blush. "Ah, young love!" She teased playfully. "My monster lover and I were much the same, we'd just lock up in situations like that because neither of us could stand for the other taking the arrow instead."

"Yes, of course." Dipper muttered, as he and Pacifica remembered the towering monster and his mouth of razor sharp teeth that Star had shown them as part of the whirlwind refresher on the queen of darkness she'd offered the humans as soon as their earlier group hug had ended. "What happened to him anyway?" The boy asked, then regretted it as soon as the question made the former queen quite downcast looking, which also earned him a mild glare for his girlfriend.

"...I don't really know." Eclipsa admitted, looking down at the palms of her hands as she sat on the
bed. "He was still alive and kicking when I was frozen in crystal, so I'm not really sure. Perhaps the MHC froze him in crystal as well, or maybe... well, it's been a long couple of hundred years after all..."

Both humans looked profoundly uncomfortable now, Dipper in particular scratching the back of his neck out of guilt for bringing this subject up. "If it's alright you two, do you think you could let me rest at this point?" Eclipsa asked as gently as possible. "It's, well, it's been a very long day you understand..."

"Oh, of course!" Dipper responded quickly. "If you're not feeling up to this anymore we can leave, no problem! What do you think Pacifica?"

"Completely agree. If she'd like to rest we should let her rest."

"Well, until next time. Good luck with all this trial business!" Dipper said in parting as the two hastily shuffled out of the room, leaving behind a rather solemn looking queen of darkness. As soon as the door was closed and locked behind them though, Eclipsa let out a sigh and got a mildly mischievous smile on her face. "Well, you didn't lie to them Eclipsa, that mention of Globby did make me a little sad... but you never could resist getting dramatic, could you?" She thought to herself, giggling a little before laying down on her bed in a relaxed state again. "They're good kids though, and you didn't trick them that badly. Just taking the steps I need to in order to put some extra hounds on the trail. They seem every bit as exceptional as Star made them sound in our garden talk." After that, Eclipsa closed her eyes and settled in. "Now, we wait for the night's final visitor..."

She didn't have to wait long. The sound of vertical footsteps gently reverberated into the room early enough for Eclipsa to be stand up, open the window and compose herself before Stanford Pines climbed through the rose tower window, gently closing the shutter behind him before removing the goggles he'd worn for the climb. "You know you could have just gotten a security pass from Princess Star." Eclipsa said teasingly, not showing the slightest bit of surprise or discomfort at Ford's arrival.

"I don't want the queen to know I visited you." Ford said bluntly. His tone was all business and interrogative, but his actual stance was more distant and cautious. He stayed by the window instead of getting closer to Eclipsa while he asked his questions. "I'd like you to tell me more about this deal you made with her."

"Oh my, all these theatrics for that old piece of ancient history? You flatter me." Eclipsa responded disarmingly, then with a quite free tone of voice went into an explanation. "Well, Moon had just been made Queen, and was at war with the monster who had assassinated her mother. He was a tough specimen though, extremely difficult to kill even with the most powerful magics. So she had me briefly unfrozen so I could teach her some that could. Those were the terms: Upon the monster's death, I'd be free."

Ford had listened to the whole explanation without a single change of expression. "An interesting set of terms, Eclipsa. On one hand, most would demand their freedom be provided up front, and would not be content waiting to be paid back on a matter like this."

"Well, however long it took didn't really matter to me." Eclipsa said dismissively. "After all, five seconds versus five centuries in crystal hardly makes a difference to me! Besides, what if the spell didn't work?" That last statement actually seemed to catch the stoic Ford by surprise, causing Eclipsa to follow up on it. "I'd hardly be upholding the spirit of the agreement if I got out in exchange for a spell that didn't work, and my magical creations have always been a bit... temperamental..."

"An interesting stance. There are many people out there who are perfectly happy to sell something
that doesn't work." Ford commented, before resuming his more inquiring tone of voice. "But... on the other hand, still a very cleverly worded contract. The conditions of 'the monster's death' are suitably vague, ensuring the fact that you'd still be set free even if Moon found some other way to defeat him, or if someone else managed the feat."

"Well, you've got me on that one." Eclipsa admitted, shrugging her shoulders in a playful fashion. "What can I say? I really wanted to be free of that crystal."

"Understandable." Ford remarked, switching back to his inscrutable demeanor. The queen of darkness was actually matching him in this regard, meeting his face, unreadable by flat control and steely, with her own coy and mysterious expression that offered a similar level of unreadable mystery. The two were evenly matched.

"What I'm more interested in is the actual mechanisms of your deal." He asked her. "How did you enforce it?"

"Well, if that's your question, you'll have to ask Moon, because as unbelievable as this sounds, my freedom is entirely due to her." Eclipsa explained, and while Ford's expression didn't change, a small brightness to his eyes indicated she'd gotten his mind racing, considering all possibilities. "You see, I never quite got the hang of casting wandless magic..." she admitted without missing a beat "...So when young Moon came before me, she held all the true power in that situation. I told her that a deal between queens is unbreakable, but that may have been, well, just the littlest fib." This time, the confession came with a slight twang of guilt as Eclipsa made a gesture with her index finger and thumb indicating how little the fib is supposed to be. "I had to put the idea in her head, you see. Magic isn't the most reliable thing, after all, sometimes users of the royal wand can end up doing things they never actively meant to, but deep down secretly want to or think they need to."

"Subconscious mana articulation." Ford replied, speaking as an expert on the subject. "When in proximity with an abundant supply of arcane radiation, even the smaller, weaker electrical impulses of subconscious thought can trigger a reaction in the energy. Pertinent to hidden wishes, sleep spelling and some instances of poltergeist activity."

Clapping her hands together excitedly, Eclipsa remarked "Oh my! Someone is certainly up to date on the theories! That's lovely you know, it's been so long since I've been able to speak on these matters with an intellectual equivalent. But please, forgive me, I've gotten sidetracked." she admitted before returning to the nitty gritty of magic. "So, what I was trying to say is that Moon always had the ability to keep me frozen in that crystal. I didn't have the wand at the time we made our deal, so there was no magic backing it, I couldn't bind her into a contract. It wasn't worth anything more than a friendly handshake."

"But Moon believed there was more going on, didn't she?" Ford conjectured. "When her enemy finally died recently, as much as she wanted to keep you in crystal, she knew she was obligated to let you go deep inside. She felt like you were going to be freed no matter what, because of the deal, and knew it should be her letting you out. So her magic subconsciously flowed to you, gradually wearing down the crystal until it set you free."

"Possibly." Eclipsa answered, before doing a little conjecturing of her own. "There were more factors than that, most likely. I suspect Star had a great deal to do with this as well, since Moon clearly told her the story of how she and I met, and young Star is both the current holder of the wand and much more upstanding when it comes to upholding bargains than her mother. There was also some kind of magic catastrophe going on recently that may have been weakening the crystal itself, maybe? I'm not clear on all the details of that." With a shrug, she simply concluded "Regardless, I am firmly of the opinion I am free at this moment because, despite what she may say, Moon thinks I
"Very interesting, thank you for answering my question Eclipsa." Ford said politely. He'd gotten far more information on this visit than he'd initially expected, though of course he'd be taking it with a grain of salt until he could independently confirm these ideas. It was time for him to go, but he hesitated. "Would it be alright if I examine your arms?" He finally asked after wrestling with the idea for a few moments.

"I don't see why not." Eclipsa answered rather quickly, taking Ford by surprise as she casually removed her gloves and held an arm up for the scientist to take a close look. He finally stepped across the room, getting closer to the queen of darkness as he carefully examined the dark rot traveling through her arms. His expression finally shifted, but instead of disgust or condemnation, he simply regarded the phenomenon in front of him with curiosity.

"It's such a dreadful thing..." Eclipsa mused aloud, before seeming to catch herself mid-sentence. 

"...For Moon, I mean. She was so young when she came to me for help. To think that she was never able to hold Star with her own two hands. That as soon as her little ball of sunshine was born, she'd have to cradle her with this rot. Every second of contact with your new baby reminding her of how her own mother was taken from her." Eclipsa rubbed her right arm with the other while wiggling her right fingers, as if to get across the full nature of her affliction. "Of course, that's simply the price one has to pay for knowledge. I was ready to do so, I don't regret any of my discoveries to this day, but it's a shame such a thing was thrust onto Moon before she was ready for it."

"You don't regret it then?" Ford asked. The barriers of inscrutability were beginning to come down around both of them, each managing to read more and more off the other's face.

"Never." Eclipsa said firmly. "I've experienced many hardships as a result of the choices I've made, but they're all part of the road I've chosen. It isn't always easy to bear, but all knowledge is good knowledge, as so I will carry the burden, knowing it makes me a more complete person." At this point, Ford was looking very distant, causing Eclipsa to gaze at him with genuine, peeked curiosity. "Do you have regrets, Stanford Pines of Earth? I can see from your stance and walk alone that you have endured a great deal, but do you regret any of it? Would you take those painful incidents out of your past, knowing that would make you someone different, someone with less knowledge, less complete than what you are now?"

His face was close to her's at this point but Ford wasn't looking at Eclipsa anymore, his eyes saw right through her as his mind was a million miles and thirty years away. Memories were flashing across his eyes while his face betrayed his emotions, the painful home of New Jersey and the cramped but warm college, slow madness amid the winter snow, that terrible fight, the infinite horror of a multiverse gone mad, not gone mad, born mad, mad from the moment it began spinning.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Eclipsa. I should go."

Ford had clamped down on his runaway thoughts and emotions, and was stepping back towards the window as he said that. Eclipsa began to put her gloves back on as she watched him go, a look of genuine concern on her face now. "Stanford?" She said, just before he began his climb down. "I do think I'd like to speak to you again. As I said before, it has been some time since I've been able to discuss the magical theories with someone who can appreciate them."

"I... I will make an effort to meet you again." Ford responded with an uncertain tone. "I would appreciate that opportunity as well." Then he was gone, scaling down the side of the tower under the cover of the newly arrived night, mulling over his new understanding of the queen of darkness, just as she was mulling over her newfound understanding of him.
Rewinding now to earlier in the evening, just after the first meeting with the released queen of darkness, Star was sort of aimlessly wandering the halls of the castle, musing over the recent conversation and trying to put her thoughts in order. She was steadily getting closer to her room, just taking a very wide path to get there. "I just want to be free of this doubt and this hurt. I had hoped my talk with Pacifica would make things easier but seeing her and Dipper together just makes me long even more. It's... it's a different feeling than the hurt that would come from watching Marco and Jackie together, more of a dull ache where I can still feel happy for them, but it still hurts."

As she was walking down the hallways, she could faintly hear a voice carrying down the way. It was harsh and aggressive, and under normal circumstances Star would be the first person to bound down the hallways and see what a disturbance was all about, but after everything that had happened today she was exhausted and more than content to just walk past. However, she stopped dead in her tracks when she could faintly hear someone different respond to the first voice. "Look, go talk to Queen Moon or King River, they'll tell you who I am! I'm allowed to be here!"

"No." Star thought to herself, an enormous well of emotions bubbling up inside her. She couldn't even comprehend what she was feeling right now because there was so much raw emotion it was crushing her flat. "It... it can't be."

"A likely story, scum!" The harsh voice of a castle guard echoing off the walls, but Star didn't even hear the older sounding man as she began to walk, as if in a daze, towards the disturbance. "You picked the wrong day to try and break into the princess' bedroom creep, you're getting brought down by the full force of the royal guard today!"

The words kept getting louder as Star steadily worked her way towards the heated conversation. She could feel the blood beating in her ears, straining desperately in hopes another statement would confirm her initial thought, confirm it was more than an idle, idealistic imagining. "I don't know if I can do this again..."

"I keep telling you, it's not what it looks like! I need to see Star right away! Doesn't anyone in this castle recognize me!?"

The disturbance had finally come into view for Star, and it was exactly what she had feared. Two guards, dragging an intruder between them. When the princess stepped into their path, the intruder froze up right away, causing the guards to angrily drag him for a few seconds until they spotted the princess and stopped to salute. "Good evening your majesty, just caught a little intruder. Nothing to wor..."

"Guards, out. Leave the prisoner with me, you are dismissed." Star spoke, abruptly and coldly. She was doing her best, serious approximation of the commanding tone of the queen, not a sliver of mockery to her use of the voice this time.

"Wha... but, your majesty, he's..."

"OUT!" Star demanded in response to the guard's confused stuttering, abruptly losing her cool and screaming harshly enough to make the prisoner flinch before both guards simply dropped him to the ground and ran off, leaving the two of them all alone together in an obscure castle hallway.

"I didn't think it was possible... I didn't WANT to think it was possible because I didn't want to open myself up to being hurt again." Star thought to herself as she stepped forward at a slow, dreamlike pace. "I hadn't been able to figure out why exactly I hurt so much until I talked to Eclipsa today, and she explained the pain of having never reached for what you want in the first place. But was I wrong? Do I have another chance?"
Standing in front of Star Butterfly, wearing his familiar red hoodie and uneasy expression, was Marco Diaz, trembling in place and unsure of what to say, just like she could remember him. Either forgetting or simply not caring about how the gesture could be taken, Star stepped very close to the boy so she could rub her hand against his face, wanting to confirm he was real. If this bothered Marco, he didn't express it.

"H...hey Star." Marco spoke, limply waving an arm in greeting. "How ya been?"

Chapter End Notes

Alright, a couple of looked forward to milestones with this chapter that I'm sure everyone has been waiting for. Queen Eclipsa, one of my favorite characters from Star Vs, enters the picture, with an attempt to recapture that mysterious air of wonder, opportunity and danger that invigorated all her early appearances. In addition, Star and Marco have reunited. Hopefully it goes better than in canon. Eager to hear what everyone thinks.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He's back he's back HE'S BACK! MARCO DIAZ CAME BACK TO ME!"

"What is he doing here, he can't be here!? There's so much danger here!"

"How dare he come back here. Haven't you hurt me enough Marco? Did you come here just to make my own castle an agonizing house of longing as well?"

"My dreams are complete!"

"Where's Jackie!?"

"What if he hates me because of my confession?"

"I can't handle this, not so soon..."

"What does he truly think of me?"

As conflicting thoughts ran through Star's head, the two had been standing in silence after Marco's nervous question, the boy finding this more difficult than he'd imagined while Star was so completely overwhelmed by conflicting thoughts that she couldn't even know which emotion was hurting her at the moment. After a long, uncomfortable minute of this, Marco tried to break the ice again. "Star...? Are you alright?"

The familiar note of concern in Marco's voice was like the gunshot signaling the start of a race for Star. Without even thinking, she grabbed the boy by the arm and rushed off into the castle, unknowingly following the exact same trail the guards had just dragged Marco down. The boy let out a token yell of resistance to this but his body was cooperating with Star in full. The princess, meanwhile, was faintly aware of the fact she could have used magic to pull him along but chose to grab him by the arm anyways.

The end of the journey was Star's bedroom, and after shuffling Marco inside it with her, the princess pulled up a pair of chairs while waving her wand around and put them right in front of each other, then commanded the boy to sit without saying a word before joining him. As a result, the two were looking right at each other, seated so close together they could almost touch. Marco's face was now the one expressing an unstable torrent of emotions while Star looked blatantly and unnaturally blank. Behind her placid mask though, just as many emotions were swirling. She thought back to everyone she'd talked to during the last week: Dipper, Buff Frog, her mother, Stanford, Pacifica, Eclipsa. All of it seemed to be pulling her in so many directions, she felt thoughts and emotions she'd buried so far down in her stuffing beginning to burst out through her broken seams like she was a mauled teddy bear.

Marco opened his mouth to say something, but Star cut him off. "We need to talk." She said, as deathly serious as she'd ever been in her life. "We need to talk, and I don't care what you say. Say whatever you want, just say something to me when we talk now! I can handle anything you can say Marco, but I can't live with this horrible uncertainty anymore!"

"Sure... sure thing Star." Marco responded, obviously unnerved but trying to play it cool. "Has there been something happening here on Mewni? The guards seemed really worked up..."
"Marco I'm sorry." Star burst out, unable to keep her watering eyes trained on the boy and choosing to look at her own shows instead. "When I confessed to you back on Earth before I fled from Toffee, that wasn't fair! I just dropped it on you out of nowhere, and in front of your girlfriend and then just left without giving you a chance to even answer it."

Marco was very quiet now, as even though he'd done everything in his power to not think about the event Star was recounting since it had happened he'd subconsciously settled into the plan of simply never discussing it for as long as he lived, a plan that had been instantly shot to pieces by the opening bout. When he couldn't muster any words, Star kept going, her words getting faster as more and more just came tumbling out. "It wasn't something I should have done to you Marco, and if you and Jackie hate me for that I'll understand, but I just can't... I can't..."

Star was abruptly silenced as Marco leaned forward and hugged her, having put every one of his doubts and reservations to bed in the face of Star's increasingly desperate and miserable sounding words. "Star, wherever this goes, I want you to know I don't hate you and I NEVER could, and if that's what you've been thinking for, well, awhile... then I'm sorry."

The two broke the hug at that point, both having calmed down significantly. Star was taking a few deep breaths to get back in gear, and when she was ready to speak again she dove straight to the problem before she could lose her nerve again. "Not even if I'm between you and Jackie now?" she asked, needing an answer more than anything.

In response, Marco took his turn looking down at the floor, a guilty and regretful expression on his face as he struggled with his own emotions. "Star... me and Jackie broke up. Like, half an hour ago. It's... it's sort of why I'm here."

Star was quiet in response. Her eyes had widened as far as they could go, damp patches still doting her the blue expanses. On the inside, her heart had reflexively exploded upon hearing Marco's words, an overwhelming flood of happiness rampaging through her body on instinct that was just as instantly crushed flat by the reciprocal feelings of guilt, disgust and self-loathing that Star felt about herself for taking joy in her bestie's heartbreak.

"HE DID IT, HE LEFT JACKIE FOR ME! I WIN!"

"WHAT HAVE I BECOME!? I RUINED A RELATIONSHIP MARCO ASPIRED TO FOR HIS ENTIRE LIFE!"

"He's come back to me... at least I can't lose him again."

"No one can steal him from me now."

"All I can do is hurt people."

"Am I just second best for him?"

"Star you selfish animal, romance is probably the LAST thing Marco wants to talk about right now!"

All of these thoughts struggled with each other in Star's head, all of them being a real segment of emotion she felt, but also none of them being the complete picture. As was becoming a frequent occurrence for the princess, she didn't know how to feel. Finally, she managed to squeak out "...I'm sorry."

"Star, don't be. Me and Jackie didn't work out because I'm an idiot." Marco responded, selflessly willing to heap blame upon himself for the sake of everyone around him, as usual. This time though, Star felt something boil up in response. Almost angrily, she reached out and lifted Marco by the chin
so they could look each other in the eyes.

"Marco, no! You are not the idiot here! The idiot is me, Star! I don't want to hear anyone badmouthing you like that, not even yourself!" She spoke, doing her best to try to strengthen the boy's confidence. However, Marco wasn't having it.

"No Star! Don't say that about yourself! You were under a lot of stress at the time and you made a mistake! I am the idiot here! I hurt Jackie and I hurt you over and over again because I was too stupid to see what was directly in front of me!" He responded, as tension slowly began to build between the two of them and a shouting match developed.

"Marco, I'm telling you, you're the smartest, most clever guy I know! I messed everything up!"

"Star, you are brave, confident, in touch with your feelings, and not an idiot! If I had been more aware of how you felt things would be better now!"

"I shouldn't have even felt what I felt!"

"I played it too safe!"

"I AM THE IDIOT HERE MARCO!"

"NO STAR, I AM!"

As soon as the two realized they'd devolved into shouting at each other, both fell silent in an instant. Star actually covered her mouth as she leaned back and looked at Marco with wide eyes, feeling actively horrified she'd broken down into yelling at him, while Marco's neck bent down as he looked at the floor and was overwhelmed with guilt for screaming at Star. Things were quiet between them for a few minutes as both tried to sort out their feelings.

"Marco?" Star asked, once she was feeling strong enough to speak again. "What did you mean earlier? When you said that you and Jackie breaking up is why you're here?"

Marco didn't answer right away, needing a moment to put his thoughts together, and even when it did speak it was only after taking several deep breaths. "Well, to be honest, there was a whole conversation we had before we decided it wasn't working, but now I'm thinking I was an idiot and didn't even get the point of that conversation either." He explained in a slow, melancholy fashion, before more energetically adding "And before you tell me not to call myself an idiot, wait! I need... I need to get something off my chest before we continue!"

Taking several more deep breaths, Marco muttered a little to psyche himself up before going into an explanation. "Okay, right. Well, let's get this one out right away: Star, I've always thought, always know that you are... well, a-attractive..." He said, minuscule confidence dying and causing him to stutter off at the end. However, a brave look at the effect this statement had on Star, who was wide eyed and fascinated by this, with a hint of joy creeping onto her face, gave Marco the strength to carry on. "I mean, that's not even, you know, an opinion! Even for that half a day when we first met where I sort of hated you for falling into my life out of nowhere and ruining everything, I was always able to acknowledge that you're, you know, very, uh, physically attractive and, well, p...pretty. And going forward from there, I never stopped thinking that was true."

"Reaaaaally?" Star asked, borderline intoxicated by the idea that Marco thought she was attractive. It was the smallest possible drop of emotional satisfaction, and Star knew it, but after their separation and the intense longing she'd experienced, she hungered voraciously for even that minuscule drop. When Marco nodded to confirm it, she felt herself melt inside, an outright joyful expression finally
crossing onto her face. "Oooooh Marco!" She couldn't help but exclaim, finally feeling her aching heart being validated.

"Star, wait, let me finish." Marco responded, a little more sternly than he'd meant to, but he knew he had to get everything out in the open right now or the moment might be lost. "But, that realization sparked, well, a second realization I guess. Back on Earth Star, I was your host, remember? Your family had placed an enormous amount of trust in both my parents and myself that you would be safe and cared for during a stay in a strange and potentially frightening new world. I knew, as soon as it was clear to me you were both very attractive and going to stay, I knew that I could not, under and circumstances, violate that sacred trust, particularly when, you know, you and me started getting along. So, I did my best to never think about the fact that I liked the way you look and to treat you purely as a friend." Looking a little guilty, he added "I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I, well, took advantage of you, even if it was by accident."

Despite the heavy weight to all of Marco's words, his next speech was surprisingly uplifting by comparison. "But you know, that might have actually been for the best. Because that made me look at you deeper Star. You became a best friend who I trusted completely, and who always had my back. A warm, beautiful soul that helped me to live for the first time, who would never stop trying to do what was right or what would make her friends happy no matter how dangerous or difficult it looked to be. I'd spent my life living so far down in the dumps that when you picked me up for the first time and showed me how high life can climb I was scared by it, until you helped me realize there was nothing to be frightened by."

"Marco I know you're trying to get your feelings all out at once for me and I appreciate that but please I need to stop that was beautiful!" Star interrupted, her misted over eyes beginning to match Marco's the deeper the two got into this conversation. "Whatever you feel about me in this sense Marco, I feel the exact same way! You changed my life just as much as I changed yours! Before I met you I felt like, I felt like a warnicorn that had lived in a cage its whole life! Nobody ever wanted me for me, you know what I'm saying? Mom, dad, the country, the other kingdoms, everyone had a specific Star that THEY wanted me to be, who would suit THEIR needs the best! I tried to vent and be myself by beating up monsters, but you showed me so much more! You appreciated me for who I was, who I REALLY was, and I could be myself with you, in all kinds of ways that didn't just involve random fights! It... it felt like sometimes you even loved me for who I am Marco, and I guess that's why I couldn't help but fall in love with you."

With that, a heavy weight settled onto the room. The awkwardness of Star's mentioned confession paled compared to what had finally been said out loud. Star had admitted to Marco that she had fallen in love with him.

"I never realized that I, well, that I meant so much to you Star." Marco responded, struggling to put his new, painful feelings into words. "It always seemed to me that you were what made us special, you know? You're the magic princess, you take me to all these crazy dimensions and show me all these adventures, you make me laugh with your bubbly, infectious enthusiasm... I always thought I was just along for the ride, to some degree. Like you could have ended up roommates with anyone and they'd go through the changes I did." By now, both of them had brought their hands together in the gap between the chairs they were both seated on.

"Well you're wrong Marco Diaz." Star answered, looking straight at him even if Marco couldn't meet her eyes at the moment. "No one else, in your world or mine, could have done for me what you did. No one else in the multiverse is the exact combination of strong, smart, caring and encouraging that you are and that I needed. You're... you're perfect for me Marco!" Star tumbled out, feeling every word hurt like a ripped off bandage as it left her mouth. Her heart was being barred to the boy in front of her, and every inch of it stung with dreadful anticipation of a crushing break Star feared was
still to come. But at the same time, she knew, with more certainty the longer they talked, that this had to happen. "Even if he stomps my heart to bits here, I can live with that." Star thought to herself. "At least it will all be over then."

Marco, in contrast to Star wrestling with old, achy emotions, was wrestling with an ongoing parade of fresh, red hot revelations that burned at him every time they came to life. "I've been oblivious." He thought to himself. "Blind, deaf and stupid to what was going on with everyone, even myself. But whatever my heart decides to throw at me, I'll figure it out and stop it, right here and right now! Star's been hurt so badly by all of this, and I... I... I WON'T LET THAT KEEP HAPPENING! IF MY FEELINGS THINK THEY CAN KEEP HURTING STAR I'LL PUNCH THEM ALL INTO NEXT MONTH!"

"Star, I've cared about you, I always have and I always will! I care about you more than anything in the world!" Marco yelled, the tears flowing out of his eyes freely now as his pride was torn to shreds by the ruthless sandstorm of emotion he was exposing it to, but he didn't care. He wasn't thinking his words through at all anymore, just reaching inside past all his self-deceptions and blind moments, ripping his real feelings free and throwing them out of his own mouth. "I don't care if I end up hurt or humiliated for any of this, Star needs the truth and she's going to get it!"

"We were closer than I'd ever been with anyone in my life, but because I'd made that vow so early that I'd never betray your trust, I didn't let myself see, see anything really!" The boy continued to spill, a mess of emotions coloring his tone as he got it all out. "I was so blinded by tunnel vision on us just being friends that I ignored how I felt, I ignored how you felt, I ignored reality and in the end, I ignored the girl that you yourself had swallowed your feelings and helped me pursue!" Bewildered by his own revelation, Marco leaned back in his chair and gestured wildly with his hands, rapidly losing touch with his own control of the situation. "Oh my god, Star! Did you have a crush on me WHILE you were being my wingman for Jackie!? That's... that's... I can't believe you could do that!"

Star, meanwhile, had been drinking in every word Marco had said, her eyes wide and just as full of tears as his were as she took in everything he said. "I've been struggling with these feelings for months, no, I've HAD months to sort all these feelings out and do something with them, and now, what, do I expect Marco to solve all this!? He's getting punched in the face by MONTHS of emotional struggle all at once, and all because of me! HOW DARE MY MONTHS OLD FEELINGS OF HURT BEAT UP THIS BEAUTIFUL BOY IN FRONT OF ME!? THAT'S IT, THEY'RE GETTING THE BOOT!"

"MARCO, STOP, I'M SORRY!" Star shouted out, causing the boy to silence the stream of babbling he'd gone on as revelation after revelation struck him. "I shouldn't have kept my feelings locked up and let things get this bad! I should have told you! I shouldn't have helped you date Jackie and I should have just been honest with you! I should have awoken you from your sleep one Saturday morning by playing an enormous horn on the front lawn of your house from the back of a white warnicorn steed with piles of roses everywhere and a full barbecue grill and an enormous sign that says 'I love you Marco Diaz!' because I LOVE YOU MARCO DIAZ!" After having let it all out, Star breathed heavily for a moment before hanging her head low. "But I didn't. And now everyone is hurt. And I'm sorry for being such a big idiot."

Another uncomfortable silence had descended over the two, and minutes later, this one was also broken by Marco Diaz. Instead of another outpouring of feeling or more warm words however, this time he broke it... by laughing. It started off as just a mild under the breath chuckle, but steadily got louder and louder. Once she could hear the laughter for herself, Star looked up at him. "Oh no, I finally drove Marco insane!" she screamed in her head, but that doubt was soon enough put to rest.

"You uh... you had that specific scenario in mind for awhile?" Marco asked teasingly, unable to help
himself but giggle at this. Star, rather than being upset, recognized this instantly as one of the boy's
good natured laughs, and didn't at all feel like she was being mocked. Instead, she wanted in on the
joke, and even chuckled a few times on reflex. "I mean... for a bit, yes. What's so funny?"

"I was just, you know, thinking about all the ways it would probably go wrong. Which it would
have, since it's us we're talking about." Marco answered, and in response, Star's laughter actually got
stronger as well.

"Oh my goodness you're totally right." She said with an air of self-depreciation. "I'd probably have
been in such a rush to make everything perfect that I'd pick the rowdy warnicorn that bucks me off at
some point and poops everywhere, huh?"

"I mean, only if we weren't already at the hospital because I, seized by a fit of romantic passion, tried
to jump down to you out of my bedroom window and both shattered my legs on impact and landed
in the thorniest pile of roses on the front lawn." Marco shot back, getting an unexpected belly laugh
out of Star.

"No, no, there wouldn't be any roses left because I'd probably blow up the grill trying to make you
the traditional Johansen Courting Steak and then you'd come out with a fire extinguisher and douse
everything off, including me. Then I'd probably throw foam at you, because I love doing that..." Star
mused idly in response, a far away look on her face as she considered the idea.

"Right, right, I remember. I was wondering for awhile, actually, if you weren't starting fires on
purpose just so I'd have to come out and spray the fire extinguisher so you could roll around in all the
foam, you really enjoyed doing that the two or three times it happened." Marco said back, then raise
his eyebrow to consider another possibility. "There'd probably be some weird magic element to the
whole thing that I'd ignore or disrespect and then that would have us running for our lives. As usual." His last words, instead of being bitter, were more nostalgic and wanting.

"You'd get stuck in the giant horn somehow." Star said back, playfully.

"You'd try and strike a dashing stance by lifting me onto the warnicorn with a rose between your
teeth, but you'd forget to take the thorns off first and I'd have to bandage your lips." Marco retorted,
equally playful.

"That doesn't sound too bad!" Star said which a giggle. "I'd much rather have to go through all that
than fall off the warnicorn a bunch of times like you would, dork."

"Well, I wouldn't be the one with all the traffic tickets you'd inevitably rack up when you take that
thing stampeding through downtown then, would I?" Marco answered back, causing both to collapse
into giggles. When both of them calmed down at roughly the same time, the silence that descended
was much more comfortable than the previous two had been. They took a long moment to look in
each other's eyes, a tinge of the old nervousness returning. Both took a gulp to try and gather
courage, with Star being the first to speak.

"So, just to be clear, you're single now, right?"

"Yes Star. Yes I am."

"And... you don't hate me for causing you and Jackie to break up?"
Marco let out a long sigh before slumping back at that question. "Star... if I'm being honest, I wish
you'd gotten in-between and broken me and Jackie up sooner. I wasn't treating her right."

"I don't believe that for a second." Star said accusingly. "Based on the mountains of first hand
evidence I have collected about you over all the time we've spent together, you, Marco Diaz, are the best boyfriend any girl could ask for. You're caring, you're considerate, you do everything in your power to make others happy and you're cute as a button. There is no way anything that went wrong in that relationship was your fault."

"It was though Star! Things are different between you and me, and that's what the problem was!" Marco tried desperately to explain. "I'd admired her for so long, and from such a distance, that by the time I finally got close to her and won her over in a whirlwind romance I didn't even know who I was dating. Then I promised to get to know her better and I completely failed to do that." He leaned closer now, putting a hand on Star's cheek, the heart now beneath the hand glowing in response.

"You're different Star. I know we really haven't known each other very long, all things considered, but we've been through so much together, I feel like we know each other inside and out. And... and, well..."

"This is it Diaz." The boy thought to himself, feeling like a volcano was going to erupt in his gut. "I need to make this work, however this ends, I need to make Star happy! I can't hurt her again! I just need to dig up these feelings, get them in order..."

"Marco, wait."

His thoughts abruptly went blank as Star's voice cut through Marco's haze. Despite the uncertain look the girl had on her face, she soon put both comforting arms on Marco's shoulders. "I know that look on your face." She explained, tilting her own head sideways a little as she looked into his eyes. "It's that look you get when you're about to dive headfirst into something stupid for my sake, and come out on the other side victorious despite how impossible that seems, because you're amazing. But..." With a regretful sigh, Star looked to the side and took a deep breath before looking back.

"Marco, don't do this just because you want me to be happy." She said, letting the brick in her stomach finally drop, crushing down on her sensitive insides. Still, she kept talking despite how much it hurt to. "Not too long ago I'd have just jumped into your arms as soon as you came back, but I've had some time and some experiences since then. If... if we're actually going to, to date..." Star explained, the word tasting forbidden on her tongue, but unable to help but sound briefly excited at the mention of the possibility. "...then I want it to be because you want me, just as much as I've wanted you. If you don't... if you don't I can learn to live with it."

The room was silent again, for the longest time yet as Star sat with silent anticipation, fearful and hopeful all at once. Marco was much more inscrutable, head hanging low to guard his expression, thoughts running through his head. This time though, the silence was broken not by one of them speaking, but by the much softer sound of Marco bringing his lips into contact with Star's.

"Finally." Was the last conscious thought Star had for a good while before the raw, unearthly joy of his touch wiped away her senses with the soft touch of Marco's dry lips. Objectively, it wasn't even a very good kiss, as Marco simply pressed his puckered up lips onto Star's unprepared ones, and the only flair to it was him grabbing her upper arms and leaning forward when Star's neck bent back listlessly in response, but for both of them it was the most important kiss of their lives. Finally, after a period time that was in that perfect awkward position between quick pecks and long make outs, Marco withdrew, sitting back down in his own chair and unconsciously licking his own lips while Star melted into her chair.

"Wow." Was the first thing Marco thought as his senses returned to him. The next thing to surprise him was his own reaction to this. Marco knew himself well enough to guess that he should be responding to having reached out and kissed Star by freaking out, panicking, and apologizing, in various orders and amounts, but instead... he felt calm. Placid, almost. Content. "I just kissed Star"
Butterfly on the lips and it felt like the most natural thing in the world." He thought to himself, almost disappointed at his own lack of a reaction. "It felt good, inviting even. Like those lips had been waiting for me. I could have stayed like that forever. Well, until I needed oxygen at least."

"It's all worth it." Were the equivalent thoughts going on in Star's head. "Going to earth, blowing up the wand, all the weeks of heartbreak and fighting Toffee and sort of dying once... IT WAS ALL WORTH IT! Strike me down now, I don't care! I kissed Marco Diaz and it felt amazing!" It was everything Star had hoped for, everything she had dreamed of. In contrast to Marco's surprisingly straitlaced and normal aftertaste, Star was giggling and grinning in her chair, overwhelmed with happiness. However, what Marco said next easily cut through the haze and brought her back to reality.

"Star... let's make it happen."

"No, he can't mean... does he really...

"Let's, well, you know, give this a try. Let's be boyfriend and girlfriend."

Marco tried to play it so smooth, deliver it in such a calm voice, but even his kiss induced placidity had shown some cracks in that delivery. It very much didn't matter to Star though. She briefly felt like her heart had stopped, and instantly responded by using magic to kick it back online, because she'd be damned to hell before she let a little cardiovascular failure hold her back at a time like this.

"eeeeeeeeeeeee..."

"Star are you alright?"

"eeeeeeeeeeeeeereeeeeeeeeeee..."

"Star do I need to take you to a hospital?!"

"eeeeeeeeeEEEEREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEH!"

The princess' inarticulate squeal of delight reached maximum volume at this point as her arms and legs flopped around like improbably happy little noodles as she basically lost all control of herself, smiling so wide it looked like it hurt and grinning like an idiot. She actively started to drool from the mouth after flopping out of her chair and onto the floor while her neck swung back and forth with happiness. All the while her eyes had almost rolled into the back of her head.

"STAR!" Marco yelled in concern, but when he stood up and attempted to pull her off the floor she simply dragged him down with her, before enveloping him in a bone crushing hug. "Star always gives the best hugs." He couldn't help but think to himself at the sudden change of position, but then, he noticed this one had something new to it. Something none of Star's previous hugs had had before, and that was the feeling of her hands running up and down his back, seemingly directed by some sort of primordial hunger or a curiosity to explore that specific region of his body. "Okay, new, but I'm kinda liking it."

This act of hugging soon turned into an act of kissing, as Star bent her neck forward in order to capture Marco's lips with her own, which he gracefully accepted. What took the young man by surprise however, was when Star's tongue eagerly emerged from her mouth and burst its way into his, instantly going to town rolling and wrapping around his own. A conflicting haze of surprise and amazement coursed over Marco's brain, leaving him only able to think "Wow. I guess we are smooch buddies now."

The two soon separated, both in need of fresh air, but while Star looked ready to go back to kissing
her new boyfriend, her glazed over eyes having gained a hungry new glint, Marco stood himself on his feet instead. "Star, c'mon. If we're gonna make out, let's not make out on the floor, okay?" He said, while offering her a hand up.

"O~kay!" Star giggled as she accepted the hand and stood up, planting a quick kiss on Marco's cheek before giggling. "I guess I did take things a little fast there, didn't I?"

"Maybe a little." Marco remarked dryly, as the reality of the situation settled in on him, the second dose of that placid feeling wearing off. "Oh my god, Star, we kissed! Star, we're dating now!" He said, starting to get frantic as her gripped both of Star's resting at her side arms with his hands while looking into her eyes. "What are we going to tell my parents!? WHAT ARE WE GOING TO TELL YOUR PARENTS!?" He abruptly let go of Star and paced in a little circle. "I'm too young to get executed Star!"

"Marco, relax." She spoke with a chill, controlled tone. "If mom and dad want to execute you, they'll have to go through me. Besides, I've been thinking about this, and I know exactly how we'll break the news to them, no worries." That did seem to calm Marco down, as he stopped walking in a circle, but still looked a little troubled. This, in turn, made Star frown a little. "Hey, Marco, what's wrong? I told you, if you're still uncertain about things, don't do this just to make me happy."

"It's not that Star, you, uh, really managed to change my mind back there." Marco explained, scratching the back of his head while inwardly, Star swooned at the indirect compliment to her kissing. "It's just... well... I'm worried I might not be a good boyfriend to you Star."

"Oh Marco. Marco Marco Marco Marco Marcomarcomarcomarcomarcos." Star chided while she stepped closer and closer and eventually gave her boyfriend a hug. "Just be the incredible friend you were to me back on Earth, and you can't fail. After all, that's what made me fall in love with you."

Smiling a little now, the human boy wrapped his arms around the princess of mewni and looked into her eyes. "That's all I've got to do huh?" He spoke playfully. "I think I can manage that..."

"With just one exception!" Star added in, removing one hand from her hug so she could gesture with a raised index finger. "You also need to give your girlfriend lots and lots of kisses!"

Laughing a little, Marco retorted with "I dunno Star, sounds like a lot more work. Hang on a sec." before leaning down and giving her a surprise kiss on the mouth. This time, he had his tongue ask permission to enter, which was instantly granted. This kiss was shorter, and Marco mostly used his tongue to gently rub Star's a little, but when he withdrew both were clearly satisfied by it. "All right." The boy spoke with mock weariness. "I suppose I can take on this extra duty."

"Good!" Star said authoritatively, as if to playfully chide him for thinking there was any other answer. "But, your new royal boyfriend duties will have to wait for another time! We need to get you settled in, find you a room, and OH!" Star suddenly burst with excitement midway through her stride to the door. "I have new friends you need to meet!"

"Oh wow, look at the forward planning on Star!" Marco teased playfully as he followed her. "I would have figured I'd need to bring up concerns about a room and a meal for me, and that you'd be the one suggesting we just make out for a few hours. Someone's been learning!"

"Hey, count yourself lucky you're so cute mister, or I could have had those guards throw you out for daring to come in and confess your love to me at this hour at night!" Star teased back, but then briefly bit her lip and changed tones to something more expository. "But it's been a long day for me, I'm actually exhausted. I'm still happier than anything that we had this talk and decided to do, well, all this, but I really do need to get some sleep soon."
Marco gave her a sympathetic smile and an apologetic, sober voice. "Hey, Star, it's alright, I'm sorry to have just dropped in like this. Look, we'll sort out where I'm staying, and then you can go to bed. We can meet your new friends and stuff tomorrow."

"You sure?"

"Positive. I can wait any amount of time for you Star."

"Awww. That's sweet of you to say Marco." Star answered, one hand on the doorknob. Then however, with an almost sultry tone, she added "But don't go around waiting for me all the time wild man. That's how we got in all this trouble to begin with."

The next morning came early enough, and everything began normally enough, though the royal dinning table was a little sparse at the moment: It seems that just the humans were taking breakfast today, and Stanford ate his food quietly and left fairly quickly, leaving just the human teenagers.

"Are you sure your great uncle is okay Dipper? He seemed sort of troubled." Pacifica was asking.

"I wouldn't worry about it, I can recognize that expression on him. He gets that way when he doesn't have a project in motion or is feeling lost in terms of research." Dipper explained, making sure to talk in-between his bites. Due to their respective seating positions, the boy was able to notice a top hat wearing spider climbing onto the head of the table while carrying a trumpet before Pacifica did, but he kept talking like this wasn't unusual in the slightest. "He's probably just in a bit of a funk because we've got no way to go after Bill right now, which is troubling, I won't lie, but I'm sure intelligence reports will come in eventually."

Pacifica opened her mouth to respond, but it was at that moment that the magic spider opted to play its trumpet at maximum volume, causing the blond girl to jolt in her seat out of surprise while Dipper just chuckled at little. Before anyone could ask what the deal with this was, the answer presented itself.

"GOOD MORNING MEWNI!"

The enthusiastic voice of the land's princess could have woke the dead, but in the cavernous, nearly empty dinning hall it only turned the heads of the human couple. This gave them the perfect view of Star confidently striding into the dinning hall, carrying Marco in both arms as the two of them laughed. The air at first glance seemed to be full of flower petals as well, but those faded away as soon as you stopped looking at them.

"IS EVERYBODY READY TO GET THEIR FIRST HELPING OF MARCO DIAZ, ALL AROUND COOL GUY AND YOUR NEWEST BEST FRIEND!?" Star announced, setting the boy on his feat and gesturing up and down his body while he began to look embarrassed. "Look, but don't touch."

Both humans already at the table reacted with looks of surprise, though Dipper's was more one of dry amusement while Pacifica outright dropped her fork in shock. "Oh, poor Paz." Dipper thought to himself, looking at his girlfriend with sympathy "But when you've lived with Mabel for as long as I did, you gain a resistance to strange shenanigans like this." Clearing his throat, the boy made himself the first to speak. "Huh. He's kind of normal looking to be honest. Based on what I'd heard of him I imagined Marco being more... seven feet tall and able to shoot blue fire out of his hands."

Clearly a little amused by this, Marco responded with "Likewise, when Star told me she had made new friends recently, I was expecting a lot... weirder." He commented, as Star led him by the arm to the table, then pulled up her own chair so she could sit directly besides him and continually rub her
head into his neck.

"Wow." Pacifica thought in her head, a little shocked and now consciously aware of the fact that she and Dipper had opted to sit across from each other instead of... that. "She is REALLY into this guy. This suddenly explains a LOT about some of her behavior so far." Clearing her throat, Pacifica added her part to the conversation. "Oh don't be fooled, the normalcy is only skin deep for Dipper over there." she teased.

"Hey, hold on a second." The boy responded, getting into the tone of voice for the kind of playful bickering the two had gotten used to with each other even before they started dating. "You had your own limo, yacht and pony before your age hit double digits, you're the strange one out of the two of us!"

The familiar references caught Marco off guard, to the point that he didn't notice when Star discreetly began putting small pieces of fruit into his mouth for him, and just chewed them on reflex inbetween sentences. "Wait, are you two from Earth?" He asked, suddenly taking a closer look at their clothing and finding it to be very earthlike. "How did you even get here?"

"Built an interdimensional portal. Once you apply a little elbow grease and follow the instructions they're not that hard to assemble." Dipper answered jokingly, and in a way that made Pacifica look at him with pleasant surprise. She'd expected him to be more guarded about the portal but was pleased to see her boyfriend opening up, and Dipper understood this right away. "If Star trusts this guy, I'll trust this guy. Besides, I can tell this secret wouldn't have held even if I'd tried."

"Wait, what? When!?"

"Thirty some years ago if you want to get technical, but the working model we used to actually get here was brought on line, oh, seven months ago?" Dipper explained while pointing a fork at the two and almost chiding Marco. "You and your magic princess aren't the only weird things to ever happen to Earth you know. There's all kinds of magic and anomalies hidden just under the surface, and we investigate them!"

"Shouldn't you be in school?" Marco asked shakily as it settled in these people were about the same age as him and Star.

"Shouldn't you?" Responded Dipper with a raised eyebrow, while Pacifica just answered "I'm rich."

"Well, you got me on that one." Marco admitted, before his eyebrows scrunched a little. "Hey, I don't think I caught your names?"

"Oh oh OH! No worries Marco, I'll introduce you!" Star spoke up while raising a hand above her head before the two could volunteer the information themselves. "That's Dipper Pines..." she said, while pointing to the boy in question. "He's awkward, but nice, so don't hold that against him! He helped me out with some magic trouble a few days ago and is quite the fighter!" Then, she pointed at the other girl seated at the table. "That's Pacifica Northwest! She's basically a princess from Earth, and she's really understanding and knowledgeable about how being royalty comes with a bunch of whack ins and outs. We haven't been friends very long but they helped me figure out a lot of stuff about myself, aaaaaaaaaand..." Star drew out her last word while swishing a pointed finger through the air before tapping it against Marco's nose. "...just like you and me are now, they're daaaaaaaating!"

"Are they? Well, good for you two." Marco responded pleasantly, before Star added in that "And there's an old guy as well named Ford whose their teacher and Dipper's uncle, I'm sure you'll see him at some point."
"Oh, OK." The boy answered again before turning to address the two in question. "So, you guys are paranormal investigators, or something like that? You must have hit the jackpot coming to Mewni."

"HE'S a paranormal investigator." Pacifica spoke up sassily, pointing towards Dipper. "I'm just the hapless assistant who gets dragged along for the ride."

"Now Pacifica, that isn't true." Dipper responded, taking a firm and professional tone of voice. "You are an equal and valued member of the research group, able to engage with me and Great Uncle Ford on an equal footing, and you should never feel otherwise." Then, his steady tone cracked a little as he sprung some sass of his own on her. "That of course means you are just as strange as him and I are."

Though he was smiling to himself at the sight of Dipper and Pacifica continuing to argue/flirt with each other, Marco quickly turned his attention to his girlfriend. "Huh, that's... an interesting sensation." He thought, mulling over the taste of the word now that it was associated with his bestie. Who was, at the moment, still practically glued to him at the hip, leaning against him over their chairs and trying to offer him more small fruit pieces, even after he deflected the last one. "Hey Star..." the boy spoke up, instantly catching the girl's attention. "...You don't need to go so over the top, okay? I mean, I'm not saying I don't appreciate all the attention, but, well, grand romantic gestures that sort of miss the point of human relationships were always more of a... me thing, you know? If we're gonna try this out, we should take things as naturally as possible, right?"

Star's expression had shifted for the nervous as Marco explained things, but she was looking more relaxed by the time he was done. "I mean, I get what you're saying Marco, but I promise, what you see is what you get, and what you're getting is aaaaaaaaaaaaall me!" She explained, getting a wide smile and running her hands along Marco's chest in the process, trying to get a feel for him through two layers of material. "I'm not putting on a big, affectionate love bag show in an attempt to win you over right out the gate, I've just wanted to hold you close for a long time!"

"Oh." Marco muttered quietly, winded from that remark like he'd just run a marathon. "I, uh... I didn't know. I was thinking I'd have to work my way up to that." Then, realizing what he'd just said, hastily added "I mean, not that that's the only reason I said yes! I mean, I came back to Mewni because I just missed us hanging out, talking about our problems, stuff like that. For me, all that's, well..."

"It's okay Marco." Star purred at this point, rubbing her head against his chest. "I may have been too dumb to realize it, but we've been doing the whole 'boyfriend-girlfriend' thing for awhile, when you really think about it. So, I'm more than ready to give you a little sugar."

"Wow." Breathed the Earth boy as he felt these new sensations settle into him, and found they were pretty alright. This feeling of warm contentment was abruptly replaced by warm embarrassment when a loud, fake cough echoed across the table, causing Marco and Star to realize that Dipper and Pacifica were looking straight at them, both with teasing expressions on their face. Marco was of course made immediately flustered by this and even Star blushed and opened her eyes wide in reaction, though she didn't take her head off Marco's chest.

"As I had asked you two several times already..." Pacifica spoke clearly, obviously amused by the couple in front of her. "...Dipper is absolutely the weird one between him and I, right?"

The boy in question, also amused by Star and Marco's interactions, just rolled his eyes in response and looked to the two while saying "Hey, back me up on this guys!"

"Dipper, we tried to go get friendly hamburgers once, before we were even dating, and that whole afternoon got derailed because you become convinced a newspaper dispenser was the drop off point
for a cult of some kind!" Pacifica argued back.

"That newspaper dispenser was very suspicious!"

"You set the thing on fire and then ran away from the cops on what was supposed to be a friendly hamburger lunch!"

"Guys, hold on!" Star cut in abruptly. "That's not just a date thing! On the recent secret mission me and Dipper went on, he burned the building we were investigating down as well!"

"Oh wow, maybe Dipper does have a problem." Marco wondered aloud before looking at Pacifica with a comforting tone. "I do have some tips for controlling public fires I picked up over my friendship with Star. We can talk sometimes, I'll share them with you."

"I would greatly appreciate that, Marco." Answered the blond human, while the blond mewman looked at the boy in the hoodie a little perturbed, with her face only getting more cross as he spoke again.

"Although, they might not be as relevant to your case. Star tends to start fires by accident, usually as a result of trying to fill the area with rainbows, to liven things up. Rainbows that explode if gently nudged or worse."

"Hey, I have been getting better at those, particularly while you were gone!" Star said defensively, before using her wand to generate a small example of this phenomenon over the soup bowl. "See!" She said proudly, crossing her arms and closing her eyes right before the colored arch caught fire. Without missing a beat, Marco emptied his glass of water to put it out.

"So, no advice for a boyfriend that refuses to carry individual dollars?" Pacifica asked playfully.

"He can see you through every one!" Dipper shot back.

Putting a hand on his chin and making a show of being in deep thought, Marco responded with "No, but if general paranoia is your problem there was this one time, with this other foreign exchange student..."

"THAT PERSON WAS SUSPICIOUS!" Star yelled, slamming a fist on the table. "I never figured out why he was measuring you and your parents in their sleep!"

Dipper, who up until now had simply pulled his hat low to try and conceal his blushing, abruptly perked up at Star's exclamation. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, there was this weird fake foreign exchange student who came back once, he was a cannibal but he was actually a cook, he had a fake language so I blackmailed him, but he wasn't able to explain why he was measuring the Diaz family while they slept!" Star explained in a ramble, causing Marco to look at her with a shocked expression.

"Wait, wait, slow down, what!?" The boy asked, as Star's eyes widened and she abruptly realized what she'd said in front of him. "THAT'S what happened to Gustav!?!" After another moment of wondering, he yelled in confusion "What do you mean you blackmailed him!?!"

"That sounds worrisome Star, good handling on that guy." Dipper abruptly cut in, taking this matter completely seriously and ignoring the perplexed looks both Marco and Pacifica were sporting. "If you know where this guy lives and are up to take the scissors for a spin, we can swing by the Mystery Shack to get my listening equipment, and I'll help you bug this guy's house."
"Wait, did you say The Mystery Shack?" Marco asked, his previous frustration with Star completely dosed by bewilderment. "Little tourist trap gift shop, up in Oregon?" When Dipper and Pacifica nodded in response, equally bewildered, Marco explained that "Me and my parents stopped there once on a vacation we went on when I was... ten, eleven maybe? I remember it really well because it smelled terrible and even as a child I thought the whole thing was a bunch of garbage and was disappointed in my parents for how seriously they took the whole thing."

Dipper just slumped in his chair at this revelation, taken by severe surprise. "I can't believe you've met Grunkle Stan." He muttered in shock.

"Well, I can't believe Dipper Pines is such a good friend." Star spoke up to reenter the conversation. "I'd be happy to have you show me the ropes for properly bugging someone's house. I'd see people do it in the movies me and Marco would watch every week back on Earth, but I've never actually done it first hand!"

"Well, bugging is only half of it." Dipper responded offhand, talking about this subject like it's the most casual in the world. "The key to a good bugging is a good breaking. Specifically, you really need to not leave any evidence of you breaking and entering when you bug the place, because otherwise people will get suspicious and then they'll be looking for something to be out of place."

Marco's deadpan expression traveled between Star and Dipper a few times before her finally looked at Pacifica. "Okay, I agree with you. He's the weird one out of you two."

It wasn't even a particularly funny line, but something about how utterly dry Marco had said those words made the rest of the table, Dipper included, break out into a chuckle. Breakfast continued on from there at a light and enjoyable pace, the four finding that they all easily shared laughs and stories between them. Out of an entire table of good cheer however, Star Butterly was easily the happiest person among the bunch. She felt light in a way she hadn't felt in weeks, just able to quell her anxieties and relax with the boy she'd always wanted and the good friends who helped her get to him.

Chapter End Notes

So, here I can finally introduce two things I've been eager to write ever since I decided to take this to a crossover: Some sweet Starco, and the awesome four person friendship I think Dipper, Pacifica, Star and Marco all have the potential for. I hope everyone enjoys my interpretation of these character interactions, but of course, I can't shake the feeling that something is missing from this picture...
Mabel Gets Kidnapped/Mabel and the Mabels

Chapter Notes

So, whose ready for a little trip back to Earth? It was never my intention to cut Mabel out of the story, in fact I specifically want to give her the chance to grow and develop as a character into a protagonist of equal quality to Dipper, and in this chapter she's going to have to face some challenges on her own to hopefully start that development. For those of you who were waiting for this, I hope it was worth it.

On the day that it happened, it happened to rain on top of everything else.

Mabel Pines had gone for a walk that day, driven by a lack of an immediate distraction inside her then current reach back at the Shack. The journey through the town proved to be a lamentation of her failing summer dreams, as she passed by all the places she had planned to visit again with her twin brother Dipper at her side. After the first few times where she stood hesitantly outside the business of fun and then realized she lacked the energy to go in alone, Mabel stopped bothering, simply casting the place a glance while continuing to walk. Her sweater, a bright pink piece with a rainbow wrapping around the whole torso of it, was strangely inappropriate on the dreary lakeside day, despite doing an excellent job insulating her from the chill.

Dipper had been gone, willingly stepped through the portal of his great uncle's design, for several days at this point. Mabel had reached the shore of the town's lake and was gazing across the calm water while seated on a rock when she really began to lament this fresh loss. "After all those years of waiting through high school, trying my hardest until I could see my brother again, and as soon as I get here he's off through a portal, adventuring around the multiverse." She thought to herself with a miserable air, skipping a rock across the water. "I should have stayed in California, we were closer to each other then than we are now."

"Sometimes it seems like he just wants to get away from me. As soon as I'm ready to finally be the best big sister that Dipper always deserved, he just up and vanishes on me! I've been great at making friends all my life... so why can't I be friends with the one person who means the most to me?" She continued to think while getting a slight flash of frustration across her face. "...I hate that portal." Mabel thought to herself, inwardly realizing she was crossing a line but unable to help it. "It took my brother away from me, just like it took Grunkle Stan's away from him."

That was the moment the first rain drop tapped Mabel on the nose. Blinking in surprise, the girl was roused from her thoughts as the gentle hiss of the rain falling began to build up around her and drops sent ripples across the water. It was all very gentle for the moment, but was visibly speeding up over time. "Oh come on! It's gotta rain too!?" Mabel yelled with frustration. "Why am I dealing with this all of sudden!? It never rains on Gravity Falls!"

Distantly, the Pines girl did have a hazy memory of her mother instructing her and her brother to back all their jackets and sweaters, as well as providing Mabel with a pastel pink umbrella she'd ended up never using, citing that Oregon was a very rainy state, unlike California, and the twins needed to be prepared for their trip north. However, her clearer memories contradicted this, being clearer in that it was easier for her to remember all her adventures and clearer in the sense that exploring the supernatural never got rained out in all her experience.
Finding herself muttering angrily in a manner she used to associate exclusively with Dipper, Mabel got to her feet and began to shuffle back up the road away from the lake, looking to get out of the rain once she was back in town. "When did things start getting like this?" She asked aloud, to no one in particular. The weather forecast that predicted this rain had kept the crowds away from the lake today. "Why isn't my bubbly personality and good hearted intentions enough to get ahead in life anymore!?"

So caught up was she in this rage against the heavens was Mabel that she didn't notice the fact she had walked past a delivery van parked into the treeline just near the lake. She'd been similarly too caught up in her newfound taste for free-form brooding that she hadn't noticed the van earlier, when it split off the main road and parked itself there shortly after she had gone down the road to the lake.

As a result of all that adding up, Mabel was completely unprepared for when the men from the van threw a bag over her head and grabbed her by the arms.

"...LET ME GO! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT GRUNKLE STAN WILL DO TO YOU FOR THIS!? STRANGER DANGER!"

Mabel had fought and yelled the entire way, but the abductors had chosen their moment extremely well, and no one was around to hear her shouts. The teenage girl couldn't quite keep track of how long she'd been bagged for or where she'd been dragged to, as the loss of sight was disorientating and she was putting all her efforts into struggling to escape. She was, however, able to effectively realize when she was no longer being held with her hands behind her back, and wasted no time ripping the bag off her head.

As soon as sight returned to her, Mabel knew she was in the back of a van. An exceedingly similar back of the van to the van Dipper had, which Mabel would have found outrageously funny if she wasn't scared for her life. Standing in front of her, between herself and the back doors out, were two adult men dressed up in stereotypical fishing outfits, one of them completely obscured in the face between his low hanging floppy hat, dark sunglasses, and thick mustache, while the other seemed significantly less obscured despite only lacking the mustache. Mabel blinked for a moment, and not just as a result of her eyes adjusting. "Oh no, I know where this is going and I'm not having it!"

Right after saying that, Mabel rushed forward, planning to attack the kidnapper with the more visible face, which was bearing a blank but intense flat-eyebrow expression. After closing the distance between them, Mabel pulled her right leg back and kicked the man straight in the groin. When he didn't even flinch in response to this, the girl looked up at his unchanged face, looked down, then bent her leg back and kicked over and over again, slamming her foot into his crotch at an extremely strong and fast rate, and continuing to get no results from this action.

"Oh no, this is all I learned how to do from that self-defense class, and it's not working!" Mabel inwardly panicked, until she had her arms grabbed behind her back again and was pulled away. "Alright, that's enough. Calm down and we'll explain everything." The other man said while dragging Mabel back to the back of the van. After a long moment, a single tear rolled down the face of the man she'd kicked from beneath his sunglasses, who otherwise released no reaction to the attack.

Now backed up against the wall, Mabel didn't surge forward and attack again, as while her posture was still defensive and aggravated, her face contorted with a sudden look of curiosity. "Wait... do I know you guys?"

"I would hope you still do." The un-kicked man said bluntly, as the two removed their hats and sunglasses, the speaker revealing himself as an older man with mildly wrinkly skin, a large nose and thinning black hair.
"You tried to kill me once." The other one added, his lack of disguise revealing himself to be notably younger than his partner, though still an adult by at least a decade, with a fuller head of light brown hair, a small nose and bright, beady eyes.

Mabel stood still for a moment, eyes squinting and finger on her chin, looking significantly less afraid now. "...Not fully coming back to me, but I'm feeling really close to it..."

"You tried to KILL me once!" The brunette spoke up again, an obviously practiced facade of calm audibly cracking a slight amount, seemingly from indignity.

"Well, even if you don't remember us, we remember you Mabel Pines." The leader of the two responded while retrieving an ID card from inside the pocket of his fishing vest. "Agent Powers and Agent Trigger. Your government wants to have a chat with you."

Realization quickly set in on the Pines Twin as she looked back and forth between the two with wide eyes. "Ooooh, right. You guys. How's... how's it hanging?" She asked nervously, but soon after perked up with a fresh realization. "Hey, wait, this means you guys aren't pedophiles, right?"

"No."

"SILVER LINING! SILVER LINING!" Mabel cheered, while pumping her fists over her head. After a moment though, she asked them, with a more worried expression. "So, what's going on then? Why am I being invited to a party in the CIA?"

"That's classified, but I suspect you'll get a full explanation soon enough."

The van moved through the streets of Gravity Falls with steady, professional speed and handling, an unremarkable drive that would draw no attention. The ride in the back was quiet and awkward between all parties. Mabel looked to the side and finally noticed the bag that had been thrown over her head and was now discarded on the floor was one of those reusable types that supermarkets started selling to cut down on plastic use, but which even the most well-meaning and dedicated shoppers forget to bring with them when they go shopping, resulting in plastic being used anyways. It was labeled with the logo of the local Tons Grocery Store. With nothing else going on, Mabel decided to try and tell a joke

"So, hey, what do you call it when one cow spies on another?" The girl asked the two agents, grinning with that sort of look of anticipating present when a joke teller wants to hear their own answer more than the people they're telling the joke to.

"A sign that DARPA has been taking too much inspiration from the Acoustic Kitty." Powers responded. Casual observers would be forgiven for thinking that was a snarky comeback meant to shoot down Mabel's response, but the teenage girl had remembered enough of his humorless personality to know that those words were a completely genuine and straightforward answer to her rhetorical question that the agent genuinely believed.

"Yesh, tough crowd. I'm glad I didn't ask them what an FBI agent uses for birth control." The girl thought to herself.

"Despite my partner's inability to understand humor, it's clear to me you're using it as a coping mechanism for the stressful situation you are in." Agent Trigger spoke up, maintaining a neutral tone.
"I can assure you we simply want to ask a few questions, that's all."

"Well... THANKS! I guess." Mabel responded, before looking uncertain briefly. "Um, look, I'm not sure if this is an awkward question or not, but could, well, remind me... when did I try and kill you again?"

Agent Trigger had the same expression that was always on his face, but blinked a few times before responding to the question. "I was trying to take you and your brother into child protective services in order to keep you away from your criminal great uncle." He explained flatly. "While we were traveling you instigated a truck driving redneck into ramming me off the road and caused the vehicle to roll over multiple times."

"Oooooh right, that time!" Mabel spoke, mostly to herself, as the memory came back to her. Putting on a strained smile and looking at the two agents, she tried to explain herself. "Well, actually I wasn't TRYING to kill you in that spot, me and Dipper just needed to get away was all. So... no hard feelings?"

"Over 37,000 people are killed in car accidents a year." Trigger stated bluntly.

"Uh... sorry?" Mabel asked, but abruptly felt her breath catch in her throat as the numbers added up in her head. "How do you remember that happening?"

At that moment however, the van came to a stop, causing all conversation inside it to die as well. Mabel stepped forward, a little nervousness returning, but covering it by remarking "Alright, let's see your guys' secret lair/man cave." but Powers stopped her with an upheld hand.

"The base itself is still top secret. Agent Trigger, bag her up again." Powers ordered, and despite rolling her eyes at this Mabel didn't resist as the shopping bag was put back over her head. She could hear the back doors of the van open before being carefully led out of the vehicle, forward a few steps, and into what was probably an elevator based on the sensation she felt after standing in place for a moment. Then, to Mabel's surprise, the bag came off. With an annoyed expression, she asked "Are you kidding me?" to no reply.

A very short moment later, the elevator door opened, into what was almost certainly a basement given the complete lack of light and the fact that the elevator had been traveling downwards. The basement seemed to consist of a single dark computer room, about the size of the table room over at the Mystery Shack's basement and illuminated only by the blues and yellows radiating off the wall to wall collection of computer servers installed down here. Across the room from the elevator door was a singular desk, fairly modest looking. It had two chair pulled up to it, one on either side, and the further one from Mabel was turned around, back to the visitors, when the three arrived.

Mabel crossed the room in short order, one agent on each side of her. After a quiet, uncomfortable moment sitting in the empty chair with Powers and Trigger standing with stoic professionalism to either side of her, the third man behind the desk turned around at a soft pace to look Mabel face to face.

He was older than Trigger but younger looking than Powers, though it was distinctly possible this new operative had simply aged more gracefully. He was clean cut, not a pluck of his rusty red hair inhabiting his face, though despite the hair on his head being well combed back he still had a few lose strands that curled and popped out of hair cut in seemingly random places. He was wearing the same sort of generic but distinctive black suit the agents use when not in disguise, but in contrast to their perpetually stiff and professional expressions had a softer face, even smiling a little as he turned around and locked eyes with his visitor, along with a pair of conspicuous black gloves. "Mabel Pines, so good to see you!" He said in a charming tone, extending a hand to her, his other hand
holding a lit cigar in it. "It's always a pleasure to meet a member of the Pines family face to face, I'm a big fan of the work you all do. Care for a smoke?" He explained, offering the cigar to her after withdrawing from the handshake.

"Um, not a smoker, thank you though." Mabel responded, a little confused by his friendly attitude. Without hesitation or comment, the new agent placed the cigar on an ashtray then placed the ashtray in a drawer. "So, what's going on, exactly? Why have you brought me here?"

"Ah, a direct attitude, I appreciate that!" The man complemented before leaning in a little and beginning to explain. "Well, to start with, how about an introduction? My name is Ferris, no last names for now, not sure if I still have one if I'm being honest you... They tell you that one day you'll be able to go back and use your real name again but one thing after another comes up and soon enough you're dreaming of being a butterfly named Ferris instead of a man..."

"Uh, excuse me?" Mabel spoke up. "Still waiting to know why you had me kidnapped."

"Oh, of course, I apologize." Ferris answered, seemingly genuinely distracted by his little tangent. "Well, first off, sorry about the kidnapping. You know how it is, secrets and protocols and all that other nonsense. If everything goes well you and your whole family will be able to use the front door from here on out!" He continued, before more clearly explaining that "I want to propose a partnership between the Pines Family and Project TWILIGHT!"

At the announcement, Agent Powers seemed to shift uncomfortably in his place. Even though he didn't saw anything, Ferris seemed to pick up on this movement and abruptly snapped at him "Oh spare me the protocol concerns, she already knows about the secret president, no harm in letting her in on a black project or two."

This seemed to generate a look of concern on Mabel's face though. "Wait, how do you know that I know that?" A bit of dread climbing up her spine.

"Oh, that's easy. We've been spying on you!" Ferris stated nonchalantly, causing Mabel to shiver visibly. If he noticed this, the agent didn't make mention of it. "We've been spying on your whole family for quite awhile actually, among others. Truth be told, we're actually all quite fond of you Pines. You all are basically an asset to us, unlike most of the creepy crawlers we keep bugged."

Getting deeply weirded out now, Mabel sank into her chair a little. "How long is quite awhile, really?"

"Quite awhile means quite awhile in this situation. Going all the way back to you Great Uncle Stanford, back when he was just Stanford." Ferris explained, getting out of his chair and striding towards a wall as if to look out a window, only to remember they were in a basement and sat down again. "It all started when Stanford decided he wanted to research... 'weirdness.' And went about asking for grant money to do so." The red head stated with a scoff. "Honestly, your great uncle is a brilliant man but has no idea how anything money related works. What kind of credible institution is going to give someone money to run around forests and look for gnomes? Back in that time period the space race was going on and there was no cure for erectile dysfunction! No one was going to fund gnome chasing!"

Despite her attempts to remain on guard, Ferris' crude, off hand remark did get a little giggle out of Mabel. "No one... except us, that is. Project TWILIGHT is the United States' top secret supernatural security organization, and we saw potential in your great uncle's work. We had some fronts in place, of course, but we always had a vague suspicion he knew more was going on. Particularly after we asked him to make that mind control necktie."
Abruptly remembering that object, Mabel let out a nervous laugh. "Right, that old thing..."

"By the way, on a personal note? You rigged that election like a champ!" Ferris complemented while leaning over the desk a little. When Mabel looked guilty in response rather than receptive, he leaned back and added "Now, don't go getting all guilt stricken on me here! What you and your brother did there was completely justified! Gideon had actively threatened you and Stanley wasn't making a serious effort to defeat him! Your actions on that day were unclouded, they were all those of justice!"

No longer feeling guilty, instead being severely creeped out by how much Ferris seemed to know, Mabel asked him to continue. "So, if you know all that much, you know what happened to Grunkle Ford, don't you?"

"Well, we thought we knew, but it turns out we didn't, but we know now that we didn't know and that we now know, so yes." Ferris explained, causing Mabel to blink a few times. "Basically, when Stanford fell through the portal, we were under the impression Stanley had murdered him in order to escape his life of crime, live somewhere more stable, get revenge on his estranged family, etc etc. At least, that was what all our psychological profiling led us to believe." While just the thought of one of the older twins killing the other visibly disgusted Mabel, Ferris just went on talking. "It was a few days after the actual switch when we realized what had happened. We knew Stanford had a brother thanks to background checks, and to be frank, Stanley's impression of him is flat out terrible. He got really lucky most of the Pines Family was either out of touch or dead when he did that. With our asset gone, Operation TWILIGHT withdrew from Gravity Falls. I'm sure all his blue-sky research was intriguing and all, but we needed gadgets and weaponry, and it was clear Stanley wouldn't be able to pick up where his brother left off."

"So, when these two showed up to arrest Grunkle Stan..." Mabel wondered, only to cut off by Ferris.

"A coincidence, actually. Powers and Trigger here are legitimate FBI agents, or at least, they were until their recent transfer. Your great uncle has a laundry list of legitimate crimes you know. Everything from pug smuggling to counterfeiting to marijuana dealing." He explained with a slightly teasing tone of voice, causing Mabel to look surprised.

"Wait, marijuana dealing?" She asked with confusion. "I don't remember him ever doing that."

With a sardonic, condescending expression, Ferris remarked that "Mabel, your great uncle Stanley is a self-professed criminal who will do anything for money, lives in an isolated section of wilderness and is strangely tolerant of a bunch of lazy teenagers hanging around his place of business. Where do you think all those dear heads he has came from, and why do you think he always wanted you and Dipper to stay out of the woods?"

"He told me those were paper mache..." Mabel reeled with a hurt tone of voice.

"Nope! He shot those deer himself for trying to eat the pot plants he grows all over the forest, with his collection of varying legal guns." Ferris explained. "Why do you think the whole town was still on speaking terms with him even when they hated him for being a shady con artist?"

"Huh." Mabel muttered with a tone of comprehension. "That explains a lot honestly. He has always been pretty spritely for someone so old."

"Anyways, when the FBI moved to arrest Stanley we were made aware of it due to having him flagged as a person of interest, but the sudden failure of the operation is when we actually got involved." Ferris resumed explaining. Behind his professional expression, the operative took a distinct sense of satisfaction at the look of unease his next words put on Mabel's face. "Surely you didn't think that memory trick would leave you completely in the clear? All the paperwork back at
the HQ reminded those agents right away that they were there to arrest Stanford Pines. They could have swept back into town and arrested all of you at any time, but after losing their memories on a raid the team decided to fall into observation mode to plan a new attack. Luckily for you, that gave me time to get involved."

Reaching into the desk, Ferris produced a photograph and slid it across to Mabel, whose eyes widened as she looked at it. The image was blurry and oddly angled, but the content was unmistakable: It was a photo of the Pines Family, Ford included, sitting down to watch television. "My lost asset had returned, seemingly back from death! The FBI investigation was called off, and these two, the most senior agents on the investigation, were transferred to Project TWILIGHT. A regime of hypnotherapy was gradually returning all their valuable memories of your family, but before we could decide on a move, well..." The agent struggled for words for a moment before simply remarking "End of the world."

"Weirdmageddon." Mabel breathes guiltily.

"That's what you called it!" Ferris shouted with realization. "Thank goodness that news broadcast of yours was so local, we only had to track down and memory wipe about a dozen people to cover the whole thing up." He mused with a tone of remembrance. "And, of course, congratulations on stopping it! Every one of you deserves a medal if you ask me, I was this close to calling in a scorched earth USAF bombing on the whole thing when you put a stop to it. Unfortunately they don't give medals in this line of work."

While Ferris continued to wistfully recount this chain of events, Mabel felt more abject horror crawling up her back. "The whole town... they were going to bomb the whole town to stop Bill..."

"Anyways, from there, it's rather simple. Stanford is back and even has an apprentice, so both of them get marked as assets, and we simply observe them for a few years. Your brother's long chats with the Northwest girl make for excellent listening material. Very informative." By now, Ferris was leaning over his desk in a casual fashion. "Agent Trigger over there even ships them, cheeky boy."

"Negatory." Agent Trigger suddenly spoke up, keeping his expression completely frozen the whole time. "I ship the two we have under observation in California."

"Of course, my mistake." Ferris answered dismissively, but then went off on a bold, stirring speech. "And that's why we've decided now is the time to contact you Mabel! It seems like in the last decade the supernatural has started coming out of the woodwork: Strange monsters stalk the streets of LA, UFOs are flying over Delaware, a pyramid demon invaded Earth right here in Oregon, vampires are having street wars over sarcophagi and haunted houses full of ghost skeletons... They're emerging faster than our current resources can contain them, and as a result, it's time to harvest the fruits of Stanford's labor bolster our forces."

"What do you want me to do exactly?" Mabel asked, tensing up at this part. "Here comes the part where I can't refuse..."

"We want you to go to the Shack and retrieve two objects of value. After that, nothing at all, until we need something else. The psych profiles indicate your family will labor better under a delusion of independence." Ferris explained. "The objects in question are the body swapping carpet and the magic photocopier."

Mabel's memories automatically went back to her experiences with the two objects. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she asked "And what happens if I refuse?"

"Oh, nothing."
Mabel blinked in surprise a few times before responding "Wait, nothing? Hey wait, is this one of those ironic setups where you stuff me in a jail cell and 'nothing' happens to me for decades and decades of..."

"No, I mean literally nothing will be done to you if you refuse." Ferris responded. "I'm still a government employee Mabel. Do you have any idea how much red tape comes from imprisoning people indefinitely? I mean, sure we do it, but it takes more paperwork than I have time for." He explained dismissively, with a mild hint of annoyance, before adding "Well, we will erase your memory of this meeting, but you'll be put back right where we go your from. From your perspective, nothing will have happened."

The teenage girl seemed visibly but pleasantly surprised by this. "Well, that's... relieving? I think?"

"Believe me, we only have one supermax black ops prison, and I'd much rather lock up another vampire than put you in there." Ferris added dismissively.

"Well, in that case, I refuse your offer." Mabel stated firmly. "Go ahead, bring out the flashy light on a stick and wipe my brain of the last hour."

Ferris, however, simply gave her a small smile, like he'd expected to hear her say that. "Now Mabel, don't be so rash. You haven't even heard about all the wonderful carrots I'm offering you."

"Nope." The teenage girl responded firmly. "I'm not going to betray my family like this."

"Hmm." Ferris muttered, looking troubled for a moment. "You didn't offer this much resistance last time. Did I forget the aftershave today?"

That casual line, delivered as softly as it was, still caused something in Mabel to break into a panic. The outer layer of refusal she'd tried to put on broke into a visible need to know. "What do you mean, last time!?" She demanded, despite having a pretty good idea what he meant.

"You agreed to this before, with one of the conditions being that we erase your memory of the mission and not discuss it at all with you beyond the fact you performed one for us." Ferris said, casually confirming Mabel's seconds old but intensely strong fears.

"No, that's not possible! I'd never work for a creep like this to steal something from Dipper!" She thought in a panic, but the longer she had to think about it, the more her thoughts on this changed. "But I already did that once, didn't I? When Blendin asked me to steal The Rift..." Looking down at her hands, Mabel couldn't help but wonder "Did I really do it again? And did I erase my memory to hide from the shame of it?"

"What are you offering me to do this?"

"For one, the offer of a memory wipe after the mission still stands." Ferris explained up front.

"No, I'm not doing that again. Whatever I do here, I'm keeping with me!"

"Yes, well, the last Mabel I talked to said that as well. If you change your mind, the option is always open." Ferris replied, causing a cold pit to sink into Mabel's stomach. "Well, as for a reward, well, what would you say if I offered you a little reunion?"

As her spoke, Ferris was pulling a laptop computer out of a drawer. After turning it on and finding what he was looking for on it, the agent turned it around so Mabel could see the screen, resulting in the girl letting out a surprised gasp.
"MERMANDO!"

Although he was older and even swarthier now, the merman was still recognizable as Mabel's most successful summer crush. The screen showed him floating sedate in a floor to ceiling glass tube that was barely wide enough to fit him and was full of water. His eyes were closed as he gently bobbed up and down a small amount, tubes fed into the glass container entering his body at the bare arms.

"Don't mind the whole setup, just a precaution you see." Ferris explained in an understanding voice. "This just ensures that if you opt to erase your memory at the end of the mission, we can arrange a happy little coincidence for you two to reunite with minimal fuss."

Mabel's eyes had gone wide and were even blurring a little at the sight. "Mermando... I never thought I'd see you again..." She breathed wistfully at the screen, before looking up at Ferris. "Where are you keeping him?"

"Now now, that would ruin the surprise." The government agent said back. "The only pertinent location for... Mermando (not the most creative parents, that one) is that he'll be right by your side... should you complete the mission we are offering you." Ferris then gave Mabel the most electric smile he could muster. "So, what do you say Mabel? Can you do ol' Uncle Sam a solid here?"

The computer room was quiet for a long moment. Even the stoic faces of Powers and Triggers seemed to falter for brief seconds as Mabel contemplated everything, first giving the girl a short look of sympathy before glancing at each other with worried expressions. When Mabel finally brought her expression up to look back at Ferris, she stated "Well then... just call me Secret Agent Mabel. I'm in." with much less goofy enthusiasm than you'd expect from her.

"Well then, we are in agreement! Wonderful!" Ferris announced, letting his chair roll backwards as he stood up. "Agents, stay here and mind the base. I'll show Miss... or, should I say... Agent Pines out!" He addressed to Powers and Trigger while using his gloved fingers to delicately shut the lid of his laptop and slid it into a desk drawer. "This way Mabel..." Ferris said, while gesturing to the elevator doors.

Mabel was on autopilot as stepped across the room and into the vertical travel box. "I can't do this again, I can't steal from Dipper and Ford again... can I?" She mused as the elevator began to climb. "But this time is different! I'm not doing it for me, I'm doing it to save Mermando from these guys! They rub me the wrong way, getting maximum 'not friends' vibes off the whole group. I can't just let them erase my memory, I have to try and learn from this! I can't just let them clear out a bunch of stuff while doing the autopsy, could that be when..."

"...Agents Pines? We're here."

The voice of Ferris abruptly broke through Mabel's mental fog, as mildly condescending as it was, and the girl shook her head and returned to reality. "Ah, right. Sorry about that, just got a lot rattling around in the old noodle noggin right now, you know?"

"All too well!" Ferris responded with a chuckle. "First operation always goes like that. Never the less, the doors have been politely holding themselves open for almost a minute now, so..."

"Ah, right! Into the breach, and all that then!" Mabel responded, putting on a fake British accent to cover up how nervous she was. The two stepped out of the elevator, revealing that the room the girl
had been dragged through with a bag on her head earlier was an incredibly nondescript garage that
didn't even have windows. "Wow, much secret, must use bag." She remarked dryly.

"You get used to it." Ferris remarked, while pressing a discreetly hidden button that caused the
drywall to slid in place over the elevator. He then swiftly crossed the room to retrieve an umbrella
that was inside an umbrella holder next to a door that presumably led deeper into the building. "And
here!" He said charitably as the umbrella passed from his hands to Mabel's, their mutually bare
fingers almost touching. The close miss was still enough to send an almost electrical chill down the
girl's spine. "That's not standard issue, but I think you'll need it today."

"Thanks." Mabel replied unenthusiastically, before Ferris pointed to a different door, the one that
would lead her back to the streets of Gravity Falls. Opening it up revealed the agent was right about
one thing, as the town had gotten significantly rainier and wind swept over the course of the
kidnapping/job interview.

Taking one last look back the encouraging face of Agent Ferris, Mabel stepped onto the streets and
popped open her umbrella, feeling like its wide cover and the insulating, thick layer of her green, pot
of gold decorated sweater were the only things she could count on to shield her from the wind and
the rain, and the cold both brought with them.

Trudging through the wind and the rain on a slow journey back to the Mystery Shack, Mabel was
lost in her own thoughts as she struggled to find a way out of the predicament she'd been placed in.
Most citizens had vacated the streets of town in the face of the dour weather, letting her contemplate
things without being disturbed.

"I need to get Mermando back and keep those government goons from spying on my family
anymore!" She thought to herself again, trying to reaffirm her mission statement in the face of all the
difficulties she had imagined while trying to plan. "But they're gonna be the only ones who know
where Mermando is stashed at, so if I just managed to memory wipe them with the old memory gun
I wouldn't have gotten anywhere. Maybe I could wipe them, then find a way to review the memories
later? Dipper probably has the equipment to do that somewhere around the Shack, though I've got no
idea how to actually operate it..." As this thought settled in, Mabel came to a stop as a new idea came
over her.

"Dipper..." She thought to herself, facial expression making it clear she didn't know what to do at the
moment. "All they want is the photocopier and the rug, I don't think he and Ford are using those for
anything. They won't even know they're gone. Maybe... maybe it'd be best if I just do this." The
thought sent a shiver down Mabel's spine, but the longer she pressed the idea, the more appealing it
was. "If I do that, I can save Mermando, then the offer of the mind wipe and hopefully next time this
happens, Dipper won't be lone warrioring around another dimension and we can bring these men in
black down together! Yeah, the twin power way! Just like in the old days!"

Outwardly, Mabel's expression briefly spiked with happiness as she looked up to the stormy sky with
an eager grin on her face, before abruptly being struck by a fit of anger that she ventured by kicking the
pole of a nearby street light over and over again. By the time she was done her foot felt sore but she
didn't care "Stupid, stupid, STUPID! That's how I ended up like this in the first place!" She yelled
out aloud, casting a despairing look towards the sky, raindrops staining her face. "Always running
away from my problems, always helping the bad guy, always demanding Dipper bail me out! That's
how I lost him in the first place!"

Her anger burned up and out quickly enough though, leaving Mabel to look at the ground while
breathing heavily for a few seconds, before straightening out her posture with a determined look on
her face. "No, I'm going to defeat this enemy myself! I'll save Mermando and protect my family, and
"I won't force Dipper to sacrifice for me this time!" Taking a deep breath, she let her challenge sink in, this time smiling genuinely despite the enormity of what lay before her. However, after a few more moments, a small crease appeared on her brow.

"Although... let's not go nuts here Mabes." She said after a moment of thought. "Just because I'm going to stand up and face my problems this time doesn't mean I can't do it without any help. I just need to make sure if anyone sacrifices something here, it's me. After all, I'm fighting a government conspiracy here, charging off alone would just be stupid." Mabel reasoned out while pulling out her cell phone and looking for a specific contact. "Besides, Grunkle Stan would be upset with me for weeks if I didn't invite him to come kick the crap out of someone threatening the family..."

A short distance away but well hidden below ground, a trio of adults stood around the slid back wooden panel of fine desk, listening in on Mabel's introspection. "What a beautiful little speech." Agent Ferris remarked sentimentally while leaning on the desk by an elbow. The hearing end of the listening device consisted of a simple speaker hidden under the wooden panel, three light bulbs that indicated technical status (all currently green) and a metal imprint in the shape of a hand. "Shame she had try and subvert the mission less than five minutes in. Millennials, am I right?"

Powers and Trigger were standing on the other side of the desk, their normally stiff expressions betraying a small amount of concern. "Sir, she's just emotional at the moment. I suggest we wait until she stabilizes before taking any sort of action. She might still change her mind." Powers spoke up.

"Noted Agent Powers." Ferris responded. "No worries, nothing severe in mind, just a little... push in the right direction. Besides, we can't have her leaking details to her great uncle, can we?" He explained, before placing his hand into the imprint below the wooden panel.

Back on the streets of Gravity Falls, Mabel had sheltered herself against a building while her phone rang, waiting for Grunkle Stan to pick up. She wasn't upset or concerned by the delay though. Stan was probably just having trouble remembering where he put his own smart phone or was trying to remember how to answer it. The girl giggled a little as she thought about it: Stan hadn't been as quick to embrace modern communications technology as Ford had, but he couldn't turn his twin brother down when he insisted the two of them get matching cells, "So the whole family can stay in touch easier!" He later explained begrudgingly.

However, as Mabel was humming a little ditty, waiting for the phone to pick up, she felt something catch in her throat. The impromptu song stopped as the thing became solid somehow. Mabel wasn't choking, she could still breath, but it didn't feel like she was throwing up or coughing either. She just had a lump in her throat that she couldn't get down. In fact, it seemed like it was rising instead of sitting still or going down.

It didn't actually hurt until the mass hit Mabel's larynx. Then, it hurt a great deal.

"UGRRAGHH!" Mabel choked, spat, screamed and squelched as she coughed up the mass against her will. Her upper throat and mouth felt like they'd been ripped to shreds, and while tears of pain had blinded her eyes she could still see the pile of spit up material was bright red. Mabel had vomited plenty of times in her life, but never before had it come up red. She coughed one more time and felt a fresh slash of pain impact her throat before slumping against the building wall, exhausted and trying to catch her breath.

"...bel? Mabel? Is that you pumpkin?" Abruptly came a familiar, crusty old voice. Mabel broke through the haze that had clouded her vision and looked to her side where she'd dropped her phone. Grunkle Stan had finally picked up! In a spurt of energy, Mabel threw her hand towards the fallen phone, but stopped when a metal glint caught her eye, and after a moment, she realized it was coming from her pile of vomit. "Why is my throw up shiny?" She asked in her head, still a little
dazed. Never having been reluctant to poke around her own upchuck before, Mabel turned her attention to the fresh pile, and felt a chill go down her spine as she recognized the contents.

Besides mashed up, stomach processed bolus tinted by blood, the nearby vomit pile had a small number of gleaming razor blades buried in it.

The sudden, sharp splash of fear Mabel felt was enough to sober her out of her daze almost instantly, though a new layer of confusion had replaced. "That's not possible, I haven't eaten in almost three hours. This... this has to be some kind of supernatural attack, no doubt. And the only people who could possibly want to do that..."

In an instant, Mabel snatched up her phone again, holding it close to her face and speaking a little louder than most people would need to. "Hey Grunkle Stan, sorry if I interrupted anything, I think I butt dialed you by accident! Is everything good at the Shack!?" She spoke, putting on her most vibrant and cheerful tone of voice.

"...Yeah, everything's fine here." Stan answered back, still sounding a little worried. "Are you sure you're alright sweetie? It's getting stormy out there. If you need a lift, I could come get you."

"Oh, no, no thanks, but that sure is sweet of you to offer Grunkle Stan!" Mabel thanked through the phone. "I found the most adorable umbrella while I was out today and absolutely want to give it the walk through the rain it was made for! Let it feel validated in its career choices, you know?"

A small chuckle came through the phone as Stan's tone lightened. "Alright pumpkin, I'll see when you come home. Love you Mabel."

"...I love you too Grunkle Stan." Mabel responded with sincerity and a slightly less energetic tone before hanging up, pocketing her phone, and looking at the vomit pile again. With a sigh, she muttered aloud "Well, no choice but to just get the stuff now I suppose." before talking off back into the streets. A short walk away and down below, Ferris leaned back in his chair with a satisfied look on his face while Powers and Trigger looked outright uncomfortable despite their efforts to hide it.

"What a quick learner she is."

The rest of the walk back to the Shack was an enlightening one, giving Mabel plenty of time to think this whole thing through. Her early walk down the streets was weak and a little stumbling in places, as the nausea of vomiting and the metallic tasting pain of her cut mouth threatened to bowl her over, but by the time she was stepping between trees Mabel's head was held high and her expression was determined. "I can't let this slow me down. If Dipper could survive so many adventures without going to the hospital, than so can I!"

Slipping inside the Shack so as to avoid the tourist groups, Mabel was nearing the stairs, halfway through the living quarters when she ran into Grunkle Stan. "Hey kid." He greeted casually, before catching a second glance at her. "Cute umbrella." He remarked sarcastically, causing Mabel to realize that the umbrella given to her by the black ops government super spy looked exactly like an umbrella owned by a black ops government super spy: Extremely plain, colored black and unremarkable. Smiling nervously for a second, Mabel knew she needed a response.

"Oh you really think so? I KNEW it wasn't just me that could appreciate this guy!" Mabel responded, sounding for all the world like she was sincere in this opinion. "I think this umbrella has inner cuteness, you know? Just needs a, a woman's touch to get it to come out and blossom under the rain, like a lovely flower that has had as much to drink as it can and is ready to bloom!

Despite being too cynical to truly appreciate an umbrella like this, Stan did end up smiling at Mabel's
enthusiasm. Even if he didn't really like the things she did in the name of art, he did like how they made her smile. "Okay pumpkin, you do you and make him the most dashing umbrella around!" The old man spoke with a hearty laugh.

"That's the plan!" Mabel exclaimed, before putting a crooked finger to her chin and examining it closely. "In fact, I can see exactly what this umbrella needs. It needs..." She began to explain excitedly, before her voice abruptly dropped to dark and sinister to utter the word "Glowsticks." Then, just as quickly, she was bright and happy again. "Grunkle Stan, could you go to town and pick me up some glowsticks?"

His mood instantly taking a turn for the cranky, Grunkle Stan at first responded "Kid, what do you think I am, so kind of hippie delivery man!? I'm not going out to get just glowsticks!" He said firmly, crossing his arms and looking away from Mabel. "Nope, not going to do it! I was a transporter for glowsticks once but even if they're actually loaded with real... glowstick... juice? I'm NOT doing that again! I nearly got thirty years for that one!" However, Stan soon made a critical mistake, briefly letting one eye open and taking a short look at Mabel, and this was the act that sealed his doom. She was looking pouty now, a cross between miserable and adorable that could soften the hearts of even the most bitter. After trying to resist for a bit longer, Stan finally gave in, throwing his arms over his head and going "Okay, okay! I'll go get some glowsticks! Just put that face away Mabel, it should count as a lethal weapons!"

"Thanks so much Grunkle Stan! You're the best!" Mabel replied, stepping forward to give her great uncle a hug as thanks. "Oh wow." She thought to herself while removing her arms after an appropriate amount of time. "I never realized how tall I've gotten since I was last here."

"Yeah yeah, I got some shopping I need to do anyway." Grunkle Stan rationalized away as he left the room. "Don't cause trouble while I'm out!"

"Don't worry Grunkle Stan, I wont!" Mabel replied cheerfully, but as soon as the door closed the girl let out a breath she hadn't know she was holding. "Right, now there's no one in my way." She muttered before taking off up the stairs. Moving swiftly through the house, Mabel was able to locate the two objects easily enough, they'd been right where they'd been left, all those years ago, but as she walked up to the copier with the rug rolled up over her shoulders, the girl let out a sudden sigh of realization.

"Oh, right, I don't think I can move that by myself." She said aloud, with something of a theatrical gesture to her tone. Letting the rug fall to the floor, Mabel stood around and paced for about half a minute, looking to put a plan together. Thinking about the various boxes and carrying supplied down in the basement, the girl abruptly looked straight at the copier and then slapped herself on the forehead. "DUH!"

The light of the photocopier going off several times could be seen through the bottom of the room's door if anyone else had been on the second floor, and the sound of the old machine churning with life bounced around the walls of the closed room. Mabel laid down across the scanning bed of the device, giggling each time the magic light passed over her. Paper sheets bearing her likeness were spat out by the machine, and the ink recreations of the twin seemed to vibrate with energy before pulling themselves into the third dimension by their own energetic arms, rapidly stepping free and bouncing around the room.

"Hello Mabel!"

"Oh high Mabel!"

"Mabel here!"
"Mabel, Mabel, good to see you, and you as well Mabel."

"Such a pleasure Mabel!"

"Oh it's been too long Mabel!"

"Hi I'm Miss Mabel look at me!"

"Mabel! Good to see you! I'd offer you a cup of coffee, but, well, you know..."

"MABELS!"

The last shout came from the original, rising up from being flat on her back and turning off the machine, leaving the final count of Mabels in the room, paper plus flesh, at seven! Sitting above them on the beaten up old copier, the original Mabel had captured the attention of all her clones with the shout and a raise of both arms over her head, resulting in the whole crowd waiting in silence to hear what was to be said next.

Across town, Ferris was rubbing his head in annoyance at what he'd just heard. "This is gonna be a mess to listen to properly. Still, points for creativity." He remarked dryly before rolling his eyes. "Well, nothing we can do now. Make the call."

"We all know what we need to do, correct?" Mabel was asking her clones, each of whom shouted a different affirmative yell. All feel silent however, when Stan's business phone abruptly began to ring. All eyes in the room where watching the old piece of technology ring on and on. "I know I shouldn't just pick up Grunkle Stan's phone..." The original thought to herself while climbing off the printer. "But this is too much of a coincidence."

"Hello? ...Yes, I understand. There may be some delay because of the rain... I understand... I can make both deliveries right now. I understand, goodbye."

Hanging up the phone, Mabel turned around to all her clones with a more determined and serious look on her face now. "Welp, that was the boss. It's time for us to move out girls!" Despite their own trepidation, the various clones took on a look a grim but eager and determined confidence going forward, though the original Mabel looked a little unsure all of a sudden. "Although... moving this thing is going to require a lot of coordination, and I'm pretty sure we'd get nowhere just shouting 'Mabel, do this!' or 'Mabel, look out!' at each other all day. As much as I hate to say it, I think we're gonna have to take a page from Dipper's book... and get organized."

A collective groan rose from the crowd of clones, but original Mabel met it with a coy smile. "...The Mabel freaking way!" She exclaimed jubilantly. "FASHION PARTY TIME!"

Everyone inside the secret government base was looking a little awkward as their high tech surveillance device was overloaded with the sounds of over half a dozen teenage girls running towards the upstairs bedroom and squealing in excitement the entire time. "Sir, I'm beginning to have doubts about the operation." Agent Powers said in a straight tone of voice.

"Shut up Powers." Ferris responded petulantly. "She will capitulate to us, sooner or later. It's all in her psyche profile."

Meanwhile, the impromptu fashion show had reached its peak, the room's wardrobe totally ransacked so each Mabel clone could assemble a personalized outfit and develop their own unique identity from it. Clothes were tossed to and fro, pillaged from suitcases and other storage sources before being rapidly traded between the identical occupants of the room as all them tried to piece
together something compelling, something to mark them as unique! The activity hit a fever pitch when a Mabel that had slipped away abruptly ran back into the room lugging a full trash bag behind her. "Check it girls, I raided Pacifica's wardrobe!" She yelled out, eliciting a host of cheers and whoops from all present.

"Oooh! Oooh! Gimme some of that!"

"Dibs on her purple jacket!"

"I want her tryhard sunglasses!"

"...Crap. Of course her top doesn't fit me."

The activity gradually began to die down from that point, and when the Mabel in charge had confirmed everyone had decided on an outfit, she shushed the crowd and began the show. All of them were ready to step on stage (Dipper's old bed) and tell the world just who they were!

The first one to jump up was a Mabel wearing a completely blue ensemble, with a custom sweater stylized after the ocean, dark blue jeans and even light blue socks. "Hello there world, my name is Mablue, and I'm depressed about the direction my life has taken!" She shouted to the crowd with familiarly Mabel cheer and enthusiasm, resulting in the entire audience of Mabel's applauding her. Right after the newly christened Mablue stepped down into the audience, a new member stepped out and took the stage for herself.

The appearance of this next Mabel resulted in the crowd quieting to a murmur however, as she was clad in the classic shooting star print sweater. Like many of Mabel's old classics from that first summer, the growing girl had held onto it and refitted it several times to keep up with her changing body in an attempt to hang on to the memories of her adventures in Gravity Falls, but unlike all the others, Mabel had always been reluctant to wear this one again. "I would like to be known as Shooting Star for this mission..." the clone explained, drawing a gasp from everyone present.

"...Because I am going to TAKE THAT NICKNAME BACK FROM BILL CIPHER!" This caused the crowd to warm to her right away, providing a round of applause that was more formal and proud than the previously wild cheering.

"Alright everybody, I think it's time we all shine a little brighter!" Said the next Mabel clone as she jumped onto the bed. "Turn that frown upside down, and let the voice of love take you higher!" She declared in rhyme while pointing to the sky, clad in a bright yellow sweater with a smiling cartoon sun on the front and a pair of yellow shorts below it. The crowd provided a much more wild round of applause for this getup and the sunny attitude the Mabel wearing it brought with, and while she was taking a bow, the clone remarked "We'll get through this with the power of our positive thinking, and reignite the sunshine of our lives! You know, like that weird movie where they reignite the sun. Oh, and call me Sunshine!"

A steady chorus of playful boos and jeers rose up from the crowd as the next clone in line walked up to the bed, moving with an exaggerated strut and seeming to soak up all the negative attention. This Mabel had gotten the lion's share of the last minute addition to the fashion show, and was wearing Pacifica Northwest's purple jacket, a matching skirt with black leggings underneath, and was hiding her eyes between a pair of the blond's large and dark sunglasses, while below them her mouth stayed flat in a "I'm too cool for you" expression outside of the occasional lip smack. "Hello there, all you dirty peasants." She began with a put on and haughty tone of voice, performing a hair flip, less practiced that Pacifica's but still impressive, while up on stage and that only made the crowd of Mabels boo her even more. "You can refer to me as Northwabel, and I'm here to steal all your brothers away from you with my sultry charms and unusually quick to develop body!"
Still, it was obvious everyone was still having fun and didn't have any genuine disdain for the Mabel clone leaving the stage, and that paper girl in turn enjoyed the reaction she had gotten and was quick to join her sisters in greeting the next one up: She'd forgone the usual sweater attire to wear a hot pink zip up hoodie under a life vest, a pair of Mystery Shack brand sunglasses, and a matching pink skirt with knee high socks. "Here I am, the pretty soldier of love, Mabel Pines!" She announced while striking a pose. "Working together I know we can rescue Mermando from the clutches of the government! For quick reference though, you can call me Mailor!"

The last of the six clones who ended up jumping on the bed to show off their new look was a paper Mabel that had taken the entire outfit that her original had made not too long ago in emulation of Grunkle Ford's field coat, in an effort to join Dipper on his adventures. The woolen rainbow trench coat, mustard slacks and question mark undershirt were as searing to the eyes as ever, but Mabel wore it with a confidence that was appreciated by the audience. "And I'm super special science Mabel!" She announced proudly, throwing a few air punches before reaching into a coat pocket and pulling out an incredibly obscure and specialized mechanical tool, which she squinted at in confusion for a moment before tossing it away and looking back to the crowd. "And if I can't cook up a super science solution to all our problems, I'll let my fists do the talking!"

"And I'm the original!" Spoke up the Mabel in the green sweater decorated with a pot of gold on the front, turning the heads of all the Mabels in the room around to their own bed, which the leader had stood upon to address her paper followers. "Now, we're all clear on what we need to do, right?" She asked again, and again got a collection of affirmative nods. "Good! So, clone squad, you work together to load the photocopier into Soos' pickup truck and take it to here..." She indicated on a map of the town that had been pinned to the wall sometime during the confusion. "...while I'll take the guys' van to deliver the carpet here!"

On the other end of the wire, Agent Ferris opted to turn off the desk setup, transferring the feed over to an earpiece before closing the wooden hatch and standing up. "And there we go. Time to collect our prizes." He stated while reaching into another desk drawer and producing a pair of children's squirt guns. "You two will collect the photocopier. Dispose of all the clones after you've secured the object."

Both Agents accepted the unconventional weapons as soon as they were passed over the desk, but there was a notable nervous shake to their normally professional attitudes that Ferris easily picked up on. "You have permission to speak freely, agents." He remarked dryly.

Both hesitated for a quiet moment, but eventually Trigger broke the silence. "Sir, surely there's a better way to handle this? Mabel, she's... she's still just a child. Perhaps we should wait until Stanford returns and go straight for him? We'd probably get more out of him that way." He spoke, just a twinge of uncertainty breaking through his professional tone.

"Oh, oh Trigger, don't be fooled so easily." Ferris responded chidingly. "She may not have the obvious markers of the secret world, like fishbait boy or the various monsters we fight, but she's a part of it. She's touched by the devil." He explained, while making his way to the elevator. "And that makes her fair game."

Back at the Mystery Shack, the leading Mabel dressed in the green sweater had gone to the fairly new backyard garage with the carpet rolled into a tube over her shoulder. The rain had let up sometime during the fashion show, though while the sky was clearing the ground was still incredibly wet. Initially enthusiastic, her mood deflated somewhere when the automatic door opened far enough to let her see there was no vehicle waiting for her. "Oh my god, did we get robbed!?!" Mabel shouted in surprise at first glance, but quickly spotted a sticky note stuck by where the keys were normally kept. "Took the van to Hell. Sorry if you needed it. Probably not coming back. Love, Stanford."
girl read aloud, before crumpling the paper up and throwing it over her shoulder. "Typical." She remarked dryly.

Now wondering what to do, Mabel wandered out of the garage just in time to watch the clone squad haul away the copier from a distance. They had left through a back door to the Shack just in time to rush past Soos and a new crowd of tourists he was showing that rock that looks like a face.

"Hey Soos!"

"Hey Soos!"

"Hello Soos!"

"Hey Soos!"

"Good afternoon everybody! Hope you're enjoying the tour!"

"Hey Soos! We need to borrow your pickup truck by the way!"

"Haha, okay Mabels, just bring it back in one piece." The second Mister Mystery answered without missing a beat before turning back to his crowd of tourists, all of whom were struck senseless by the six identical teenage girls hauling a photocopier past them, the bizarre sight striking extra hard after their expectations had been appropriately lowered by the tacky taxidermy the tour had show off so far. "Ah, kids. What can you do?"

Smiling at this, the green sweater wearing Mabel cast her gaze to her only other option: The old golf cart that was still kept around the back of the Mystery Shack, remembering the role of played in her and Dipper's original adventure. However, when her eyes fell upon the place it was normally stashed away, nothing was waiting for her. Despite this absence, Mabel smiled even wider at this.

"Perfect." She muttered to herself, before turning the heads of the crowd of tourists one more time as she rushed past them, yelling "Girls, wait for me! Hi Soos, hi various tourists!"

A short amount of time later, Agent Powers and Agent Trigger were waiting in the back cabin of their department's van, the same one they'd kidnapped Mabel with earlier. They'd parked themselves into a quiet little alley where the vehicle could wait out of sight, observing the location the girl had been given over the phone on a laptop screen, courtesy of a hidden camera put inside the eye of a statue, which had the effect of making the old pioneer it depicted look like a cyborg from the future. In the isolated atmosphere, both could feel each other's tension. The squirt guns they'd been given for this mission managed to feel quite heavy concealed in their suits, a distinct feeling compared to how familiar and unobtrusive typical metal handguns had become in that socket after their years of service.

Trigger was simply standing as stock still as possible against the metal walls, attempting to not betray a trace of expression, while Powers was a little more mobile, pacing about a small amount. "I know you're feeling some doubts Trigger." The older agent eventually spoke up. "It's certainly a sharp turn, going from super villains to teenage girls, but it's all in the name of America." He consoled.

"Of course Agent Powers." Trigger replied professionally. After a quiet moment between the two however, Powers abruptly produced a screwdriver from his suit pocket and stabbed it into the wall of the van, puncturing and wiggling through the metal through sustained effort, and eventually drawing a wire out of the wall wrapped around the head of the screwdriver. With a sharp yank, he snapped the wire in two, officially putting the two off the record. "I don't like this Powers." Trigger confessed much more honestly, a smaller tone of emotion getting into his voice. "There were rough parts to the
job before, back in the Bureau, but we always knew we were tracking down bad guys. Mob bosses, money launderers, serial killers, terrorists, drug kingpins... but some of the things Ferris has had us chase, well, they've committed no crimes! Their arrests wouldn't hold up in court if they were human."

"I understand your concern Trigger, believe me, I'm long past the point of questioning the legality of this whole operation. It's an evil, without a doubt, but to a degree... I still think it's a necessary evil." Powers explained. "For every teenager we're blackmailing or mermaid we're kidnapping, think of the good we've managed to do as well!" He argued, still keeping an understanding tone. "The human ranch operated by vampires that we shut down, the aircraft sabotaging gremlins that we kept from causing bombs to fall on civilians, the kidnapping fish hybrid village we stopped from abducting people... Our department needs to exist to protect the people of America from the things that go bump in the night!" Powers asserted, but then, his expression softened and more of his own uncertainties came through. "But, you're not wrong to have doubts. Everything about how this is run is suspect. There's seemingly no oversight, and no one but Ferris ever talks to anyone else about the operations we conduct, and I have no idea where our funding comes from. Ideally, I'd like to find someone we can report all this to who can launch an internal investigation. I don't trust Ferris."

Before either of them could continue, a knocking came from the back of the van. "Hey, men in black, open up! We've got the copy machine!" Came the distinct voice of Mabel Pines. Both Agents looked surprised at this, and upon checking the camera feed saw no sign of the red pickup they'd been told to expect. The banging on the back door continued however, leading both Agents to exhale and draw their water pistols. "They must have recognized the van." Powers muttered as the two got into position.

"Yeah." Trigger answered with his usual stoic tone. However, after a moment, his voice cracked, and with a whisper, the man asked "Do you think these clones count as people?"

"There's only one entity in the universe that's qualified to decide that Trigger, and that's the United States Supreme Court." Powers answered, uncertainty managing to creep into his voice as well as he took aim with the brightly colored children's toy, working out exactly where Mabel must be standing. "And I pray to God we end up in front of it, someday and somehow."

The door swung open in the middle of a pounding knock.

Both fingers pulled back on the triggers.

Streams of water surged forward towards the target.

The water splashed harmlessly off the orange, pocket covered vest she was wearing.

The experienced agents, despite their years of training and hardening emotional trauma, couldn't help but freeze up momentarily as all their built up expectations and difficult struggles with their impending duty came crashing down on them. Instead of melting into a screaming, agonized pile of mush, the Mabel Pines standing in front of them, dressed in shorts and a short sleeved shirt under her vest (and had also kicked off her shoes and only had tall woolen socks on her feet oddly enough), was simply slightly damp and mildly annoyed looking, though the annoyance seemed like it could have come from the rolled up carpet she had been lugging around on her shoulders.

Flipping up the lowered bill of her Mystery Shack gift shop pine tree label hat, Mabel gave Powers, the agent closest to her, a wide grin that despite brimming with normal Mabel happiness, also concealed a faint edge of viciousness to it. "Thanks, that was refreshing!" She exclaimed, before swinging the rolled up carpet off her shoulders and clobbering Agent Powers over the head to it,
letting the anomalous object clatter to the floor along with the man. When the rug unraveled itself on the floor of the van, the numerous bricks and one doorknob Mabel had loaded into it spilled out as well.

Trigger involuntarily took a step back as Mabel jumped into the van, then very intentionally took a step back and raised his hands up when the teenage girl produced a handgun from inside her vest after closing the door behind her. Trigger would have been struck by the absurdity of the fact that he was the one stuck with a water pistol while the teenage girl had him at gunpoint with a very real, very metallic firearm were he not rightfully scared for his life at the moment. Particularly after he got a look at her muzzle discipline.

"Where did you get a gun!?" He shouted in surprise, unable to help himself from asking the obvious question.

"Grunkle Stan doesn't do a particularly good job keeping his 'anti-ladder wielding maniac weapons' locked up." Mabel explained curtly. All the while, she was gesturing with the pistol a great deal, poking it in Trigger's general direction and holding it with her finger on the trigger the entire time. To the agent's greatest dismay, she had taken the safety off as well. "Now, up against the wall!"

"You're the real one, aren't you?" Trigger asked while complying with her demands. "The water didn't work on you because you're not a paper clone."

"Excellent work Mulder." Mabel responded with a snarky, unimpressed tone of voice. "You see, I figured you had to be listening to me SOMEHOW right after I chucked up razor blades as soon as I called Grunkle Stan for help, and when I got back to the Shack and started the fashion show, I figured it out!" She explained, sounding more proud of herself with every word. "See, I keep a meticulous count of my sweater collection including the ones that have gone missing, which at last count was four, but when I checked them again I found I was missing five whole sweaters. The original missing four were Wavvy Gravy, Smooth Sunday, Twin Match and St. Patrick's Day! But as I checked it over, suddenly Rainbow Road is missing and I'm wearing St. Patrick's Day! That being one I lost real recently at that!" Narrowing her eyes, she spat at Trigger accusingly "You stole one of my sweaters and wired it at some point, didn't you!?!"

Despite his years of training and experience with holding a blank expression, the combined pressure of Mabel being completely correct and the gun she had in his face managed to make Trigger crack to a small degree. Small beads of sweat ran down his head as his mouth twitched into a frown.

"That's... that's absurd." He tried to deny. "What would be the point of bugging one of your sweaters then not putting it back so you'd actually wear it?"

"So your boss could make sure I was wearing this one, in person!" Mabel accused, causing Trigger to visibly flinch. "I don't remember what happened, but something spaced me out while I was riding in that elevator with Ferris." She explained further, a tone of hurting and revulsion entering her tone the whole time.

Suddenly, realization spread on Trigger's face, and knowing the jig was up, he asked "That's why you put on that whole fashion show, isn't it? So you could slip off the St. Patrick's Day sweater and put it on a clone, letting you operate without us noticing."

"Actually, I did genuinely wanted to do the fashion show as a way to help my clones personalize themselves." Mabel explained with an offhand tone. "Sure it helped me to take the sweater off, slip away to clone myself one more time and put the sweater on her while I stole some of Dipper's clothes, but I would have done that anyway even if I didn't need to get rid of that sweater, which you shamelessly defiled by weaving a wire of mistrust and intrigue through its stitching of love!" By the end of her statement, Mabel was much more angry sounding. She narrowed her eyes, and with a
glare, leveled a fresh question at the secret agent.

"Now, Ferris. He can do something with memory, can't he? He mentioned having memory wiped people to cover up Bill, and you guys clearly managed to recover from Ford brain wiping you somehow. Did he manage to steal the memory gun technology at some point?"

Still trapped by the gun and increasingly nervous as he waited for it to discharge accidentally, Trigger gulped before admitting "Ferris has many strange powers. He's a paranormal patriot." Then, managing to compose himself slightly, he spoke to Mabel in a stronger, more commanding tone. "What do you hope to achieve with this, anyways? You've assaulted and threatened federal agents by now, do you really think you'll get away with this?" He asked, voice getting harsher the longer he spoke. "What's your escape plan? You're still the same little girl who instigated a car crash to try and kill me with no concern for the fact yourself and your brother were in the exact same vehicle!"

"Shut up!" Mabel shouted in response, and Trigger's tongue caught in his throat as her exclamation caused the gun she had to bounce around in her hand in an unsafe manner, making him opt to choose his words carefully next time. "I don't need a plan when it comes to protecting my family from creeps like you! I just need to keep my head held high and power through life with my optimism and creativity!"

Silence reigned between the two after the outburst, as the girl didn't know what else to say and the agent was increasingly terrified of the gun pointed in his direction. When the silence was broken, it was only broken for one of them, as Trigger's earpiece buzzed to life, emitting a sound only he could hear. However, a faint buzzing could be heard coming from Powers' device, which had fallen out of his ear and onto the floor, cluing Mabel in that communication had been established.

"Agents, report. The original Mabel has just jumped out of the pickup truck driven by the clones and is heading in my direction. Prepare yourselves for contact."

It was Agent Ferris speaking in Trigger's ear, but Mabel silently gestured with the gun for him to not answer. With another nerve racking gesture, she ordered the man to take a few steps forward, with he did with noticeable reluctance. Then, with an incredibly wide grin, Mabel suddenly began shuffling her feet against the floor. Trigger only had a moment to stare confused at this before a flash hit his eyes and the world seemed to go unbalanced. He felt weak, there was a weight in his arms and his face... seemed to hurt? To make things worse, he seemed to be starting at himself, but swiftly realized he wasn't having any sort of cranial trauma induced out of body experience or hallucination.

"This is Agent Trigger." Mabel, now inhabiting the older man's body, spoke into her earpiece. Unfamiliar facial muscles stretched into a smile that anyone familiar with the agent would have described as unsettlingly out of character, and her voice was a borderline panto over-exaggeration of what a secret agent would sound like, but between it being spoken with Trigger's genuine body and the man's own history of sounding very strange, it seemed to not rouse any suspicion. "Agent Powers is moving into place to greet the clones. Do we... move to radio silence from here on out?"

On the other end of the line, Ferris looked at the car radio of his black sedan with a quizzical expression, the device having been modified to be able to receive input from the comms and bugs used by Project TWILIGHT. "Trigger sounds sort of weird." Pressing the button to talk, the leader of the project responded with "Affirmative. Report back as soon as the object is in your possession." Then, just as quickly, he adjusted the channel so he was only speaking to Powers. "Agent Powers, confirm status. Agent Powers?" Scowling at the lack of response, Ferris finally switched over to Mabel's wire, and upon hearing the sound of a car starting up very close by over the wire, decided to throw his keys in the ignition and fire up his own vehicle.

Between the weather and the time of day, the roads were fairly barren at this point in time, letting
Ferris pull right out of the alley he'd backed his car into without him feeling like he needed to pay any special amount of attention to the road he was entering, too wrapped up in his thoughts of what Mabel might be up to. The answer, and a speeding, swerving pickup truck with a rusty brown paint job, hit him moments after because of this.

"Over and out." Mabel in Trigger's body responded curtly. Trigger in Mabel's body had just brandished the gun at his own form and was beginning to speak a command when the van abruptly came to life and jerked into motion, causing the unprepared agent in the unfamiliar body to fall flat on his now female face. Mabel, meanwhile, used the experienced muscles of her new body and her slight foreknowledge that this was going to happen at some point to stay on her feet with only a slight wobble. The agent contorted the girl's face into an involuntary look of surprise and regret as he watched the gun fall to the floor, almost in slow motion from his point of view, and instinctively closed his eyes in fear of the accidental discharge he was sure was going to occur. When an amplified bang noise didn't deafen everyone in the van, a very unnatural sound hit Trigger instead: Him laughing, as Mabel had let out a small giggle at the chain of events.

"You didn't need to worry." She spoke, briefly looking surprised at the reality of how masculine her voice was now, but continuing on without missing a beat. "It's not loaded."

"That's no excuse for waving a gun around so recklessly! You ALWAYS treat a firearm like it's loaded!" Trigger shouted, having the same momentary surprise at the new voice he spoke with. However, his expression stayed shocked longer, as he briefly looked over his shoulder toward's the driver's cabin, if this van divided the front and back with a solid wall. "Whose driving!?" He demanded to know, and was answered when Mabel clocked him in the face as soon as he turned her face back around to face his body.

From inside Trigger's body, Mabel cringed a little at watching her own form stumble backwards hurt, small leaks of blood coming out her own nose after she'd misjudged the agent's strength. However, to her satisfaction, her body had stumbled back far enough that it was no longer standing on the body swap carpet, and Mabel took her stolen body forward a few steps to ensure the federal agent couldn't simply step back forward and swap them back around. "Not looking forward to patching that up later...

"The fake leader Mabel is driving of course!" The real but now bodyswapped Mabel explained to Trigger with another unnatural looking grin on his face. "I had to keep up the appearance of there still being six clones plus me, so I made one more and had her slip into the bugged sweater while I took the golf cart to get a head start on the pickup truck."

"Wait, how is she driving the van!? Powers has the keys!" Trigger demanded to know, struggling with questions while pointing to his still downed partner.

"Grunkle Stan taught me how to hot wire cars that first summer back, and I stayed in practice while living in California." Mabel explained back, enjoying the confused look this generated on her own face.

Trigger was silent for a few moments, feeling that the van was clearly moving and turning through traffic by now. "What happens next?" he asked, a small tone of fear and trepidation having crept into his tone. He was eyeing the discarded gun on the floor. It was closer to Mabel inside his body now, and he couldn't discard the nagging fear of it possibly of it actually being loaded and that it simply hadn't misfired upon being dropped due to sheer chance.

"Well, we're going to go back to your secret base and then you two are going to answer some questions. From there, not too sure." Mabel said with a shrug of her now broad shoulders. "Really depends on what you guys tell me."
Trigger blinked a few times. "Did you really plan all this out?" He asked, genuinely at a loss to the fact that he was now the one being kidnapped.

"Like any good art project, I had a general outline for all this I thought up while walking home, but from here on out it's gonna be heavy improv baby!" Mabel responded with a somewhat manic grin. "Just gotta press forward and go where your inspiration takes you! And of course, have enough cups to hide the ball under." After explaining this, she took the opportunity provided by passage over a bump to scoop the lost gun back up, causing Trigger to take a very visible gulp.
Having left his breakfast behind, Stanford Pines strode through the halls of the Mewni Royal Castle with reserved purpose to his steps. He had an appointment after all, a vaguely timed "after-breakfast" summons with the Queen of Mewni. What they'd discuss would no doubt depend on if the other members of the Magical High Commission were present or not, so Stanford elected to not spend his focus planning for the talk on the way there, knowing it's good odds he'd just end up surprised. Instead, his thoughts turned to his great nephew.

"He's become very close to Pacifica as of recently, though they always seemed like good friends." The old man thought to himself, pondering back to his own youth for similar examples he could relate to Dipper's, and finding none. "I'll need to talk to him at some point about this, try to put him on the right path when it comes to matters of attraction." Ford was musing over a few indistinct tangents of this topic when he finally arrived outside Queen Moon's office, and he swiftly stowed them away for later. A short knock was followed by a curt admittance, and the man from Earth entered the domain of the queen.

The office was much like the other times Ford had visited it, as was the monarch seated behind her fine oaken desk, though this was certainly the most papers he'd ever seen piled onto it. Moon was making some final inscriptions on one particular piece, the air filled with just the sound of a scratching quill pen for a short period after the noise of a door creaking shut faded, but eventually this fell silent. Letting out a sigh of relief, the queen pushed the paper aside and finally made eye contact with the scientist.

"Stanford." She greeted in a neutral tone, her eyes simultaneously guarded and inquisitive. Moon seemed notably more relaxed around the human scientist than she had been in all their previous encounters, but that wasn't saying much. The air was silent between for another uncertain moment, before she took the initiative of the conversation. "I would like to begin by saying thank you. I may have suspected your motives at first, but it is clear to me that the support and protection that you and your wards have extended to my daughter is very genuine. This is a trying time for her, and I appreciate that."

"It's no difficulty." Stanford responds. Like Moon, his tone is lighter in comparison to their previous conversations, but was still fairly guarded and tense sounding. "Star is a very exceptional young woman after all. She is..." He hesitated for a moment, but then decided the information he was debating giving away couldn't do any harm. It's not as if this was a potential unknown that could work its way to Bill. "...Very reminiscent of Dipper's sister. I believe that has contributed to them bonding so well."

"Oh. I see." Moon responded with a note of genuine interest. "That explains quite a lot actually." She then thought to herself. "I feel a smidge bad for what I insinuated about Dipper to Star now. He's probably more threatened by her than the other way around now that I think about it..." Clearing her head, Moon focused on the conversation in front of her by stating clearly "But, while you have earned my respect as a mother, I still have my responsibilities as a ruler. And on that front, I must know your intentions, Stanford Pines." She leveled the question while sitting straight up in her chair, hands folded together on the table in front of her. "The situation has changed significantly since your arrival: You suspect Bill Cipher is among the Luciters, and now a diplomatic crisis between my kingdom and theirs looms. In addition, Queen Eclipsa has become free at the worst possible time in
the midst of all this. So I must ask, archmage of Earth: What do you intend to do while you are here?"

Ford was quite in response, taking his time to put together a full response. When he finally did speak, it was with a measured, deliberate tone. "The primary mission of myself and my wards remains the elimination of Bill Cipher and the elimination of the weapons he brought with him to Mewni. To that end, we are willing to conduct operations against the Lucitor Kingdom in exchange for access to the intelligence and resources needed to pursue him."

"I see." Moon answered with a cautious tone of voice. She was approaching a dangerous ground in the conversation and new it, trying to speak as carefully as possible as she asked "Would it be possible to convince you to deliver the weapons that Bill is in possession of to the crown, instead of simply destroying them?"

"No, you cannot convince me to do that." Ford replied bluntly, his face slipping into the unreadable grimace that was his father's default expression, as he felt the conversation enter a dangerous direction. "I am here to prevent Bill from escalating the conflict that already exists on Mewni by introducing a smattering of weapons you are all unprepared for."

"Then help us prepare for them! Show us how these weapons work!" Moon argued, her voice rising and becoming more firm, but not yet escalating to yelling. Her net speech, however, was suddenly more subdued and expository. "You and your wards, you are much like Star in that you do not understand the threat the monsters pose. Now, not all monsters are bad, in fact some of them can be outright upstanding, but the community in general cannot be trusted." The queen explained, before stepping out of her chair and looking out the window, onto a city still showing scars of battle. "This invasion you have arrived in the aftermath of... it was not the first time Toffee has attempted to conquer Mewni. Before, decades ago, he made his first attempt. It was a much more blunt force affair, and he had an army."

Turning back to her visitor, Moon spoke with a lower, forceful tone of voice in an attempt to impress upon Stanford the gravity of what she was saying. Despite her royal facade, emotion was clearly cracking through with every word. "That army was never conclusively defeated, simply bloodlessly routed after Toffee was... disgraced. They fled to the far corners of Mewni and melted into the existing monster settlements. Patrols and hunts were organized but the results were minimal. The authority of the Monster King, once a prominent restraining influence upon their population, was revoked due to the fact that his court was no doubt infested with survivors." Now, Moon looked back at the window, furtive eyes glaring past her castle, into the horizon. "They are out there, Stanford. Experienced veterans of the Monster War, weapons buried in backyards or hidden in the wood panels of barns. If the monster community as a whole is given an inch, they will rise up once again to devour the Kingdom of Mewni, seeking to sate their instinctual battle lust. And I will never allow Mewni to be unprepared for their predation!"

Ford kept his expression steady in the face of this speech, feeling grateful for the light reflecting off his glasses that obscured the details of his eyes. While outwardly the man was as calm as ever, on the inside old memories were bringing up fresh turmoil. "Is that why those children had to die, Queen of Mewni?" Ford thought to himself. "Were those farmers the remains of the monster army as well, waiting to rise up?" However, he did an expert job concealing his emotions, and began to draw on the social lessons he'd learned from his brother. "Unfortunately, it simply isn't my choice. I am subject to rules, just as you are Queen Moon."

"I beg your pardon?" Moon asked, seeming genuinely surprised by this. As she fell for it, Ford remembered back to this specific lesson. "Rule sticklers always buy other rule sticklers!" Is what Stanley had said in the relevant lesson.
"Do you believe I invented the means to travel between dimensions purely by myself? From scraps?"

Ford asked, ignoring the fact that this is exactly what he did. "I am part of a scientific institution
Queen Moon. No scientific project can get very far without funding and networking, and in
exchange for providing that the institute has very strict rules about our experiments. The number one
rule of the dimensional science initiative, our, uh, Prime Directive you might say..." Ford explained
fraudulently, unable to resist slipping in a small reference. "...Is to not permanently compromise other
dimensions with objects from Earth, including everything from electronics to weapons. We are trying
to study the natural state of the multiverse, after all. Now, allowances can be made in the interest of
defeating Bill and other threats to earth, but what you are asking of me would be an unambiguous
violation of all my codes and traditions."

"I see." Moon answered, her tone indicating that she would accept these reasons even if she wasn't
happy about them. Ford gave his brother a silent thanks as the queen then changed the subject. "So
what does all that mean for your interactions with Eclipsa? I trust I do not have to be concerned with
the possibility you may... meddle, in her trial?"

"Eclipsa... intrigues me, I will admit, though purely in an intellectual sense. She's a mysterious
subject about which seemingly little accurate historical data exists." Ford explained, stepping
carefully and this time, sticking mainly to the truth. "However, provided she remains as she is
currently, ie unconnected to Bill Cipher, then she is not a primary concern of mine. Should the efforts
of the Magical High Commission turn up valid evidence that she is legitimately guilty of being, as
you say, evil..." He continued, casting a bit of disdain upon the simplistic terminology. "...Then I will
accept the ruling of the court, whatever it may be. I am a scientist after all, Queen Moon. And the
most important thing a scientist must understand is that their opinions must change to meet the facts,
and to not change the facts to meet their own opinions."

Moon seem satisfied by this answer, though not necessarily happy with it. "Then, I believe the
working relationship between your group and the Kingdom of Mewni will continues harmoniously.
As a matter of fact, I can actually provide you with something of use right now." She explained,
while passing a small pile of papers over the desk to Ford. "Those are summary files on previous
demon smugglers who were caught providing weapons to monsters. Obviously all this information
was gathered before we knew the truth, but for the moment it is all we have on the activities of these
smugglers. Perhaps it can be of some use."

"Thank you Queen Moon, I'll examine this right away." He thanked while folding the paper into a
coat pocket.

"Then, if there is nothing else?" Moon asked, attempting to bring the conversation to an end.

"Actually, there is one more matter I wish to discuss." Ford spoke up abruptly, managing to trigger a
look of slight surprise on Moon's face. "If you would indulge me, your majesty, I'd like to collect
skin samples from your arms."

"I beg your pardon!?" Moon responded in a scandalized tone, taken aback by this request.

Ignoring this reaction entirely, Ford pressed straight into an explanation. "I believe I can perform a
test on those samples that could possibly reveal the source of Eclipsa's signature dark magic, divine
some of its nature. I would, of course, be willing to submit the test results to the Magical High
Commission for use as potential evidence in her trial." After a moment of quiet, Ford then admitted
"I know I said she's not my concern, but call it a hunch. Thee test I'm considering is fairly simple
and, well, it would help me pass the time until more information on Bill emerges."

Moon considered this in silence for almost a minute, a conflicting combination of thoughts bouncing
around in her head, competing with each other to guide her actions. "Giving anyone a chance to
learn more about dark magic is a risk, but if the right results come back this could let us easily convict Eclipsa!" On the outside, the Queen's brow furrowed. "Remember the incantation Moon. This power... it flows from somewhere dark, somewhere evil. If a definitive source could be found and identified..."

"Very well." The Queen stated simply, removing one of her gloves in a dignified fashion and clearing out a section of desk to lay it down upon. "But you will deliver the results to me as soon as they are available."

"Of course, your majesty." Ford responded while removing his sampling kit from inside his coat. His first action was to swab down a section of skin with a disinfectant before he set to work. "You may experience some momentary discomfort."

Earlier and elsewhere, the four teenagers who stayed to enjoy their breakfast eventually finished the food and split their separate ways. Star and Marco were currently heading towards the old rose garden. "You know Star, I've got a really good feeling about your new friends. I mean, Dipper freaks me out a little bit but he's still nowhere near as bad as Janna and Pacifica seems pretty nice." The boy said in an attempt to make small talk. Star had said there was something she wanted to show him in this old section of garden, and for the moment he was content to follow where she led.

"You should be grateful to them Marco, they really helped me sort out my feelings." Star replied, both her arms wrapped around the boy's left as she finally brought him an ordinary looking bench in a shaded, isolated section of the garden. "Now, have a seat Diaz."

"Okay, okay." Marco responded in good spirits, recognizing Star's tone of voice as the one she used when she was determined to make him have fun, one way or the other. After being seated, he shifted uncomfortably a little on the old stone. "So, is this some sort of... magic bench? Is it gonna take us on a crazy trip to some world of war where we become magical mercenaries?"

"Nope! It's just an ordinary, uncomfortable stone bench!" Star exclaimed with the enthusiasm of someone delivering life changing good news. Then, she fluttered to a seat besides Marco. "Until now! Now it's magic!" She said, the last word delivered with a fluttering whisper then asked playfully "Can you guess why it's magic now, Marco Diaz?"

"I don't know Star, it still feels pretty uncomfortable and made out of stone to me." Replied the boy from Earth, deliberately playing along with a coy tone. "I give up, tell me why it's magic?"

"Because now there's a magic GIRL sitting on it!" Star exclaimed, while throwing her arms up in the air in celebration. "And not just any girl, oh no, it's your magical girlfriend from another dimension!" The princess continued to use the tone of an eager game show host from Earth, causing Marco to giggle, but for her next line the girl opted to use a much more husky tone that made Marco suddenly stop and swallow. "And this magical girlfriend wants to make out. wiiiiiiiiith... you!" Star explained, punctuating her last word by poking her boyfriend's nose.

Suddenly, the jokey, easygoing atmosphere that was highly reminiscent of his strong friendship with Star evaporated to be replaced by the strange and frightening but exciting world of romantic tension for Marco. Despite the fact that they made him nervous enough to bring out a stutter and dampen his palms with sweat, Marco had no desire to turn away Star's advances, he simply was uncertain about how to properly receive them.

"Alright, okay then. We're not, uh, going too fast are we?" He asked with a little confusion, but none the less reached forward and connected his lips to Star's, the two quickly closing their eyes and leaning into the kiss before they separated. The newman girl was openly grinning at the kiss they had shared, and while the human boy was a little more bewildered looking, his face had a warm
However, his hesitation did seem to give Star pause, as she held herself back from kissing him again. "I mean, I'm not, I've been ready to go for at least a month, but, if you're not, we can stop."

"No, no, it's not like that! If you're comfortable, I'm comfortable, I just didn't want to, you know, be pushy." Marco explained, doing his best to look Star in the eyes with a warm expression to set her at ease. "I mean, my dating experience is hardly, you know, expansive or anything, but, well, before, things didn't advance this fast, and I don't want to hurt you or make you uncomfortable."

Star knew it was petty, but she couldn't help but feel her heart spike as Marco inadvertently compared her to Jackie in a matter where, from Star's perspective, she had come out on top. With a surge of confidence glowing through her body and a fluttering heart at Marco's kind concern for her, the blond princess leaned in close and put her mouth right next to Marco's ear, so she could whisper her next line to him with inviting confidence. "Well, that's good to her, but don't worry Marco. All I want to do right now is show you a good time."

Marco's face got even redder now, and he was suddenly aware of the fact that Star was close enough to him that she could easily shift forward and be sitting on his lap with a very small movement of her body. However, the hypersensitivity this situation brought to both their sets of senses resulted in both of them seizing up when the sound of a twig snapping hit both their ears.

"Star dearie, is that you lurking in the rose bushes? Have you come by to visit me again?" Called out the posh voice of Queen Eclipsa, having an idle wander through the gardens as a way to pass the time. When she eventually rounded the corner to see the bench the two were seated in, Star and Marco were on opposite sides of the bench, as far away from each other as possible, both blushing brightly and not looking at each other.

"Oh thank corn Eclipsa it's just you." Star said with a sigh of relief as soon as they saw who their visitor actually was. "I was scared you were my mom for a second."

"Uh, Star? Who is this?" Marco asked, getting the impression right away that this was someone important based on her confident stance and distinctive cheek marks.

"Oh dear, did I interrupt something? My sincerest apologies." Eclipsa said with a genuine sounding tone to her voice. After running her eyes over Marco a few times and analyzing the situation in full, she got a playful little grin on her face and asked "So Star, is this the wild flower you and I talked about last time we met?"

While Marco looked confused at this comment, Star was rapidly climbing off the bench and pulling him with her. "Well, yes, but we'll have to do the formal introductions later, me and Marco need to be somewhere else right now!"

"No we don't..."

"Marco then! That's a very pleasant name, it's good to meet you." Eclipsa responded. "Please, don't let me delay you then. I was just out for a little stroll."

Abruptly, Star froze in place and turned an inquisitive eye towards the prisoner queen. "Wait, aren't you supposed to be under house arrest?"

"House arrest!?"

"Well, yes, but I really needed another good stroll through the rose garden. It's quite nice here you know, good for enjoying yourself far away from judgmental eyes." Eclipsa admitted honestly, then
added with a bit of cheek, added "I won't tell if you won't tell."

Blushing slightly brighter now, Star quickly responded "Deal." before grabbing Marco again and pulling him towards an exit to the garden. "C'mon Marco! I've got something else to show you!"

"But, wait, Star!" The boy implored, to no avail. "Is this some kind of dangerous criminal or something that we should be dealing with right now?" He asked, trying to gesture towards Eclipsa, who was simply waving goodbye to the two of them.

"Nah, just a bunch of political junk, I'm sure we can leave her here." Star explained dismissively, and the two shortly after left the old section of garden behind completely.

Elsewhere in the castle, Dipper and Pacifica were traveling back to their room, each carrying an armful of books. After breakfast the two had gone right to the royal library, intending to learn more about the newest set of players in the hunt for Bill Cipher: The Kingdom of Lucitor.

"From my previous readings, I know that the Lucitors and the Ponyheads became military and economic allies of Mewni through the work of Jushtin during his post-rulership diplomatic service, but aside from that the books I'd read before didn't offer much insight into what they're, you know, really like." Pacifica explained as she and Dipper walked side by side. "Hopefully this new bunch of books has some more specific information that might help us hunt down Bill."

"I was surprised to learn they call themselves demons." Dipper admitted. Pacifica looked a little quizzical, so he explained further that "Well, it had sort of been Grunkle Ford's hypothesis that a lot of earth's superstition developed out of supernatural encounters, either from this world or others, that people didn't understand fully. So, under that idea, the word 'demon' would have been used to describe dangerous supernatural creatures that could have had dozens of sources, but all get described with the same word, but nope, they call themselves that." Then, with a distant look to his eyes, Dipper's thoughts began to run wild as he muttered in wonder. "Maybe earth got the word demon from them, but then went around and misapplied it to other supernatural encounters they had later..."

Pacifica let her boyfriend work through his thoughts for a minute with a smile on her face, as they were now standing outside the door to their quarters, but eventually her arms began to hurt from holding up the books and she had to break his train of thought. "Hey, Dipper." She spoke up, instantly causing his focus to snap to her. "Be a gentleman and open the door up for your lady?" The blond asked in a playful tone.

Blushing slightly, Dipper answered with a nervous but sincere "Oh, uh, sure thing!" before thoughtlessly placing his pile of books on top of Pacifica's, almost causing her to drop the whole collection as the sudden, surprising weight made her knees buckle for a moment while Dipper dutifully opened the door. "Please, after you!" He said with a cheesy but nervous grin while holding the door opened, and ended up looking mildly confused when Pacifica shuffled past him with a mild scowl on her face.

Soon enough, the books had been set down and the two humans had settled in to do their reading. They moved between books quickly, seeking out relevant sections and passages instead of reading cover to cover. As time passed, piles of paper built up around the room as the two humans gradually painted themselves a portrait of the realm of demons, out of the disparate literature at their disposal.

"So, they're definitely not demons the way Bill is a demon, right?" Pacifica spoke up, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between her and Dipper as the two settled in to do their work. As he looked up at her from the other end of the couch the two were sharing, the blond elaborated. "I mean, they are physical enough that they've got anatomical illustrations in some of these books and
dead demons are mentioned from time to time without it sounding like it was something unusual."

"Well, the common people of the Underworld, no, based on stuff like that I think they're just a sort of high magic species, but their royal family I'm not sure." Dipper responded, then quickly added "The old royal family that is, not sure if you came across any mention of them with what you were reading..."

"Oh no worries, I know exactly what you mean." Pacifica affirmed quickly enough, before taking a sort of dramatic air. "The sires and patrons of the Underworld, the great family of demon emperors who created the kingdom as the pure, perfect spawn of Asmodeus himself, and ruled in perpetuity, forever be their infernal glory." Then, the Northwest snorted derisively, before remarking sarcastically "Shame they're all dead now."

"Not all of them." Dipper corrected gently, while pulling up a genuine historical artifact off the cart, a preserved public flier preserved in wrap deeper within the library. The parchment was thick and sturdy, but had still been frayed around the edges by the passage of time. Filling in the space was a large amount of demonic script, framed by stylized bordering and reverently placed below an artistic rendering of a large demon woman. "Queen Wrathmelior, the smallest and youngest child of the last pure blooded King of the Underworld. The only survivor of the royal family descending into a paranoid personal conflict that wiped out the entire lineage over the course of one month." For the last sentence, Dipper's cynical tone of voice conveyed that he didn't quite believe that official story.

Pacifica, for her part, shared her boyfriend's suspicion, and was quite quick to vocalize it as well. "Yeah, I got to that, recognized her from the party even. A real photogenic lady, provided she's posing for Weekly World News. Anyways, less than a month after the entire lineage is wiped out in an unexpected struggle for power and she's the only survivor, Wrathmelior marries a Mewman out of nowhere. Not even a rich one! They apparently just met in a library or something..." Now looking right at Dipper, she added in a more serious tone that "I'm shocked his regime managed to survive that kind of cover story."

"It makes more sense than you might think, to someone whose been conditioned by life in a totalitarian theocracy, at least. Wrathmelior is part of that perfect lineage of Asmodeus, so if she says that's how it happened, that's how it happened. Plus, it makes a sort of sense that the only thing that could kill perfect demons is other perfect demons." The boy explained, putting his book down to meet Pacifica's gaze as they slid a little closer to each other. "Of course, I'm more skeptical and think these great demons probably weren't as great as they were made out to be. Maybe they have some weakness King Dave managed to figure out... Did you find out anything about that guy? I've got nothing."

"No, it seems like he just walked into the pages of history when he met Wrathmelior." Pacifica responded with a hint of disappointment to her voice. "I don't think he's a Mewman stooge though." She added offhandedly, and when Dipper looked a little surprised at this, she elaborated, knowing the boy well enough to be able to tell when he wanted more. "As much sense as it makes to figure that the magic wand was what made his coup possible, Dave came to the throne early into Moon's reign, meaning she would have been the one who backed him and planned things, but she didn't react like she had this sort of intimate knowledge of his dirty secrets when she found out he is arming monsters. Plus, I got the impression that these deals go way back to the early days of his reign, and it seems improbable that the Mewmans would lose control of their asset THAT quickly."

Dipper beamed at his girlfriend with pride in response to her political deduction, and Pacifica felt uplifted by his obvious confidence in her. They scooted a little closer together. "Still, it seems unlikely he could have done all that by himself... If Mewni wasn't backing him, maybe he bargained with Bill for power? Traded over something for knowledge of a dark spell that instantly kills this
super resilient life form? Would explain how he got his foot in the door for the arms industry..." Dipper mused aloud.

"Potentially. What if it's the other way around though?" Pacifica wondered back before digging for a specific book she had marked with a particular color of sticky note. "What if the pure demon royal family were Bill's pawns somehow, and Dave destroyed them, so now Bill has infiltrated the Underworld's arms industry to set Dave up for destruction?" By then, she'd found the book she was looking for and began opening towards the right pages. "These portraits look a lot like some of those goons Bill had with them, don't they? Maybe the Underworld is where he got them." Holding the book up so Dipper could see it, Pacifica first gestured to a portrait of a demon diplomat reproduced in between the pages who had a strong, though not identical, resemblance to the Henchmaniac 8-Ball, though in possession of normal eyeballs and wearing a dapper Victorian suit and top hat. Then, Pacifica flipped a couple of pages to show what was presumably a female demon, who like Pyronica had horns and a singular eye, though in this instance she was wearing a fairly normal looking Edwardian era style dress, that happened to be burning with blue flames while smiling at her painter.

"Also a very real possibility, good thinking Pacifica." Dipper responded while furiously writing away on a fresh sheet of paper, having realized midway through Pacifica's hypothesizing that all their ideas would need to be written down, and so was now struggling to fill in the last few minutes of conversation before it was lost to fickle memory. The blond at first smiled at being complemented, but after a moment of watching his boyfriend scribe at a furious pace, she got a small frown on her face.

"Dipper, take your hat off. You don't need it in here and it's just going to make sweat build up on your forehead." She told the boy, speaking softly but easily conveying through tone that this wasn't a request.

Dipper seemed to deliberately ignore his new girlfriend for a second, but Pacifica knew him well enough by now to simply wait patiently for a few moments, and just before enough time had passed to make her feel actually uncomfortable, Dipper dutifully set his paper and pencil aside, having reached a point in his note taking where it would be easy to resume his work. Looking firmly at his new girlfriend, the boy from Earth asked "Hey, what brought this on? You concerned about my scalp all of a sudden?"

He had said that with a cracked eyebrow and a jokey tone of voice, trying to play things off with humor, but Pacifica stayed insistent. "We're inside Dipper. You should have taken that off at the door. A hour ago." She explained in a critical voice, but then added, in a softer tone "And, uh, if your head is all sweaty I'm not going to run my hand through your hair likeivebeenthinkingaboutdoing." Midway through that sentence, Pacifica seemed to get embarrassed and looked away as her words turned to muttering.

Blushing now, Dipper felt motivated enough to reach up and take the hat off, even though he felt an almost gravitational pull trying to put it back on his head. The pine tree decorated cap did come off before the boy held it close to his chest. "I got this hat at the same time as I first felt my true destiny in Gravity Falls, and I've kept it with me through thick and thin. It's sort of a comforting symbol of the strange world I live in." He thought to himself, looking down at the piece of headgear he was holding close.

After a moment though, he abruptly scrunched his eyebrows up and wondered what the heck he was talking about. "It's a HAT Dipper" He could hear his brain talking to him. "You take it off all the time. Now hurry up and get us that physical contact!"

With a dismissive posture, Dipper swiftly removed the hat from his chest and tossed it onto the
nearest chair, where it landed on some books. He went from wondering what that was all about to feeling the aching need to push the hat over his head again as soon as he looked back at Pacifica though, abruptly feeling uncomfortable and a little unkempt in her presence.

For her part, Pacifica was looking at Dipper with a very guarded, neutral expression, which while it didn't make the boy feel any better, it also didn't make him feel any worse. After a second of observation though, Pacifica leaned forward and said "You shouldn't feel bad about your birthmark Dipper." While doing so, she combed back some of his hair with her hand to make the constellation visible.

The flush of heat and discomfort Dipper felt as a result of this instantly confirmed the source of his previously vague and uncertain feelings of shyness and discomfort. A dozen excuses jumped into his mind for use in this situation, but the strange feeling of forcing his insecurities came over the boy as he took a gulp. Feeling like this was something he could say to his new girlfriend, Dipper quietly spoke that "I know I shouldn't, but it's hard Pacifica. Just knowing people can see it makes me feel bad inside in a way I can't control."

Pacifica's gaze lowered, locking eyes with Dipper and giving him a soft, compassionate expression that he wouldn't have believed could possibly live on her face back when they had first met. "It still is sort of a rare expression from her, I must admit." He thought candidly to himself. "But I guess that just makes it sort of special. I'm one of the only people who gets to experience it."

"I know it isn't easy to just... get over something like that, but try to remember you never need to feel bad around me and Ford." Pacifica replied comfortably, while wrapping her arms around his body in a sort and warm embrace. Closing his eyes and feeling at peace, Dipper returned the hug while smiling softly. After a long moment wherein the two slowly cuddled even closer together, Pacifica added that "...And for your information, I think it's cute."

Dipper's eyes opened in surprise in response to that, but seeing as the girl he loved was still curled up against his body, hugging him with her eyes closed, the boy decided to not make a fuss in response to this and closed his eyes in turn to focus on the feeling. Neither were sure how much time had passed as both faded into the sensation of their body heats becoming one and each person's heartbeat becoming a comfortable rhythm traveling into the other's body, but they were both enjoying it a great deal.

All good things have their ends however, and in this case the two from Earth had their hugging session ended when the door to the room abruptly slammed shut, causing them both to snap out of the mutual haze they were in and look towards the doorway, while clinging each other tighter. Standing by the entrance and having slammed the door shut out of surprise was Stanford, returning from his meeting with the queen and looking uncharacteristically flustered and uncertain. Both teens did momentarily relax as they realized it wasn't any sort of danger, but quickly felt embarrassment in the place of concern and began to untangle themselves from each other. Without saying a word, Ford turned around to leave the room but abruptly caught himself, muttering "What am I doing, I've been meaning to talk to them about this!" before turning around again, walking up to the couch they were on, and sitting on a nearby chair (after removing the books from it) so he could look at the two, who were now seated side by side. Putting his fingers together and thinking it over for a moment, Ford asked his question in the most direct way possible. "Are you two dating?"

Dipper almost never felt any sort of overtly negative emotion about his mentor, but thirty seconds into this conversation and a stab of awkwardness was traveling up his body as the teenager wished his great uncle would just leave him and Pacifica alone. Despite that, when he spoke up, it was in the same respectful but casually comfortable tone Dipper normally used with his great uncle. "Yes. Yes
we are dating." He said, causing both teenagers to heat up slightly.

"It's really recent though. Like, we started dating here on Mewni recent!" Pacifica added with a flustered tone of voice.

In response, Ford pursed his lips and considered the two of them, a troubled and indecisive look on his face. Finally, he tersely asked the two "Have you considered doing otherwise?"

"What... what do you mean great uncle Ford?"

"What I mean is, well, romantic relationships are very time consuming, mentally taxing, and can a severe effect on both parties when they go wrong." Ford explained. Instead of the usual highly composed and strongly certain attitude the old man normally carried when explaining a topic, now he was slightly nervous and clearly at something of a loss. "I think it would be better, for both of you, if you put these feelings aside and focused on science at your ages."

Both teenagers were looking off put and nervous at this point, exchanging a reassuring glance before Pacifica asked "Doctor Pines, have you ever been in love before?" Dipper turned his head around again to look at Pacifica with a look of surprise for just diving into Grunkle Ford's painful past like that, but when the senior scientist spoke up, his voice was remarkably unbothered and expository.

"No, not really." He explained simply. "Stanley got me involved in girl hunting schemes a few times back in high school, but he was the driving force behind those and I was mostly hoping it would make me more popular. When I was in college I was too busy for any kind of romance, and once I was living by myself in Gravity Falls, well... the idea had occurred to me a few times that I could go out and try to find a girl, but it was just never interesting enough to motivate me to leave my work. I'd mull it over while eating a meal or something like that, but by the time I was done I'd decide I wanted to go back to whatever experiment I was working on more." Then, Ford's tone darkened over a little, though he kept talking in a detached tone of voice. "Then, while I was in the portal, there were... a few encounters, but they never lasted very long and I always had some kind of ulterior motive."

It of course went without saying that his love life after returning from the multiverse was similarly non-existent, which Dipper knew due to having been at Ford's side since the moment he came out of the portal. Everyone was quiet for an awkward minute, thoughts mulling through all their minds, before the younger man was the first to speak up. "Great Uncle Ford, I want you to know that while I still respect your considerable personal knowledge, I think you're wrong about this." His voice was nervous, but completely lacking in uncertainty. "I feel very strongly about Pacifica and I don't think I can simply will those feelings away. When I'm with her I feel calm inside and happy with myself, and I think we'll only be getting stronger from being together, and that trying to shut these feelings down would be the course of action that would be distracting." After saying this, Dipper looked over his shoulder again, hoping for confirmation or approval from Pacifica, wondering if she felt the same way.

He got it right away. "Dipper is one of the few things that makes me feel stable in life Doctor Pines. When I'm... just, with him, everything seems clear and I know what I need to do, most of the time." The girl explained, while wrapping her arms around the boy's chest from behind. "I don't want to ruin his intellect or anything by distracting him, it's one of the things I find most attractive about him, but I don't really think us dating would do that, because yeah, I think we make each other stronger like this."

Dipper bent his neck back to look at his girlfriend with a soft, content smile on his face. "You're right Paz, you know that, right? You're an inspiration to me, in a lot of ways."
Looking a little flustered now, Pacifica quickly turned her head to the side before looking far to closely at her nails. "Hey, don't be talking like that, I'm the one whose supposed to be inspired by you, remember?" She said while trying to sound dismissive, but soon enough had met Dipper's gaze with a soft look of her own. "...You're the one who helped me to be a better person, after all..."

Ford had simply been sitting there and observing this process, and only spoke up again after the two spent several long moments of just looking at each other instead of talking. "So, I presume you two want to keep dating each other then?" He asked, in a very neutral tone of voice. The teenagers shared an anxious look, but soon turned back to Ford and nodded their heads in the affirmative, worried but resolute. After taking in this answer for a few moments and waiting to make sure they weren't going to say anything else, Ford simply stood up from his chair in a casual sort of manner. "Well, I guess that's that then. If you'll excuse me, I have a small test to run."

Dipper and Pacifica looked at each other in surprise, having expected something angrier to have come out of all this, but now they were left just sitting together on the couch. "So, wait, Doctor Pines..." the blond human asked of their older mentor, who was scattering scientific equipment across the room's table. "...Are you saying you, well, approve?"

"No, but I don't disapprove either. It's quite clear to me all this is beyond my field of expertise." Ford explained while turning around to face the couple again, a small smile on his face. "But... more than anything else, I trust Dipper's judgement, and now yours by extension Pacifica, and the two of you are clearly more knowledgeable on the relevant facts than I am. After all, I have very little practical experiences with the finer aspects of romance, but you two are clearly off to an advanced start. If Dipper tells me you two being together will make you both stronger, than I am inclined to believe him."

The two teenagers got very bright faces at Stanford's high praise and the fact they were going to continue dating. "However!" He spoke up after moment, teasingly wagging a finger at the two. "I may re-evaluate my position if it seems this is all too distracting for you two. You are conducting very important work after all, and speaking of which, I need you to deliver something to the princess for me while I conduct an experiment here." He explained, while scrawling a note and handing it off to his apprentice. As they turned to leave, his face got a little more serious, almost parental in expression. "And, children... Be safe with each other."

"Of course Great Uncle Ford, we'll get it to her right away!" Dipper spoke up in an eager to please and enthusiastic tone of voice, though he quickly became flush at Stanford's second statement. He was quick to take the other human teenager by the hand and head for the door. "C'mon Pacifica!"

Ford watched the two leave with an inscrutable expression of his face, but once the room to the door slammed shut his expression cracked a little into a smile. "Well, if it makes you happy Dipper..." he said quietly and wistfully, before setting back into grim determination over the course of setting up the experiment. First came the gloves and safety goggles, then he set out making a place to work. When the work table was ready, the notes the two teenagers had filled it with had been cleared off, courteously kept together and organized just the way Ford had found them but on the other side of the room. A glass beaker sat on a metal wire mesh spread across a ring stand, the water inside the glass bubbling up, heated by the Bunsen burner running beneath it, which in turn was fed by a rubber hose connected to a portable gas container. As the water reached a steady boil, Stanford opened a small container of ash from an evergreen tree and used it to draw a circle around the base of the burner on the desk, then added a straight line to the top and bottom of the circle, completing the stabilizing sigil.

"A little bit of urea 40%, some demecolcine, and a touch of silver powder..." Muttered Ford to
himself as he added the ingredients in question to the boiling beaker from a trunk of alchemical ingredients he'd briefly gone back to Earth for shortly after Star's testing by the MHC, before reaching into his coat and preparing the key ingredient. The blackened flakes of skin collected from Queen Moon's arm were gently sprinkled into the bubbling concoction, and soon enough the heat and chemicals were doing their work while the old scientist paid close attention, note pad and pencil in hand.

On the molecular level, the membranes and cytoskeletons of the skin cells were being broken down, causing the dark essence to be released from inside them. Inside the clear, boiling liquid solution, a thicker, more sludge like material was precipitating behind the glass, the volume of it seemingly exceeding the volume of the skin cells it was flowing out of, though not enough to overrun the container. "Deep arcane residue, just like I thought." Ford mused to himself, jotting this down. "If it was a simple case of arcane radiation burns inflicting biological decay, Moon would have lost the use of those arms a long time ago."

Turning off the heat source once the dark magic mass stopped expanding, Ford took several pictures of his experiment before moving to the next step. Reaching deep into his alchemy trunk, the six fingered scientist cleared a small clump of rainbow colored hair from a well sealed container and laid it on the desk, then set up a small, right triangle wooden block next to the clump. Working gingerly and with the protection of both gloves and a long pair of tweezers, Ford removed some of the long dormant dark magic ooze, and placed it on top of the wooden block. Gravity took over, and soon the black viscous was steadily rolling down the object, right towards the hair clump.

Ford sat poised with his notepad, analyzing the setup with all possible focus. He had checked it a dozen times in less than a minute, the rolling ooze he'd collected from Queen Moon's skin was on a slow but certain collision course with the sample of unicorn hair he'd placed in its path. The viscosity of the sample made for slow going, but there was no way around it. Any second now, it would flow directly onto the brightly colored mane trimmings...

At the moment of truth, it jumped. Against all laws of physics, specifically the ones pertaining to momentum and gravity, the rolling black liquid seemed to avert course and flow around the clump of unicorn hair, despite there being nothing in its way, be it physical or kinetic. It was almost as if there was a physical stopbank redirecting the flow to leave the hair spotless, but of course, no such thing physically exist. As the liquid dark magic leveled out on the flat surface it gradually stopped moving and settled in, but still would not come close to the little mound of mane, forming a perfect circle around it instead.

Ford was scribbling notes rapidly at this point, having already filmed the entire process as it happened. When he felt he had no more left to write down, the elder Pines returned to his trunk, went through the process of opening the secret compartment, and removed a glass bottle from inside. Despite the glass being completely wrapped over with sturdy black tape, a faint yellow light seemed to shine from inside.

"Months of work..." Ford thought to himself, taking half a second to consider the possibilities. "It took us months to collect this small amount. Tapping ley lines, diffusion collection experiments, soil sampling, water purifying, all timed around the exacting calculations derived from the scanner's rough estimations of the Arcane Dynamo's strange fluctuations." He recollected, but his decision was already made.

Donning an old style gas mask, Ford popped the bottle open, and gently dripped some of the brilliant yellow liquid kept inside it onto a sturdy rag, his eyes briefly dazzling at the sight from behind the circular glass before his gloved hands went to work. The dampened cloth was rubbed against the dark magic spilled against the table, the two creating an eerie hiss on contact, but as the rag moved
along it left nothing behind it but clear, unvarnished table.

Once the dark magic scattered on the table was cleared up, Ford took the remainder of bottle and poured it directly into his glass beaker, which had by now cooled off completely. The two reacted strongly to each other at first, gold and black swirling around and seeming ready to boil over, but at a the critical moment to burst both just seemed to fizzle out and fade away, leaving behind a container with nothing but slightly viscous water inside.

After giving the desk a twice over to make sure the experiment was completely neutralized, Ford left some sage to burn before collapsing into the nearest chair, gradually discarding all his safety equipment while completing his notes for the experiment. When it was all finally done, he leaned back in his chair and pinched the space between his eyes, feeling overwhelmed. "Eclipsa..." He wondered aloud. "Just what is she, and what is she up to?"

Ford felt trapped, surrounded on all sides by people he couldn't trust, Dipper and Pacifica being the only ones he could rely on, and to make things worse, he had no leads and no clues on how to begin escaping this situation at the moment. "Our best chance is Star, provided the kids can get her looking at this the right way." Ford thought aloud, his mind working a mile a minute for an alternative way forward, but nothing came. "I'm simply going to have to wait to hear from Princess Butterfly, and who knows how long that could take."

Dismayed at the process of having nothing to do while being weighed down by these thoughts and worries, Ford scanned the room for anything to distract himself with, and found his eyes settling on the magic containing bottle, which was now just empty glass wrapped in tape. "Unless..." The man thought to himself, before getting up to retrieve the bottle and then sitting back down again. Holding one eye up to the opening, Ford's expression changed to pleasant surprise.

There, sitting along the grooved bottom of the bottle, were a few small droplets of magic, still shining with a golden light.

Checking one last time that his notes were complete before he set them aside somewhere safe, Ford set himself into the chair and made himself comfortable. Then, he tipped the bottle bottom's up and let the sweet sensation of magic rush over his senses. Behind his glasses, Ford's eyes began to shine and glimmer with a sort of youthful exuberance that had left his eyes long before he'd stopped being a youth.

Elsewhere in the castle, an ornate table for two had been set up in an out of the way little window room, draped with the finest table cloth and covered with fine ceramic plates and cups. After seeing Marco off to a guest room last night, Star had spent a few hours refreshing herself on the various Mewman courting practices she'd slept through her mother's lectures about.

"It all needs to be PERFECT!" Star thought to herself as she gently pushed a teacup a few inches over the table, giving it a long, troubled look to try and figure out if she liked it there. "If I'm really going to make him my boyfriend, for good, I need more than just crazy wahoo friendship thursday antics. I need to engage Marco on HIS level!" She thought to herself, feeling like her logic was perfect while neurotically moving the tea cup right back where it had been. "And that means a perfectly planned, orderly tea date!"

The door to the room opened, causing Star to whirl around in eager surprise, but it was only the servant who had set all this up, bearing the freshly made pot of tea needed to complete the table. Marco himself wasn't here at the moment, breakfast had caught up with him and he needed to use the restroom before sitting down to drink something else. "Thank you for setting this up, you're dismissed." Star said to them in a polite but rushed tone of voice.
"Of course princess. Cleaners will be here in three hours to stow all of this. I trust you'll be done by then?" The maid asked, and got a dismissive wave from Star in response. "Enjoy your Song Day sweetheart, your majesty." the domestic servant added cheekily before shutting the door behind her and leaving Star alone.

"Okay, alright!" Star breathed in and out, clearly stressed, while taking her place at the table to wait. "My boyfriend is going to come through that door any minute now, and we're going to have a nice orderly date. It is NOT going to get a little weird, it is NOT going to get a little wild, we're just going to have a nice, safe time, just like Marco Diaz likes to enjoy!"

Just as soon as this proclamation had been made, the pot of tea began to quiver in place, instantly catching Star's eye. Knocking off the top lid and jumping free was a small, horned imp with green hair and a blue cap uniform on. Star seemed genuinely stunned with surprise, while the little imp brushed themselves off like nothing about this was weird. "Hello and congratulations!" She greeted enthusiastically. "Today is the day you have delivered a very special message!"

Out in the hallways, Marco was walking back to the room with his head lowered, lost in thought and walking a little slower than he could have been to give himself more time to think. "Man, how did I even get here?" He asked himself in confusion the apex of his recent thoughts. "I came here broken up, wanting to go on adventures and see the multiverse again, but within a day me and Star are dating!" He stopped for a second, and tried to spot his own reflection in one of the windows. "I didn't plan for any of this, didn't hope for something like this to happen, but somehow it feels so right, despite everything that's messed up about it."

He spent a long moment looking at his own reflection in that glass, paying no attention to the Mewman vista beyond it. When he was done thinking his situation through, Marco saw a determined look flash over his own face and gave himself a nod of the head. "Right, listening to my brain hasn't helped me so far. It led me in circles, and caused me to hurt people. I'm gonna let my heart guide me and my feelings show me the way from here!" He announced, then in a reserved tone, added "Just handle things like Star does Diaz."

"I've arrived to deliver an Apologram to one Star Butterfly and a Threatnagram for one Marco Diaz!" It explained. Star continued to sit stone still from shock. Reaching under her heat to pull out a pair of sealed envelopes, the imp continued with "They both arrive today courtesy of a Tom Lucitor, who sends these with his warmes-ACK!"

Mention of the prince's name had finally got Star to react, as she picked up the delivery imp in one hand by squishing their whole body in her palm, walking over to the nearest window, opening it up and throwing the courier out. "Nope. Nope nope nope nooooooooope nope nope, NO!" Star muttered the whole walk over. "I am not dealing with this today."

"Hey Star, I'm back!" Came Marco's cheery voice from a different doorway than the one the servant left out of. Star instantly spun around, surprised and a little panicked, and slammed the windows shut so that the fact that the imp was still screaming on the way down couldn't be heard.

"MARCO!" The princess exclaimed, while stepping back to the table and gesturing for him to sit down. "I had, uh, thought about opening the window to get some air in here, but I forgot the, uh... BIRDS!" With an unnaturally wide grin, Star rushed forward and took her own seat across from Marco, gradually calming down as the two settle in.

"So, what have you got me for me now Star?" Marco asked, genuinely curious but making an effort to add a playful tone to his voice, laying an arm on the table and leaning forward a little with a raised eyebrow. "I never really had you figured for the tea and cakes sort of princess."
"Well Marco, since you've asked, I might as well tell you that this is a sort of traditional Mewman courting spread." Star explained, trying to speak in a measured tone and sound as responsible as possible. "As we work our way through the dishes in the arranged order while enjoying our steadily cooling tea, we'll achieve a closer level of connection with each other."

Marco's raised eyebrow shifted slightly to go from slightly coy to slightly confused, feeling offput by Star's unusual attitude. Casting his eyes downwards, he was able to instantly see the symmetrical trail of finger food and light snacks arranged in front of each of them and while he admired the pattern they'd been placed into things still felt a little wrong. It was all perfectly nice, but it didn't feel like STAR.

"Now, as the woman sitting at the table, I'll pour us our tea." Star said, a little posh, before making a show of extending her pinkie before reaching for the tea pot at the center of the table. Marco, however, beat her to the punch.

"That all sounds great Star, but I prefer to drink from the bottle." He said with an affected slyness to his voice before swiping the tea pot and true to his words, drinking straight from it, which did require holding the object at an odd sideways angle, since it wasn't built with the intention of serving someone directly. However, his expression quickly broke as his eyes began to water, and within seconds Marco had dropped the tea pot back to the table, scattering small dishes while he gasped and rolled his tongue out. "AH, AH! HOT! WHY DIDN'T I REALIZE THAT WAS GOING TO BE HOT!"

Despite being genuinely concerned by Marco's distress, Star had been laughing since he drank straight from the pot with that weird expression of his and wasn't able to stop herself from laughing over just a scalded tongue. "MAAAARCO! WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT!?" She wanted to know in-between her laughs, sounding more confused than upset and a little bit genuinely amused when adding "Are you making fun of me or something?"

"Ack! It came off that strong huh?" Marco asked, his voice a little hoarse as he recovered from his attempted escapade, giggling a little about it himself. In a little more steady voice, he added "I just thought I'd try and do things your way this time, let my heart tell me what to do and junk."

"And your heart told you to chug hot tea straight from the pot?" Star asked, now quite clearly amused by the whole event.

"Well, I guess it told me to make you laugh, you seemed way wound up all of a sudden." Marco replied, a little unsure of himself, a little concerned for Star, and a little amused at how all this had turned out. Then, with a more sly voice, he added "And hey, it worked, didn't it princess?"

Star held her hands in her lap for a moment, smiling with a flush inside and smiling at how touched that explanation made her feel. "Yeah, yeah it did. Thank you Marco, but don't worry! I'm not feeling down at all, I just thought you might appreciate something with some organization put into it. Sooooo, I tried to do things your way this time."

Wearing the same warm smile himself now, Marco extended his hands over the tea table, prompting Star to put hers into his, at which point the boy from earth closed his palms around those of the Mewman princess, letting them feel each other's warmth. "Well, I appreciate the thought, it really means a lot to me that you'd be willing to go out of your comfort zone like that..." Marco explained, while giving the hands in his an affectionate squeeze. "...But I'm ready to step out of my comfort zone and start living in the moment. It's, well, sort of why I left earth."

After a moment of quiet hand holding however, Marco's brow abruptly became heavy as a troubling thought transparently crossed his face. "Hey Star? What's going to happen now? You know, to me? I
mean, you're the princess and one day you'll be queen, but I guess I didn't really think about the specifics of how I fit into things..."

"I've already got some ideas Díaz, but it's too early to start talking about your permanent position as my prince." Star thought to herself, momentarily surprising herself with how quickly she had added the epitaph to her mental image of Marco, and found it equally surprising how natural it sounded. In the real world, the girl leaned in and pulled the tan right hand up her heart stamped cheeks, gently nuzzling it while closing her eyes and making a soft, adorable noise. "You'll do what you've always done: Be my brave, sweet and understanding best friend who is always there for me, and helps me make sense of the crazy stuff that goes on in my life. After all, that's how you made me fall in love you to start with."

Marco felt his heart melt at Star's reassurances, but they couldn't completely banish his lingering insecurities, though the wonderful feelings traveling down his right arm were certainly making a valiant effort in that field as well. "Star, I mean more of an official position. I want to be with you Star, I understand that now, but I don't want to just bum around the castle doing nothing when you're busy. River talked about making me a knight, but I still wonder..."

"Ah, there you are! Me and Paz have been looking for you two, and all the servants have been really unhelpful this afternoon, wonder what's bothering all of them..."

Both Star and Marco looked towards the now open door with flatly dismayed expressions as Dipper and Pacifica stepped into the room, the brown haired boy continuing to explain his reasons for being here while pulling an extra two chairs off the wall and helping himself to a pastry. Pacifica, on the other hand, had stopped shortly after the door and shot the other couple an apologetic expression as soon as she realized what they'd interrupted. With a look of resignation, both gave the blond human a forgiving look and then finally payed attention to what Dipper was saying.

"...so Grunkle Ford wanted me to give you this." He had finished saying, while passing a folded up piece of paper to the princess. With her weary look turning into a smile, Star accepted and began to read it aloud.

"Princess Butterfly (well that is refreshingly to the point) I unfortunately have no further leads regarding Bill Cipher. I believe the best course of action to acquire new leads is to investigate his connections to the monster community, preferably diplomatically. I think it would be best if you handle this personally, rather than passing this tasks to the knights who would probably escalate the situation and cause a massacre. Dipper and Pacifica will assist you however they can." After checking the back to make sure she didn't miss anything, Star set the note down with a worried look on her face.

"Okay, whose Bill Cipher and whose Grunkle Ford?" Marco asked, breaking the silence. "Is he the old guy you mentioned Star?"

The princess of mewni simply nodded in response while Dipper answered the first question by grabbing the used note and scribbling on the back of it while speaking in a dead serious tone. "Bill Cipher is a mind demon from the Nightmare Realm who can spy on dreams and possess bodies. He attacked earth, OUR earth, a few years ago but me and my family defeated him, but now he's here on Mewni, wearing the skin of a regular demon and selling AK-47s to monsters. He is, more than likely, the most dangerous being you will ever face." After finishing that statement, Dipper held up his drawing.

"That looks like a nacho wearing a top hat."

"THE NACHOS WILL BETRAY YOU!"
"Dipper, please, calm down." Pacifica said soothingly while placing an arm on his shoulder, causing the boy to instantly relax a little. Turning to Marco, she explained further. "We only recently followed Bill to this dimension, but it's very likely he's been to Mewni before and laid down plans or resources here. Now that Mewni is vulnerable after Toffee's invasion, he is absolutely up to something big."

"Okay, I think I get the point, new bad guy to take down. After what Toffee threw at us, me and Star can conquer anything!" Marco stated confidently, which only made Dipper and Pacifica look nervous. Focusing on Star, he added "And if you want to talk to monsters, Star's your girl. She once babysat a whole clutch of them. So, what's our game plan Star?"

The normally energetic princess just looked nervous however, twiddling a bit of blond hair while reservedly explaining "Well, to be honest, I don't know. I mean, I do want to make things better for monsters, and sometimes it seems like I'm the only person in the Kingdom who does, but aside from Buff Frog I don't actually know too many of them personally, and I think I might have gotten him banished. Maybe. I'm definitely not sure if he's actually the monster expert or not right now." Then, she let out a frustrated groan. "The problem is that nobody can just talk to each other about anything! Mom and Buff Frog actually got along great once they actually sat down and spoke to each other like normal people! If we could just get some dialogue going between these groups the monsters might just hand Bill over!"

"So what if we GET everyone talking together! Put together something BIG that will capture the interests of mewmans and monsters alike, and have them bond over mutual interest!" Dipper declared, slamming his right fist into his left palm in realization. "What about... some kind of live, dramatic broadcast! A breaking news story about the cutest, most sympathy inducing baby we can find being kidnapped! We can have a desperate search, sad interviews with the parents, a couple of dramatic twists and turns with a few red herrings, get people out and volunteering to search the wilds and stuff, it'll be great! People will bond over the collective drama!"

Everyone else at the table was quiet for a long moment, wearing looks of confusion while Dipper had an expectant expression on his face. Finally, Pacifica broke the silence by slapping him on the back of the head. "OW! What the heck Paz?" he whined, before verbally elaborating. "The baby wouldn't be in any danger, we'd be the ones who kidnapped it! It'd be perfectly safe, and then to wrap everything up, we'd frame... eh... we'd frame that Higgs girl you told me about."

"Dipper." Pacifica said, using a very serious, very stern tone of voice with him. "You know that I love you, and one of the reasons I love you is that you're brilliant, but that is one of the worst ideas I have ever heard in my life. That sounds like a plan MABEL would come up, only with your inclination for large numbers of interconnected steps and rigged, multilayer organization added in."

Rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish look on his face, Dipper seemed to be reconsidering his idea in earnest, muttering "I was trying to reach the lowest common denominator you know..." when Marco spoke up and said "You know, he might be on to something." quickly earning him confused looks from everyone else, including Dipper. "I mean, I mean the base idea, of bringing everyone together over some common interest. The stuff about the kidnapping is absolutely insane, I agree." The newest arrival from Earth then backpedaled. "But if we had some kind of common interest that could bring mewmans and monsters together on friendly terms, maybe we could make some progress."

The whole table sat in silent thought for a minute, until Star spoke up. "What about... a party?" She asked, getting blinks from the rest of the table before continuing with "You know, little get together, dancing, music, free food. If we could get some famous people from both sides to show up, they'd draw in others, and then everyone would be under one roof having a good time."
Appreciative nods emerged from the other three sitting at the table, with Marco in particular beaming with pride at Star, which made her blush a little. However, when her boyfriend starting speaking, she frowned a little, just enough to not be noticeable. "We'll have to get started right away on this, we need to find a venue, get people invited, get food ready, the lists alone will probably take me a whole afternoon to plan out..."

"Uh, Marco?" Star asked sheepishly, a blush spreading out from her hearts. "I really appreciate the enthusiasm, but I think it'd be for the best if we wait a little, maybe a day or two until I can talk this over with mom. At least let me get this all clear with her before we set any details in stone. You know, don't want the knights or whoever ruining things with a surprise raid or whatever. Ask her to focus her attention away from the monsters, give us time to build a little good will."

Marco's expression fell at these words from Star, but he quickly nodded in agreement, finding her idea logical. "Yeah, that makes sense." He said, before lifting his tea cup to his mouth only to realize he'd never actually filled it with tea. Setting it down with a disappointed look, Marco then looked at the other two humans at the table. "Dipper, Pacifica, do you think you could explain to me, well, what's the deal with you two? I mean, what's going on with you two, how are you even here, exactly? Do more people on earth know about... all this?"

Dipper opened his mouth up, planning to take the questions as they came, but Pacifica cut him off first. "Let me answer your second question first, since that answer is actually very simple: No, as far as we know, the Pines family and myself are the only people researching the supernatural on our scale. We do it mostly in secret, but I know Doctor Pines does dream of going public." She explained succinctly, before her boyfriend answered the first question. "As for how it all started, well, it began when our parents decided me and my sister Mabel, she's actually back on earth right now... guarding the portal. Anyways, our parents thought we needed more fresh air, so they sent us north to spend the summer with our great uncle Stan, but things didn't really start to get weird until I found this old book in the woods..."

From there, Dipper and Pacifica spent awhile describing that fateful summer to the princess and her boyfriend, Star listening with wide eyed, rapt attention while Marco was more prone to looks of concern and fright. It was a skimming over of the whole story, but included all the critical points such as the twins' battles against Bill Cipher, their early meetings and eventual friendships with Pacifica, and Ford returning from the portal, which Marco became quiet and focused on. When the subject of Weirdmaggedon came up, however... both Dipper and Pacifica became abruptly sullen, keeping the retelling of things down to "Eventually, Bill Cipher found a way into our dimension. He did a lot of terrible things to the people of the town, but eventually the Grunkles worked out a way to trick and destroy him, or at least, we thought they had. Well they did, but he had a way to come back, as it turns out. So now we're hunting him down before he musters the strength to attack again." Letting out a sigh and starting to smile again, the boy finished with "And from there, I decided to take up my great uncle Ford's offer and study with him. We've been working to learn more about the supernatural, and fix everything Bill broke, ever since."

Pacifica did her best to not show her tell as Dipper was talking, taking a sip from an actually full cup of tea and looking downwards when Dipper talked about Ford first making him the offer than changed his life, and doing so again when he talked about the start of Weirdmaggedon. "If he doesn't want to explain Mabel's part in that, then that's his decision." she thought to herself.

Star had gotten a little bored midway through, not finding the other boy's adventures all that extraordinary compared to her own life but continued to pay attention out of politeness. Marco on the other hand, just looked amazed. "And all of that was just, what a couple hours drive up from California? I mean I was surprised to find out I'd visited there on vacation once, but to know all that sort of stuff was going down while I was wishing for a little more danger in my life back in Echo
The name actually made Dipper perk up in surprise. "Do you go to a school called Echo Creek Academy?" He asked curiously, causing an equally surprised Marco to nod his head vigorously while both blonds leaned in to pay attention, curious at the implications of this. "Well, like I said, Mabel and I were going to be starting high school when that summer ended, and Echo Creek was always "the other school" that our parents didn't want to send us to. It's been so long since I've thought about that but you just sparked my memory."

"That's crazy." Marco exhaled, clearly boggled by how close their lives and the supernatural all came to crossing over. "That's, I mean, I don't mean this as an insult man, but your whole life is crazy!" The latino boy exclaimed, getting louder and more excited the more he talked, though the warmth in his voice actually kept Dipper from feeling disheartened by this words. "You were like, destined for adventure dude! You've got a mysterious, secret family history with fake relatives and deep rooted conspiracies, a family home hiding great magical power... you've even got cool magical markings, hey, sort of like Star!" Marco spoke the last bit with a tone of realization to his voice, having just made the comparison between Dipper's forehead mark and Star's cheeks as he said that. Then, slumping into his chair, Marco finished with "And I could have met you at a football game, had things been a little different."

Dipper's eyebrows scrunched up at Marco's mention of his birthmark, but taking into account the earlier words of his girlfriend and the friendliness with which Marco had spoke, Dipper quickly shoved this feeling off, feeling remarkably light inside after he did. "Well, it's not magic Marco. Even after I came to Gravity Falls and started studying the supernatural it's never done anything cool in my life. Not like Star's, which, uh..." he played off jokingly, prompting the blond mewman to chime up with "They're a mark of the royal family! Yup! Every queen of mewni has her own unique ones!" In a slightly nervous tone the others didn't catch. This made Dipper chuckle a little before responding "See? Nothing like my mark. This is a just a bit of weird flavor to my body that anyone could pick up."

Dipper then relaxed his posture himself, finding Marco friendly and easy to talk to. "So, what about you? How'd you end up on this side of the veil?" He inquired, with a friendly tone rather than his usual suspicion, Pacifica was happy to note.

"Well, nothing quite as dramatic as your story Dipper." Marco explained. "I was just a normal kid whose parents loved to host foreign exchange students and had a reputation for being a safe kid, and as much as I used to dislike that label it'd never want it to be anything different, because as a result they asked me to show Star around when she enrolled in our school midway through the year."

With questioning expressions, Dipper and Pacifica looked at Star, obviously wondering why a magic princess from another dimension had dropped into an American high school. With a shrug, the princess responded "My parents wanted me to train with my wand in a dimension without magic."

"So, yeah, from there, me and Star lived under the same roof and became the best of friends. We fought monsters, traveled to other dimensions, helped each other learn about ourselves, and I think brought out the best in each other." Marco reminisced fondly, getting a smile from Star as well. "We were besties within the first month, and, well, she changed my life. Star brought me out of a rut and helped me live the best life I could." Star's now twinkling eyes waited expectantly for Marco's dark ones to meet them, but he was looking down with a troubled expression, staring at the cup of tea he was gripping with both hands. Regret poured from his posture.

"I... I think I'd developed my own feelings for Star since the beginning, but I didn't actually realize them until yesterday if you can believe it. I had a bunch of different, well, excuses I guess, that I kept
throwing up to block them out or rationalize them, right? She was my family's guest, we were just friends, Jackie was my crush, I wasn't royalty, she'd move away eventually, Star didn't need a hero... and I ended up hurting good people because of them." He admitted with a deep sigh, but then looked up and cracked a weak grin. "But hey, no way I can deny it now, huh? After all, what else but love could make me abandon everyone else I've ever known to travel to an alien world and fight in a war that doesn't involve me?" Then, he looked back down at his cup and sighed again. "I was a real jerk though. I went on and on about the adventures I had gone on and the amazing things the multiverse had to offer like it made me better than everyone, basically telling my girlfriend to her face that I enjoyed the company of this other girl way more than her, and I rationalized to myself that I was just going back for adventures, but I think I just didn't want to admit to myself that, well, I was trying to dump my girlfriend and take off." As if this was a new revelation to Marco, the boy sunk into his chair and looked ashamed. "Aww crap, I'm scum aren't I?"

The princess of mewni had a sort of worried, imminent tears expression on her face, but Dipper ended up being the next person to speak. "Well, maybe maybe not Marco. All those reasons you call excuses could be just as valid." He commented, causing Pacifica to scrunch her eyebrows as she prepared to chastise her boyfriend for saying something emotionally clumsy to the clearly troubled Marco, but then he continued in a sort of serious, emotionally touching tone of voice, indicating he was saying something personal, and she waited, interested. "You see, I think I was much the same as you Marco. I felt a couple of years ago what you felt a day ago when you decided to return to Mewni."

Reaching out to his girlfriend, Dipper almost seemed to comfort her initial angry response to his words by gently cupping her hand in his. "You see, I sort of skimmed over the details of taking up Grunkle Ford's apprenticeship. There was... a lot of troubled feelings involved, because Mabel was going back to California to start high school at the end of the summer, and taking this offer would split us apart. I was friends with Pacifica at this time, but I wasn't in love with her yet. The decision was purely between my sister and my dream." He explained, before removing his hands from his girlfriend's, having done that to impress upon her that he did love her now. He turned his focus from the blond human and onto Marco, giving him a very firm but very empathetic look right into his eyes, offering understanding while trying to analyze everything about his response. "But, it was more than just following a dream or taking up an opportunity, it was more like the choice had already been made for me. I had already come to live in a whole different world than the mundane one I'd come from, and turning great uncle Ford down would just be ineffectually running from it. I think we're kinda the same in that way." Dipper continued, feeling himself connect to the boy in the red hoodie, who had an appreciating glimmer to his eyes as the apprentice spoke. "You and I Marco, we've had our horizons expanded, our experiences made us realize the universe is bigger and stranger than most people know, and after an experience like that couldn't just go back to living dull, regular lives. You said something before about having wanted danger in your life before you met Star, right?" He suddenly asked, seeming to change topics.

"Yeah, I did." Marco answered, nodding his head. "I've always wanted some action, some excitement in my life, that's why I dedicated myself to learning karate, but just because I wanted that didn't mean I was going to take stupid risks!" He exclaimed, throwing his arms out in a frustrated gesture as a rant he'd clearly put prior thought into emerged. "I mean, crossing the street without looking both ways isn't an adventure, it's just a way to get killed!" Then, he let out a frustrated sigh. "But of course, since there were a lot more crosswalks than ninja cults in Echo Creek before Star arrived, I got labeled the safe kid."

"Exactly! I felt something similar before I came to Gravity Falls. I was always wondering if there was more out there then just normal life, and in Gravity Falls, there is. It's why I knew I had to stay there, it felt right like nowhere else ever did." Dipper explained, putting to words long felt sensations.
"Marco, I can't comment on if you handled your girlfriend badly or not, maybe you did, maybe you didn't, I wasn't there so I don't really have a right to provide commentary. But, no matter how it ended, maybe it was just important that it did. I still have some regrets about the exact ways me and my sister separated, but if I had to choose again..." He continued, but abruptly his sentence caught, delayed for just a moment, before he continued almost seamlessly ",...I'd do it again. That stage of my life had come to an end, and I think yours did as well Marco. It's like growing up, the world changes around you and you have to embrace it in order to be true to yourself."

Looking back to his girlfriend, Dipper's words got even more of a reassuring tone. "Before, back during the first summer, I had a different crush, on someone older than me. If I wanted to, I could simply wait until we're both at ages where the gap between those two numbers doesn't mean anything, but as I grew towards that age and my world changed, so did my heart. No one gets to decide who they or anyone else loves, after all. One of the many reasons I came to love Pacifica was because she was a part of that new world I was maturing into, where I could reach and achieve the things I only dreamed about as a child."

Despite his intentions, Dipper was starting to lose track of his attempt to reassure Marco, as he and Pacifica gradually got lost in each other's eyes. When Dipper spoke again, his voice was a little more dazed. "You are a part of all that Pacifica, a part of my dream, the world in which I finally find fulfillment. You accept and understand and embrace this new world that I'm eager to explore, and I want to explore it with you. What we have wouldn't have worked between me and someone who is disconnected from the wonder of the world, we'd just have... so little... in common..."

The two had gradually leaned closer and closer to each other as Dipper's words, which were now loosely running from his lips, seemingly beyond his control, seemed to entrance Pacifica, causing the blond human to hang off every one. The run on dialogue was eventually stopped when the two surged forward at the exact same time, locking lips together over the tea table, both reaching to hold the other's face and neither caring as they clattered the plates and cups below them. Star and Marco scooted back in their chairs with surprise, but after a moment, Star's eyes got lidded and her face a little red while she silently cheered Pacifica on with an encouraging expression, while Marco just continued to look shocked. Both couldn't help but watch the other two teenagers eat the other's face, but after the expected amount of time had passed and the two were still kissing, both looked up with bewildered expressions.

Star looked at Marco with a raised eyebrow and a bewildered expression that seemed to ask "When are they going to stop?" to which Marco in response silently threw up his hands and shoulders as if to say back "I don't know, they're your friends!" The tan skinned boy did his best to look away while Star gave the steadily more intertwined mass a curious, hand on the chin look of pondering as they both climbed further up the table, then pointed to the door with a sideways bounce of her head, which Marco hastily shook his own in agreement to. By all indications, Dipper and Pacifica hadn't heard them leave.

As all of the above was happening in the sunlit world of Mewni, Prince Tom brooded within the infernal Castle Lucitor, seated at his desk and doing the young royal equivalent to homework. His father had given him a mailing list of relevant nobles who needed to be given an update following the disastrous Silver Bell Ball, as well as a short summary of how the letter should be intoned: Some should be formal, some should be flirty, some casual and others apologetic, and a select few condemning. Whatever King Dave thought the noble in question would respond to best is what that noble heard and of course, none of them truly took responsibility for the events of that night.

The work was slow going however, even with consideration given this being the sort of project that takes a few days to complete. The only letters he'd written so far that Tom felt any passion about writing were the first two he had made, that were directed to two unlisted recipients and were slipped
inside the first batch of completed dispatches that the steward had come to collect. From there on out, the prince was simply producing letters to people he didn't know or care about which said things he didn't truly think or feel.

And of course, his mood wasn't helped by his damn mirror going off every couple of seconds.

Bing

Despite the chime itself being a perfectly soft, melodious tone, the event it signified as having occurred was enough to cause the formal quill Tom was holding in his hand to crack where his fingers pinched it and the feathers to burst into flames. After quickly blowing the embers away from his parchment, Tom discarded the writing implement with a sigh, tossing it into a wastebasket overflowing with similar quill and pulling a fresh one from a nearby crate of them.

When Prince Tom's magical mirror phone of communication and wonder made that noise it meant one of the several curses he'd discreetly planted on Marco Diaz was being triggered, and this one in particular was the curse that alerted Tom whenever the boy from earth said Star's name. "Maybe Brian is right and this whole thing is an unnecessary stress source. Maybe I should turn the alert off and just review the day's events while in a calm, stabilized..."

Bing

This time, Tom's head turned rapidly to look over his shoulder as the alarm went off again. "That's the shortest time between hits I've heard in months." He said aloud to himself, in surprise. The air in the prince's chambers was dead still for a long moment, and then...

Bing

Third eye twitching, Tom took a deep breath and turned back to the project assigned to him by his father. "He's... probably just talking about Star with his parents or something." Becoming more calm, he continued talking to himself, hypothesizing that "Yeah, they probably just found like a sock or something that she lost and thus didn't take with her when she left earth forever and that turns into talking about memories and good times and..."

Bing

Confident in his newly developed explanation, Tom gave himself a small smile as he completely ignored the newest alert...

Bing

...only to freeze up completely and gain a flat facial expression when a new one went off just seconds afterwards in a way that defied the patterns of normal conversation.

Bing bing bing bing bing bing bing bing bing

Tom's whole body was on fire before he'd even completely jumped out of his chair, kicking it into the wall as he spun around the face the magic communicator with his three, now burning and soulless looking, eyes which were coursing with rage at the conclusion he'd jumped to, only for the burning rage to instantly be snuffed out and be replaced with a more grumpy discontent when he saw his mirror phone was active and just who it was on the line.

"Hello, Bill. I suppose a good reason for you having not just called me like a normal person is too much to expect?" Tom asked, making his annoyance undoubtedly clear as the curse alert noise stopped completely, and the triangular true form of Bill Cipher was being displayed on the reflective
"ON ONE TENTACLE, I'M TRANSMITTING MY MENTAL PROJECTION TO YOUR MIRROR PHONE INSTEAD OF CALLING YOU NORMALLY BECAUSE MY HOST BODY IS IN A COMATOSE HEAP ALONGSIDE ALL THESE MONSTERS AFTER THEY DECIDED WE SHOULD CELEBRATE THE WEAPONS DELIVERY WITH SOME TRADITIONAL PSYCHOACTIVE HERBS AND FUNGUS. ON THE OTHER GRASPING INHUMAN LIMB OF THE ABYSS, THAT WAS REALLY FUNNY!"

Tom looked the mirror surface up and down, annoyed but not particularly surprised by the dapperly dressed yellow triangle floating in a purple void and brightening when he spoke. "How are you able to do this again?" He asked while rubbing his temples.

"WELL LIKE I SAID, I'M INSIDE A BRAIN COOKED OUT ON PSYCHEDELICS AND THAT HELPS BOOST THE SIGNAL TRANSMISSION, BUT THE MAIN REASON I CAN DO THIS WAS THE LAST SYSTEMS UPDATE THIS THING HAD. IT WAS ALL IN THE TERMS OF AGREEMENT THAT CAME WITH THE UPDATE, AND I KNOW YOU ALWAYS READ THAT, RIGHT HORNS?" Bill explained, a faint tone of mockery entering his voice.

The prince of the underworld let out a frustrated sigh. "What are you doing here Bill? This better be important because I'm in the middle of a lot of boring prince work right now."

"JUST FULFILLING MY DUTY AS YOUR SOCIETY'S TRADITIONAL DEITY OF MESSAGES AND HOPE HORNS! I'VE JUST RECENTLY HEARD SOMETHING I THINK YOU'D BE VERY INTERESTED IN!" Bill explained, but then went silent and didn't say anything as Tom just stood there, slowly looking more confused and uncomfortable.

"Well?" Tom asked abruptly after enough time had passed. "What's the news?"

"I MEAN I WASN'T GOING TO TELL YOU, BUT WHAT THE HECK, YOU'VE BEEN A GOOD BOY, I'LL FILL YOU IN!" Bill explained, causing Tom to slap his face in realization he'd walked into one of the demon's jokes. Onscreen, Bill's yellow brick body shifted through images as he spoke again, first showing a Bigfoot hiding behind a tree, the pyramids of Egypt, an ace of spades playing card, a flying saucer, crop circles, a pie cooling in a window, and a dark city alley where every surface on the buildings and the power lines above head were covered in pigeons.

"THE WHOLE BUTTERFLY WEB OF ALLIES, COLLABORATORS, RACE TRAITORS AND ECONOMIC PARTNERS IS ABOUT TO HAVE A VERY BAD DAY. THE UNDERWORLD HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN THIS PARTNERSHIP, AND AFTER THE BALL A LOT OF THE OTHER TRIBUTARY KINGDOMS ARE WONDERING IF THEY'RE GONNA HAVE TO PICK BETWEEN YOU TWO, AND A LOT OF THE BETTER OFF MONSTER POPULATIONS ARE WONDERING IF THEY'LL BE ABLE TO GET IN ON THIS! POP QUIZ HORNS, WHOSE THE NEWEST ADDITION TO MEWNI AND COMPANY?"

"Uh..." Tom wondered as it felt like Bill's single eye was drilling a hole in him and he tried to recollect the princely lessons he'd always been disinterested in. Though there was no more noise in the room and the shifting images on Bill's body stayed on the city alley, giving the impression of a computer that had frozen up in the face of missing information. Unfortunately though, the only vassal kingdom of Mewni whose name could even come to mind for Tom was the one whose crown princess had bitten him about a day or so ago. "...The Ponyheads?"

The air between them was silent again for almost a minute, Bill's single eye and pyramid shaped
"IT'S FUNNY HOW STUPID YOU ARE." Bill stated in his normal tone of voice after letting Tom sweat a little. The prince let out a sigh of relief and the images on Bill's body continued to cycle as he resumed talking, showing a skull with a pentagram painted onto the cranium, a ripped spiderweb, a giant screen of repeating words and a giant bald face on it overlooking a plaza, a two headed cow, discarded socks sitting in a rain gutter, a monarch butterfly fluttering through a horrific forest fire, a pizza truck, and a radio telescope. "THE PIGEONS HORNS. THE PIGEONS ARE THE WEAK LINK!"

"Oh, right, the Pigeon Kingdom! Yeah, now that you've said that they are the newest addition to the tributaries, right?" Tom responded with realization, then his face crunched up in uncertainty. "But, they're just birds. Birds that walk around on power legs... and have money, somehow? Ugh, now I wish I paid more attention to my royal tutors... what am I saying, this is pointless! How are they the weak link to me getting Star!?"

"DO YOU WANT ME TO GET THE HANDPUPPETS OR CAN I JUST WALK YOU THROUGH THIS?" Bill asked, but after a moment of silence simply launched into his explanation. "THE DECAPITATED UNICORNS ARE USELESS AND YOU CAN'T MAKE TOOLS FROM USELESS JUNK. THE WILDLANDERS WILL NEVER BREAK FROM QUEEN WANE, THE FISHWALKERS ARE COMFORTABLE WITH THEIR TRADE CONTRACTS AND THE ARACHNOPHOBES ARE CONFLICT AVERSE BY NATURE. BUT THE BIRDS HORNS..."

A new image flashed on Bill's body, showing a pile of skulls with an innocuous looking bird sitting on top of it. "THEY ARE RUTHLESS, DETERMINED TO GET AHEAD AT ANY COST, AND HAD TO BUY A CONTENTIOUS SEAT AT THE CORN TABLE. A LOT FOLK AREN'T HAPPY ABOUT THIS AND THE RIGHT TOUCH IN THE RIGHT PLACE COULD TIP THINGS IN ANY WHICH WAY!"

"You know what I'm not hearing in this conversation is how this puts me any closer to Star." Tom asked, clearly annoyed.

"WELL THE PROBLEM IS ONE OF HEARTS HATES YOU HORNS, SO YOUR ONLY CHANCE TO HIT IT OFF WITH HER AGAIN YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO BRING HER TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, AND TO DO THAT..." Bill explained, his body finally shifting back to normal.

Tom was quiet for a moment, a hesitant look on his face. "Bill, are you sure this is the best way to go about this?" He asked, then quickly added "I mean, if we try and meddle and things don't work, that's just going to turn more kingdoms against us. Maybe we could just let this divide happen naturally, it's not like Mewmans actually respect us in any way. We could turn the other kingdoms against them without all this weapons smuggling which carries some very heavy risks if we get found out."

"KID, WHERE'D THIS ALL COME FROM? WHERE'S THE TOM I KNOW AND LOVE, THE SNEAKY, MANIPULATIVE CHARMER WITH AN ANGER MANAGEMENT BUNNY AND THE BEST POKER FACE IN THE UNDERWORLD!?" Bill asked, leaning back on nothing in the void he was floating in. "LOOK, YOU CAN TRUST ME ON THIS HORNS, I WAS AT YOUR BAPTISM! I SUGGEST THESE SCHEMES TO YOU AND YOUR FATHER BECAUSE YOU NEED THEM! THE QUEENS OF MEWNI HAVEN'T USED THE MAGIC WAND TO ITS FULL POTENTIAL FOR GENERATIONS..." Bill explained, as one
more image flashed across his body extremely quickly, the guarded, mysterious face of the dark queen as depicted on her tapestry. "...BUT BEING BACKED INTO A CORNER MIGHT BE JUST THE MOTIVATION THEY NEED! IF YOU TRY AND BEAT THEM FAIR AND SQUARE, THEY'LL JUST FLIP THE TABLE AND MAKE UP NEW RULES. THE ONLY WAY TO WIN IS TO BEAT THEM THEIR WAY, FIRST!"

The prince of demons held his chin in his hand, taking Bill's words into consideration and finding that they made sense, remembering an old conversation with Marco. The passing thought of the earth boy threatened to make his blood boil, but Tom quickly suppressed it. "THAT BLOOD MOON BALL IS A PERFECT METAPHOR FOR THE SITUATION BETWEEN YOUR KINGDOMS, YOU KNOW." Bill spoke up, causing Tom to glance at him with a frown. "AS SOON AS ONE OF HEARTS GOT TIRED OF INTERACTING WITH YOU, SHE PUT YOU ON ICE AND WALKED AWAY. ALL YOUR POWER, ALL YOUR INDUSTRY, IS USELESS BEFORE THE TRUE POTENTIAL OF THE WAND. THE ONLY WAY TO MAKE HER STAY IS TO CLAIM THE WAND FOR DEMON KIND!"

Finally, Tom nodded in agreement. "Alright, all that makes sense. So, what's the full plan you have in mind Bill?"

"CAN'T EXPLAIN AT THE MOMENT, BODY IS WAKING UP SOON. DON'T WORRY, MY NEW HENCHMANIACS WILL BE ARRIVING AT YOUR CASTLE SOON AND WILL FILL YOU IN ON ALL THE DETAILS." Bill answered. "IN THE MEANTIME, I'VE GOT A MAGIC LESSON FOR YOU."

On cue, the door to the prince's room was thrown open and in strode a large but vacant eyed demon, a hulking purple figure with flat features crammed into a tuxedo. Moving with none of the tact or respect you'd expect from someone in the quarters of royalty, the demon gingerly carried a glass, corked bottle with a red ribbon wrapped around the neck gingerly, in-between two large, meaty hands. Delicately, they set the bottle down on Tom's desk, then turned around and left just as silently.

"THANKS GRIMSLY!" Bill called out, prompting the demon to raise their right hand up to make the "OK" symbol with his thumb and fingers, resulting in the raised limb knocking off some of the door frame as it ran into the upper part of the portal. "ANYWAYS, CONNECTIONS BREAKING UP, JUST DRINK THE BOTTLE AND YOU'LL UNDERSTAND THE NEXT PART OF THE PLANTHE MULTIVERSE IS DYING ROYALITY IS AN ILLUSION BUY PUDDING!"

The mirror phone suddenly fizzled out as if it were out of power, causing Tom to blink all three eyes in confusion before opting to let it sit deactivated for awhile. He then turned them over to the bottle. Turning it over in his hands and finding no markings of any kind on it, he popped the cork and was instantly entranced by the strange, shimmering light of gold coming from inside.

"Something about this feels familiar." His distorting mind thought to itself as the fumes rose from the bottle and enveloped his face, before his bent his head back and began chugging the bottle. "Tastes like... tastes like what I always imagined Star would taste like..."

"Okay, so, picking up from where we were before things got freaking weird..."

It was starting to get dark by now, the many moons of Mewni beginning to shine bright in the sky as Star and Marco sat down on a blanket, the royal castle visible from atop their hill as it broke the distant skyline. This was to be the last place the princess took her new boyfriend today, a sterling hike through the cooling auburn evening followed by some romantic time under the night sky, after which they could return by scissor portal. The two had chatted casually while hiking the blanket through the hills, but now that they were settled in, Marco wanted to pick up their serious conversation from the tea table.
"...what's going to happen to me, now that I'm here Star?" He asked, a conversational and contently worn out tone to Marco's voice after the trip, but an undercurrent of worry present nonetheless. "How do I fit into this situation you've got going on right now?"

"Maaaarcoooo, let's not worry about that right now!" Star responded, putting on a playfully whiny voice as she buried her face into Marco's neck, freely nuzzling against him. The boy was still surprised by these sudden shows of affection, but had gotten much more used to them over the day. "You'll be what you've always been, what you were meant to be: My awesome bestie, except, well, now you're my boy bestie... bestie... boy?" She tried to reassure, only sound a little unsure at the end. "Gotta workshop that out..."

The boy from earth couldn't help but chuckle at this, the familiar humor of the princess shining through. After a moment though, his own expression became more somber. "Sorry Star, it's just... I'm a little lost right now. I mean, this, all this, with you, it all feels good, getting in touch with my feelings and admitting that I love you, but, well, I had a plan before coming here and now it's completely in shreds."

Looking up at him in curiosity, Star found herself asking "That's right, you said something about becoming a knight, right?"

"Right." Marco answered with a tone of uncertainty, discreetly scratching the back of his neck. "I, ugh, I really don't know what I was thinking when I told everyone on earth I was going to be a knight, to be honest. Well, no, I know exactly what I was thinking, I was trying to not admit to myself that I wanted to come back to you and that we'd just be platonic adventure buddies. The only time we'd really talked about knights or anything before was during that whole Mewnipendence Day thing, and that, well, that was one of the few times I was seriously questioning my feelings for you."

Realizing this conversation couldn't be avoided, Star withdrew from Marco's chest to sit across from him and look him right in the eyes. "What do you mean Marco?" She asked, a little nervous but determined to confront this.

"Well, back then Star, your attitude towards monsters, well, made me a little uncomfortable." He admitted, before explaining that "We've had situations like this on earth you know, and it wasn't pleasant there either. If you'd kept up like that, I don't know if my feelings for you could have survived, but my gut was steering me the right when it told me there was still a good, beautiful soul that had the potential to treat everyone equally inside you, ready to shine through."

Star smiled back appreciatively at this, a deep, genuine warm feeling evident on her face as she responded "I mean, it never would have shined through without you. You tried to change my perspective for the first time with Lobster Claws, and like with everything you just banged your head against the problem until you knocked it down." She said with a giggle, but then, more nervously, added that "And now, here I am! Gonna try and mend a divide older than anyone even knows with a party. How things change, huh Marco?"

The boy could tell the girl in front of him was still nervous, and despite her eager attitude when they'd talked about it earlier, Star clearly knew what kind of challenge she was undertaking and the pressures associate with it. In an attempt to reassure her, Marco spoke again, sounding firm and resolute. "Star, I know earlier I said I wanted to be a knight, but... that's changed. I know Dipper explained that my other reasons probably aren't totally fake, but that, well, that was an excuse. I only thought I wanted to be a knight because I wanted to come back and impress you." Reaching out and taking one of Star's hands in both of his, Marco continued, saying "I don't know how this is going to affect things, what with you being a princess and all, but... I can't swear any kind of allegiance to Mewni, as a kingdom, there's a lot wrong with it you know, and if I were to become and act as a
knight I might be complicit in a lot of it." Then however, he pulled her hand to his face and gently nuzzled it. "But, there's a lot of good to this world Star, and you embody all of it, and that I can swear my loyalty to in good conscience. I'm gonna stick by you Star, and do whatever I can to help you do all the wonderful things you set out to do."

Star brought the physical affection one step closer by throwing her arms around Marco's neck in response and nuzzling her own face into his cheek instead of her hand. "Mmmm, Marco." She sighed contently. "Mom probably won't like that but it's more than enough for me." Then, shimming up to his ear, Star whispered her next line to her boyfriend in a much softer, more mischievous tone. "So, your feelings wouldn't have 'survived' if my stance on monsters hadn't changed? That's what you said, yeah? So, how long have you felt this way about me?"

Now looking a little uncomfortable, Marco couldn't help but squirm a bit, but took a deep breath and did his best to give her a straight answer. "Well, it wasn't... you know, love at first sight, I don't think that's real or anything, but I felt a connection to you, from the beginning, when we fought Ludo together for the first time." Both of them smiled at the memory of that first fight, causing Marco to continue with more confidence. "It wasn't love to begin with, it took its sweet time growing into that, and I couldn't really tell you exactly when in time it finally did grow into love, because I'm dense as a brick, but, looking back, it's just so obvious that it did." Looking at her with curiosity, Marco asked "When did you realize you were in love with me?"

"When Toffee kidnapped you." Star answered without hesitation, causing Marco to blush a little at her straightforward response. "I mean, it took me a bit to figure everything out after that, and by then, you were, you know, but as soon as Toffee demanded I destroy the wand or you'd die... I knew things had changed. It... it kind of scared me Marco."

"I mean, that's natural Star. That was a hard choice." Marco did his best to comfort her, but the princess just shook her head in response. "No Marco, I mean it scared me how easy the choice was."

The two were quiet for a long moment together, both taking a moment to look up at the skies to somewhat awkwardly avoid the others face, but simultaneously looked back at each other as they realized that sort of stuff is what had blocked them from dating up until now. Feeling a burst of confidence, Star braced herself and got a burning question off her chest. "Marco, do you regret breaking up with Jackie?"

As expected, this caused a wince to grow on the boy's face, but he didn't respond by becoming hostile or defensive. "Star deserves the truth, and we can work through it together." He thought to himself before answering "Well... I regret dating her in the first place now, because I can see that I was leading her on with a bunch of promises I didn't keep while my heart belonged to someone else. I still think we had a bunch of good times together, but it hurts to look back at them knowing they were causing you to hurt Star. I still think she's a really cool girl and I hope she finds someone who treats her correctly."

The flash of discomfort that went across Star's face when Marco complimented Jackie was suppressed in a moment, but Marco knew the princess well enough to catch it, and his eyes widened in response. "Star, is that what today has been all about?" He asked, a very balanced tone to his question. "The tea set, feeding me fruit, all the touching and hugging and kissing..." the boy ran through, looking at his girlfriend with an air of concern and worry. "...Do you feel like you need to compete with Jackie?"

"...I can't lose you again Marco." Star answered, a desperate tone breaking through as her eyes grew wide and quivered with potential tears, causing Marco's vision to cloud up in response. "It was so
hard at first, when it was just me and I hadn't made my new friends yet. I'd just lay around in bed all
day doing nothing but smelling your hoodie. Then you just pop back into my life, both of us single...
it's felt like a dream so far Marco, and I don't want the dream to end."

At this point, Marco surged forward and wrapped his arms around Star, drawing her into a hug she
returned right away. "I hate seeing you cry Star. It's the saddest thing in the world." He said softly,
but with a sincere intensity. Then, as they drew back a little to look each other in the eyes, he added
"And you don't need to worry about that. We were inseparable even before we realized we were in
love, and nothing is going to change that. You're more than just my girlfriend now Star, you're my
best friend, and you always will be."

The two kissed again, both of them feeling the intense heat lock between them as their mouths
touched. They both ran their arms over the backs of their partner, both wanting to feel the other as
close as possible, but eventually the need for air separated them, and both smiled shyly at the other.

Star chuckled a little bit. "I guess I did go a little overboard today, didn't I?" She asked with a
nervous, apologetic but somewhat playful tone.

"Hey, I never said I didn't like all that stuff, just that you were laying it on a little thick." Marco
replied in a sly tone of voice, getting another giggle out of his girlfriend. "I just don't want you to
stress yourself out feeling like you need to win me, or like, bribe me with physical affection or
something. I'm here for you Star, through the good and the bad. We can get through so much more
together than we could alone."

The princess of mewni beamed back at her boyfriend, a confident smile energizing her face enough
to make Marco smile along with her. "Yeah, yeah we can. Man, I don't know what I was worrying
about earlier, all these crises?" She asked rhetorically before making a raspberry sound. "We'll
conquer them together, right Marco!?"

"Right Star." Marco answered, before his voice turned inquisitive. "Now, first step in all that would
be knowing about these crises of course. You've been dodging the issue all day."

Star couldn't help but get a playfully nervous expression that confirmed this idea, folding some of her
blond hair over her shoulder and rubbing it while speaking evasively. "I mean, it's like you said, I
was just trying to lay it on really thick to convince you to stay my boyfriend. I didn't want all that
political junk to sour the mood." She explained, before taking a more regretful and genuinely
pleading tone. "But, really Marco, is it okay if I fill you in tomorrow? Most of the day has already
gone by and I'd hate to let our little date here be wasted, and when I talk to you about what's been
happening, it's going to bring the mood down."

Smiling gently, Marco responded with an accepting "Alright then, one more carefree evening under
the night sky." Then, he said in a more playful tone "Though you know, we didn't have to go hiking
all this way if you wanted to do some stargazing. After all, I'm looking the most beautiful star of all
right now."

Marco instantly wanted to slap himself for how cheesy that sounded as soon as he finished the
sentence, but Star's reaction belayed that instinct: She was hopping up and down in her sitting
position with excitement, clapping her hands together with her eyes closed and her cheek hearts
aglow. The boy just smiled a little instead. "You brought me out here just so I'd use that line on you,
huh Star?"

"Maaaaaybe!" Star replied while giggling. "I've been trying to impress you all day you know, maybe
I wanted you here, under all these other stars, so I'd look better by comparison." This made Marco
laugh in return, and soon enough the two closer than friends were happily passing the time together
under the sprawling night sky, enjoying casual banter with each other both had once feared was gone for ever.

Back at the castle, the door to the magic boosted living chambers of the trio of humans burst open, followed by Pacifica and Dipper sauntering into the room, still kissing each other. Dipper kicked the door shut behind him, staying focused on the lip lock, but realization suddenly burst across his features and motivated him to release and shout out "Grunkle Ford!" in preemptively apologetic shock. Pacifica, previously looking annoyed, got a similar look of shocked, surprised revelation as she was being cradled, dipped somewhat low, in the arms of the apprentice.

However, the room offered no response to this yell, and indeed sat very quiet. Both teenagers scanned the room thoroughly, but there was no sign of the six fingered scientist. "Great uncle Ford? Are you around here?" The boy called out with some trepidation at the seemingly empty room.

"Dipper, over here!" Called out Pacifica. The blond had opted to check the work desk where Ford had most likely conducted the experiment he'd mentioned last time the two had seen him, and while she didn't find any evidence such an experiment had happened, there was a note waiting on the desk.

Gone out for a bit. Following a lead. Probably won't be back until morning.

-Stanford

The two teens held the quickly scribbled note between them for a long moment, trying to make sense of the thing. It would explain where Stanford had gone, but it was unusually sparse and crude in comparison to his usual writings. After sharing a look with his girlfriend, Dipper walked over to his bag of supplies and removed a small black light flashlight from it. A quick scan of the paper revealed more writing on the back of the note.

Glad you remember our security measures. No need to worry about me. Sleep tight.

"Well, that's a little more reassuring. No one else knows about this second layer of messaging we use with each other, though I'm surprised he didn't explain his lead more in the invisible ink..." Dipper mused, looking hard at the paper with a hand on his chin before casting a quick look in Pacifica's direction. "Well, no one else but you now." He stated casually, causing the blond girl to blush a little at how casually Dipper accepted her into one of his secrets.

"Maybe that experiment he mentioned have him the lead he mentioned?" Pacifica posited, causing Dipper to warily nod his head. "That makes sense." He said, finding it logical but unable to shake some emotional uncertainty about the situation. "I mean, it makes sense he wouldn't want to let the trail go cold, and great uncle Ford's always been a night owl, so this all makes sense. I'm sure he's fine." The apprentice stated, before adding "I'm sorry for ruining the mood Paz."

"What!? Oh, no, Dipper, no need to apologize for that, it's perfectly natural to feel worried now, I feel worried too." The human girl answered quickly, though she did blush a little as their previous activities came back to her mind after the sudden loss of Ford had pushed them away entirely. Across from her, Dipper was blushing two for the same reasons.

"Oh, OK, good to know. Guess we just need to pass the night then, wait for him to come back tomorrow." Dipper stated awkwardly, getting a curt nod from Pacifica. The two were silent again for a long moment, before in a tone of admittance, Dipper burst out "Pacifica I'm sorry, things got way out of control back there, I shouldn't have..."

"Dipper I will not have you putting yourself down over this." The blond human cut him off with a suddenly strict tone of voice that was enough to make the human boy's mouth snap shut mid
sentence. "I was enjoying myself just as much as you were back there, you didn't do anything wrong. You're both a perfect gentleman and an excellent kisser." Pacifica deliberately put on a tone of authority to say this, despite not having much other kissing experience to compare this to. However, her efforts worked despite this.

Dipper scratched the back of his head as his face lit up, feeling like the compliments were coming up and battering him with their positive reinforcement. "Wow, thanks Paz. You know, you were pretty good too."

This caused Pacifica's expression, which had shifted to arms crossed, eyes closed and haughty despite her significant blush to get noticeably flustered as her eyes opened and she got even redder. "Well, I mean, I don't actually have any experience with that activity, so like most things it must simply come naturally." She spoke, getting a laugh out of Dipper with her playful arrogance.

"Hey, well, same here." He admitted, chuckling nervously now. Looking at the floor for a moment, he added that "I mean, I think that's why things went as crazy as they did back there. I mean, yes we've kissed already, back in the library, but this was really my first time like, really making out, you know? It just sort of hit me all at once that this was happening and I wanted more, I guess."

"Well, once again we're in the same boat, because that's really close to how I felt." Pacifica responded, getting a surprised look from Dipper before she harshly admitted that "Look, I didn't get a lot of physical affection growing up and you're my first boyfriend, so just the feeling of having you so close, sharing your... warmth, with me, it made me feel good. Like, really, REALLY good." As she said this, the human girl stepped closer to his boyfriend, who was now looking towards the floor with a blush and a soft smile on his face, feeling proud about making Pacifica feel that way despite himself.

"I, uh, had never really thought about that. Glad to have helped out." Dipper replied, a little nervously but still fairly composed even as Pacifica got closer to him. "You did a really good job making me feel good as well, P...Paz. I liked you knew when to take the lead, how could could kiss me hard sometimes and soft others, and, well... you're really beautiful, so of course that helps."

Her sultry steps towards Dipper stopped in place as now Pacifica was staring at her feet as well, floored and touched by the compliment. "...Thank you Dipper." She said after a moment. "I... you know I haven't felt very beautiful for awhile now." This statement seemed to stun the boy but she continued explaining before he could comment. "I know, I know, I remember you and Mabel showed me to value more than just my physical beauty, but... it's a lot like your birthmark. I spent my whole life with the best clothes, the best cosmetics and the best beauty treatment and as much as there was a hollow aspect to it... it did feel good, you know? I mean I can tell from how hard you were kissing me back there that you think I'm beautiful, and I shouldn't but so much value on that anyways... but it still feels weird." She admitted with a sigh. "I'm sorry, this all must sound really shallow and..."

Pacifica was abruptly silenced by Dipper closing the gap between them and giving her a hug, a long and warm one at that, trying to gently reassure her. "It's okay Pacifica. I understand." He spoke softly, causing her to closer her eyes and wrap her arms around him in return. "Like you said, it's like my birth mark. When something like that is a part of your identity for so long, you feel a certain emotional weight about it, even when it doesn't make sense or you know you should ignore those negative feelings. And, for what it's worth, I still think you're beautiful even without all that stuff."

"Thank you Dipper. That does make me feel a lot better." Pacifica admitted, before getting a bit of a sly expression and shooting back. "You know, you're pretty handsome yourself."

"Alright, now you're just trying to flatter me." Dipper answered in a playfully dismissive tone and a
"I'm serious Dipper." She said, putting her hands on her boyfriend's shoulders. "Growing up has been good for you. Your just strong and solid enough to be comforting without being overbearing, your face makes the best expressions, I like your messy hair, I think your birth mark is cute like I said earlier, and your eyes..." she admitted, looking deep into the orbs in question. "They show off your whole personality. Bright, intelligent and curious, fierce but compassionate." She explained in a voice that took Dipper's breath away.

"Wow... t...thanks Pacifica, I've never really had anyone complement me like that." Dipper admitted nervously, then ran his hand through his girlfriend's long blond hair. "I love how soft and luscious your hair is, I think you've got an awesome body, and well, I appreciate how sharp you are, you know? Sharp mind, sharp wits, sharp sense of humor... it makes you a blast to hang out with, I'm happy to be able to talk to someone who keeps up with everything I'm saying, and it makes it easier to bear when we're both feeling the same frustrations at the world." The boy explained, gradually getting more lost in Pacifica's eyes until he leaned in to kiss her, but was abruptly stopped by her palm on his lips.

"Not here." She said, grabbing Dipper by the collar and dragging him towards the couch. "My feet are getting tired."

"Oh, yeah, sure thing!" He answered, and soon the two were willingly sitting side by side on the couch, a sudden awkwardness between them as they realized how far they were going. Scratching the back of his head again, Dipper soon suggested with a nervous laugh "Look, maybe we should just watch a movie or something. I can boot up my laptop, and I'm pretty sure Star left us a magic bell to summon room service somewhere around here..."

"I'd like that Dipper." Pacifica responded with a sincere smile. "I'd like that a lot."

Ford was lost.

Well, not lost exactly, he'd gone exactly to where he meant to go, he just didn't know where that was. Magic was tricky like that.

As he met the enticing call of the golden light by passing the energy liquid past his lips Ford had at first simply sank into his chair, feeling the heavy parts of his mind, the pain and regret that had been caked in as permanent structural features of his personality, temporarily cease to exist. He could of stayed like that all night, but the unicorns came to him instead.

They pranced past the windows first, their rainbow golden hair trailing behind them like shooting stars. Ford had opened the window to let them in, but they simply taunted him, trotting across thin air and demanding he chase them, chase them into the sunset like he'd been chasing all his life. Despite the magical haze that was covering his brain, Ford still managed to remember something before he left. "Need to let those two know I'm gone, or they might think I'm just hiding in here." He muttered while scrawling down the first note, then picked it up to read this handiwork. "This looks like an incredibly clumsy serial killer trying to divert suspicion. I've seen suicide notes that sounded more sincere than this." He admitted to himself, prompting the use of the invisible ink on the back. With everything taken care of, Ford soon set off.

Now, the experienced scientist knew full well the world he was walking through wasn't real, he had enough experience with psychedelics to understand that right away, but he still probed the strange environments for symbolism of the hidden dream or signs of psychic attack. "Lots of bright lights and flashing colors, possible connection to Mabel, cold ice despite the warm air, and of course I'm following unicorns, whose manes are key weapons against Bill."
The world shifted and got brighter the longer the journey continued, and there times Ford didn't know who he was, at one point feeling like a mind without a body and at one point feeling like a body without a mind. Whenever his identity would slip away, his body would simply keep following the unicorns, until a projection of his inner conscious onto the riotous rainbow of colors environment could remind him who he was.

The journey, both the physical walking and the process of losing and regaining his mind several times, was well worth it however, at least in Ford's opinion. "After all, I'm among the circle of unicorns now."

Indeed, Ford now pictured himself as sitting cross legged amid a circling back of the strange, supernatural creatures, their flowing manes seeming to transition seamlessly between each other, creating a seamlessly impenetrable anti-Bill rainbow force-field. They were muttering something however, and Stanford had to strain to hear what it was.

"Come to us Stanford." The voice spoke, a harmonious choir pleading for help. "Come to where you belong, where you've always searched to be. The magnet is a shadow, a dripping reflection of the true glory of understanding you've always longed for." Then, the choir began to sound pained. "It is not this one's place to die. Save us Stanford, save us from the rot and the severing. Save us from the queens."

His sharp mind locking onto that relevant keyword, Stanford strained himself further, eyes closing shut even tighter for fear the world wouldn't be there when they opened, even as he felt the comforting light draining out the back of his eyeballs, leaving a burning sensation in his sinuses before being lost to the cold night air. "What about the queens? What are they planning? What is Bill up to?!"

"Save us Stanford. Save HIM Stanford!" Even though his eyes were tightly shut, the six fingered scientist could feel exactly who the herd was talking about.

"Mason..." he whispered with concern, feeling himself stricken enough to use the boy's real name.

"A severing would bring his nightmares to life, living on all worlds, so they may devour his flesh and leave his shriveled mind naked before the lidless eye of providence."

"MASON, WHERE ARE YOU!?" Ford shouted in concern. His head felt like it had a terrible pressure in it, and when he finally forced his eyes open the circling unicorns had somehow merged into a rainbow pinwheel reality that was slowly draining out of the stars, flowing down the drain at the beginning of the universe. He was falling but couldn't tell where, his vision seemed like it was fading but it was actually reality being drained of existence.

"Plug the drain with mane Stanford Pines, find your way between the walls and cleave the world of nightmares!"

"Mason! Mason! Can you hear me?"

"..."

"Mason... I will protect you, my son."

Chapter End Notes
Well, this fanfic's unexpected, unplanned hiatus has finally come to an end! In a way I suppose I'm just being true to the source material, but dang did this take longer to write than I expected. I hope it was all worth it everyone!

So, here we are, first chapter in a post series finale world. It was a long road that was both weird and wild, beautiful and painful. I was certainly taken by surprise by some of the final directions the show took, and while I don't think this story will ultimately hem too close to that, there are a few ideas I'll probably end up using. Gosh, the beginning of this show just feels like it's so far away, so long ago. Things really ended up changing for the Star Vs cast over time in a way that I didn't get from Gravity Falls, or even Steven Universe. Adventure Time sort of captures this feeling of wistful time passing the best by comparison. I'm actually really happy this is the chapter I had to work on in the aftermath. A nice, emotional decompression chapter to work some of these feelings out with. I'll admit, I had this chapter ready to work on for awhile but it just came to a stop as I waited for the end to strike. Anyways, I hope all of you, my readers, are doing well in this time period, with a special well wishing going out to all my regular reviewers: Ronald Reagan, OMAC001, and a very angry Ravage, I appreciate the support you guys and all the other reviewers provide. Stay strong everyone.

Also need to give shout outs to SavemefromBordom whose excellent abridged series style rewrite of the show fic was the source of the line "your magical girlfriend from another dimension."
Mabel Solves A Mystery

Chapter Notes

At last, I have come back. I would first like to sincerely apologize for the intense delay anyone following this story has experienced, I do not wish to go into detail but it has been a troubled time for me, as I have experienced a personal loss recently. The more time passes however, the more writing these stories goes from being difficult to being an act of relief, so hopefully things will improve from here on out. Now, on a brighter note, this chapter is actually a part of a hiatus ending double feature special return on my part, as this update brings with it two full chapters, detailing the events occurring first on Earth, and then on Mewni! I hope this return is worth the wait and that you enjoy what you read. I'd like to thank everyone who has and continues to support me on these stories and shares their thoughts on them.

"I underestimated that girl, Mabel Pines. Even with the wonders of the Mystery Shack at her disposal this turn of events is an unexpected one. I can't let her pull another fast one on me."

Agent Ferris was thinking those thoughts as he lay sprawled out over a downtown Gravity Falls road, his bashed but durable car nearby. He had jumped out right after the impact with the beaten looking truck, resulting in a sizable collection of injuries from the impact with the road that were still preferable to whatever he would have accumulated by staying in his car as it smashed into a power line. "She's too uncontrollable to use as an asset... but she could still serve as leverage over the rest of the family."

Blinking to himself, the government agent realized his head was swimming at this point, and while he could understand his own inner monologue the world around was proving harder to focus on. Closing his eyes, Ferris felt a jolt run through his head and the world around him abruptly became clear. Flipping effortlessly through his memories, the agent worked to assess the situation. "The original Mabel, wearing the sweater we managed to bug, had jumped on the truck when the van turned up missing. She must be heading for Powers and Trigger while the clones looped around to attack me. Is it possible she's worked out my secret?"

With his perception now clear, Ferris could begin taking stock of his bodily injuries, and tend to them. "Cracked bones in a few places, internal bleeding from the impact and external bleeding from where I skid across the road. Nothing I can't handle." Focusing his mind, Ferris felt electrical tingles crackle through his body as his internal woulds closed themselves up, the blood under the skin retreating into the broken vessels, with dead cells staying behind to clump the break shut. On his open wounds, the seep of blood seemed to simply stop miraculously, a thin layer of hardened, dried and oxidized blood clinging tight to his skin and forming a sealing barrier over the breaks in the skin.

The tingling sensation of the waves weaving through his body, from their point of blossoming within his head to the tender pinpricks of the electric signals entering his blood vessels and puppeteering his red cells, briefly caused Ferris' head to swim, and the head injury ringing in his ears served to amplify the distortion experience. He could remember it now, clear as day, despite the scenery being almost blank white. "I'll always remember." The Agent thought to himself, a bit loopy. "With my abilities I'll never be able to forget it. I even remember the base we had set off from, Canadian Forces Station St. John's. To think this all began because of a NATO commie sub hunting mission..."
Even though he knew now wasn't the time to be flashing back, the past overwhelmed Ferris. "Sometimes I feel like this is the price I pay for being able to control and manipulate my memories so easily. Every now and then they just burst out and explode." The man, much older than he looked, mused as critical parts of his life flashed before his muddled eyes. "I thought I was top secret before I had my change. Top level collaboration with the international best to use an illegal sub to hunt other illegal subs under the North Pole. That sort of shit could've started World War Three if we had been careless. Or if the people handling us had been careless."

"I wasn't disillusioned when they left the crew of my sub to die." He thought to himself with stark, unblinking certainty. "To court annihilation for the lives of a single boat's worth of people who don't exist anyway? I didn't mind being saved of course, but if I'd been on the other side of the desk I'd have left that crew to die too."

The tapestry of visions changed again, becoming much more vague and distorted, refusing to exactly play back the critical series of events, but compared to the gunmetal submarine setting and the drowning depths, the fuzzy shapes visible through the veil were brightly colored and energetic. Little human shaped lumps jumping around in red and green, dragging him through brightly lit surgical suite after brightly lit surgical suite.

"I don't remember what happened next, under the North Pole, but something saved my life, and afterwards I had my powers. The army psychs say that whatever gave me my abilities was so horribly painful that my brain rewrote using my new powers itself as to cover up the memories and keep me from seeing them." Ferris mused, attention from the increasingly white and static screen in front of him. "Personally, I bet it was aliens. It had to be something with a sense of humor, since it dropped me off at a US Navy base on Christmas Morning."

"And then from there, it was into the rabbit hole, always going deeper and deeper."

The memories continued to roll by, replaying Ferris' descent into the hidden world of the supernatural. He'd fought for the government for years in the shadows, exploding vampires from the inside out, erasing the memories of Soviet spies, acquiring objects of power and dissipating ghosts. The memories were passing by faster now as his head became clear, an ache becoming more and more perceptible as reality returned and his fixed mind was once again in control of his fixed body. With a groan, he began to push himself to his feet.

"A crude fix, but it will have to do until I can find the real Mabel and neutralize her." Ferris thought to himself coldly. He could feel the still humming engine of the pickup truck a short distance from him, the vibrations traveling through the road that his face was pressed against. "I have no idea if my abilities will work on these paper clones though. My magnetic fields can manipulate the iron inside red blood cells, but I can't take the risk just assuming that will work on these things. I could let them get close enough to test it, but what if they don't have red blood cells, and if they do, what if they're made of paper?" A worried expression crossed the face of the previously unshakably confident secret agent. "It's been too long since I've engaged someone like this up close, I might actually be rusty. My ability to generate and control localized magnetic fields was always good for causing accidents and generating heart failures, but I fear I've gotten too reliant on it, especially after learning I could project them over a distance with the right equipment."

"But this won't be the end of me." He thought to himself, a surge of confidence flowing through Ferris' body as he felt his injuries close to the point that he felt ready to move again. "She may have dazzled me with a clever use of misdirection, but it would be impossible for Mabel to deduce how my abilities work, just from the little she's seen. No one could just from that, though she may have some ideas." Still face down on the road, the agent's mind was running faster and faster as he tried to calculate a way out of this situation. "I've endured too much, survived too much to die here, like this.!
The secrets of Gravity Falls will be mine!"

Down the road, the Mabel clones were still piled into Soos' pickup truck, which was idling in the middle of the road as they nervously but determinedly kept their eyes on the downed Agent Ferris. "Alright girls..." spoke up Mablue, who was the one behind the wheel. "...do you think he's dead?"

"He's not bleeding as much as I'd expected." Spoke up Science Mabel, who was cupping her hands around her eyes to look down the street at Ferris, a look of focus on her face. "In my expert opinion though, we should run him over again just to make sure."

"Aw geez girls, isn't that going a little too far?" Spoke up Sunshine with reflexive uncertainty, until Ferris abruptly flipped from his face down position onto his back, letting the six clones clearly see he was still breathing. "FLOOR IT! FLOOR IT!" Shouted Sunshine with an abrupt, scared yell, and without hesitation Mablue put the pedal to the metal.

However, just as rubber began to screech against the road below, Ferris seemingly spat something out of his mouth and the front right tire of the truck abruptly exploded! This sent the vehicle veering to the side as all the clones screamed in surprise and hung on for dear life, and Ferris himself scrambled to his feet in the opposite direction, resulting in the vehicle and the adult male just narrowly missing each other. Ferris collapsed back to his knees as soon as the danger had passed while the truck didn't stop until it had slammed into a street light.

As soon as he had stopped moving Ferris' mouth burst open and he spat a sickly puddle of yellow liquid out of his mouth onto the ground. In-between labored breathing, he muttered "I hate that trick." while pulling himself to his feet. Draining all the iron out of the blood that had welled up into his throat, clumping it into a small bullet and then using an electromagnetic field to launch it at the tire always left a bad taste in his mouth, but it had saved Ferris' life on this occasion. Once he could stand up again, the spook took stock of the crashed truck.

The collection of Mabels had been thrown for a loop by the sudden spin out and crash. Mablue, Science Mabel, Sunshine and Northwabel were in the truck's cabin while Mailor and Shooting Star had been riding in the bed. Those two had been thrown about the worst, with Shooting Star left slumped against the back gate of the vehicle. As she finally got her bearings, two sources of sound hit her ears: All the clones inside the truck arguing with each other about the crash, and Mailor calling for help from her position on the side of the truck, hanging over the sides with only her gripping hands visible from the inside of the truck bed.

"HELP! HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" The pink hoodies wearing paper clone calling out with a tone of desperation from over the side of the truck. Still a little dizzy, Shooting Star crawled over to where Mailor's hands were gripping the side of the truck, as she'd clung to the vehicle for dear life in order to not go flying during the crash. All the while, the other clone was muttering "I know that was scary Mailor but we've come to a stop. You can just let go now."

Nevertheless, Shooting Star kept crawling across the truck bed, her own legs still a little shaky, and reached up to take the hands of the clone hanging off the side. Having positioned herself to pull the full sized, still shouting clone back into the truck, Shooting Star abruptly fell on her butt when the two hands she had gripped came over the side and down with a pull like they weighed nothing.

And they practically did weigh nothing, because there was no body attached to the wrist of either hand.

Shooting Star's expression blanched with a sudden look of surprised terror as the sight of her own hands holding two severed but identical ones registered in her mind. They were torn at the wrists, a circular border of ripped paper all the way around for a clean separation. The sound of a Mabel
screaming is what finally struck Shooting Star free of her horrified recoiling, but by then, it was too late. She peered over the side of the truck to see that Mailor had finally melted into a completely muddled pile of wet paper sticking in clumps to the normal clothing she'd put on at the fashion show. The paper clone had been done in by a fairly deep pothole puddle that she'd fallen into when she was cut off of the truck.

In the distance, Ferris looked over his shoulder to confirm he's eliminated one of them, then continued to limp away, moving faster than one might expect but still with a noticeable hunch and limp to his movements, as his blood manipulation is better at stopping bleeding than it is at restoring mobility. "Good thing I had a loose paperclip in my pocket." He thought to himself while slipping into an alleyway. In his mind's eye, the agent replayed the process of pulling the small piece of office supply out, bending it into a wire and then giving it a slight curve before sending on a curved through, empowered by a magnetic boost. The metal projectile had curved perfectly, ripping through the clone's wrists in a deadly arc, dropping her into the puddle below. "Need to call Powers and Trigger..." Ferris muttered, while producing his phone from a different pocket. "I must possess these wonderful objects!"

However, midway through his dialing the number to contact his agents, Ferris dropped the phone to the ground as a result of a brick falling from the sky and smashing his fingers. He let out a short shriek of pain as the digits bent and snapped into a collection of unnatural angles, but even as Ferris was looking to the roof the brick fell from he could feel the pumping blood reverse course under his skin and the fingers beginning to marionette jerk themselves back into a crude imitation of proper anatomy.

On top of the building was Shooting Star, grappling hook in one hand and a fresh brick in the other.

"I haven't felt this dazed and unsure of where I am since I set off that flashbang in the house of mirrors..."

These were the first clear thoughts that ran through Agent Powers' head as he regained consciousness on the floor of the van. It took a moment from their for his head to stop swimming, but as soon as he could the experienced agent snapped to his feet again, fully alert and scanning the area. The vehicle wasn't moving and the back doors were shut. Staying on guard, he tested them, and found them to also be unlocked.

Opening the van and stepping out carefully, the first thing Powers saw was the garage room of the government base, and Mabel Pines being tied to a chair by his partner. "Hey... Agent Powers! Good to have you back!" Trigger spoke quickly as he tightened the last section of rope behind Mabel's back as the girl struggled against the elaborate knots tying her to the chair and the gag in her mouth.

"Agent Trigger, what happened back there?" Powers demanded to know curtly. His eyes swept the room, seeming to take in every detail of the room. "Trigger normally does a better job parking than that..." He thought to himself, before snapping back to reality "Any contact from Agent Ferris?"

"Mabel had hidden bricks inside the rolled up carpet she was supposed to give us and knocked you out with it and then held me at gunpoint with one of her great uncle's guns." Trigger responded energetically while stepping around the teenage girl tied to the chair. "However, she made a slip up and I was able to get the gun away and overpower her."

A frown crossed Powers' face as he heard this explanation, but it was difficult to pick out from his usual rough edged facial features. After a long moment staring at an unusually expressive Trigger, whose face was shifting between a professional smile, nervousness and exaggerated seriousness, the older agent asked "How did you drive back to the base and keep Mabel under control the entire time?"
The air was silent between them for a long moment, and the bead of sweat that formed on Trigger's forehead indicated the illusion had been broken as it splattered against the floor.

"HIYAAAAAAH!

The Mabel clone that had driven the van here abruptly sprung into action, jumping down from the vantage point she'd taken on top of the vehicle to try and land on Powers' shoulder and clobber him on the head. However, the agent's hand to hand combat training came to his aid here, as he was able to reach behind him, snatch the girl out of the air and redirect her momentum to toss her over his shoulder and to the ground, at which point he got a firmer hold on her and then pulled the clone up to hold between him and the original. In the scuffle, he'd also produced his water pistol and was pointing it at the clone's head.

Mabel in control of Trigger's body hadn't been able to act fast enough to stop Powers from executing this move but did produce her stolen gun and pointed it at the man, just in time for the two of them to find themselves locked in a stand off. Meanwhile, the body of the teenage girl tied to the chair began to struggle and squirm about, as Trigger tried to escape the predicament his new body was found in and communicate with his partner through the gag in his mouth, neither of which he succeeded at.

"Let her go." The original Mabel demanded coldly, putting Trigger's serious natural voice to good use.

"Not a chance." Powers responded, before briefly letting his eyes fall to teenage body tied to a chair. "Trigger, confirm that you've been bodyswapped by blinking three times!" When Mabel's big, wide eyes then proceed to blink three times with uncharacteristic coldness, Powers looked back at the puppeteed body of his partner. "Not bad Mabel, we clearly underestimated you. However, whatever you are aiming to do it won't work out like you hope. The best way to secure the safety of yourself and your family going forward is to put the gun down."

However, while his tone was dead serious the veteran agent was feeling his mind be beset by doubt, the largest singular instance of doubt he had ever felt in his career of proud service to the American government. "I have no idea how highly she actually values these clones, but she hasn't shot me yet so hopefully I'm on the right track." In addition though was a new sort of doubt, that found a way into his brain as he tactically evaluated the viability of his hostage taking strategy, and the source of this new doubt was crystal clear to Agent Powers.

"Damn, so this is what it feels like to be on this side of the hostage scenario."

Back in town, Ferris was on the run, darting from alley to alley as Shooting Star continued to pelt him from the roof, hurling any bricks or loose roof tiles she could get her hands on down at the man. He'd managed to avoid any potentially neck breaking blows to the head so far, but was staggering with a small limp after one landed on his foot and had numerous aching spots on his back where the heavy objects had hit him, and his hand was still sore and crooked. No matter where Ferris ran, Shooting Star stayed above him using Mabel's original grappling hook, which she borrowed from her progenitor's luggage during the fashion show.

"Get back here and tell me where Mermando is!" Shooting Star demanded as Ferris burst out into the streets, standing in a light sidewalk crowd for the first time today. The townsfolk of Gravity Falls briefly cast their furtive, surprised looks at the suit wearing man, but soon after glanced up at Mabel as she ran to the edge of the building she was standing atop, arm cocked back to hurl a fake owl statue someone put on their roof to scare away roosting birds at Ferris. The sight of one of the Pines twins battling a seemingly normal human caused everyone to abruptly clear the scene in quietly hurried fashion, all casual conversation dying out as everyone did their best to not acknowledge or get involved in the latest supernatural struggle. Nobody liked to know more than they needed to in
this town.

Ferris actually momentarily gaped at this sight. "I spent most of the career having to beat and brainwash people away from the truth, but these people willingly flee it!?" He muttered in surprised, but he was broken from his fugue state when the wooden owl replica smashed into the back of his head. His staggered stumble forward was saved into a brisk and building run as Ferris dashed across the street, jumping over the hood of a car in the process. The gap between the two sides of the street was too far to just grappling hook across so the agent figured this bought him some time, but fleeing across the street extracted its own toll: Still reeling from the last thrown object he'd taken to the head, Ferris lost his balance trying to jump up the curb, stumbling to the sidewalk and blindly flailing an arm to try and pull himself up.

Across the street, Shooting Star had ripped free a satellite dish to hurl at Ferris, who was doubled over in pain trying to pull himself up by a fire hydrant across the street. However, she knew at a glance she couldn't accurately throw the heavy object the full distance between her and Ferris. "But he seems really out of it..." The paper Mabel mused to herself, watching the older man barely able to hold himself up on the instillation, body heaving with heavy breathing. "If I move quick enough, maybe I can bash him over the head with this until he spills!"

Set on her course of action, Shooting Star dropped the dish off the side of the building, used her grappling hook to climb down, then picked the receptor back up and began to stride menacingly across the now cleared street. "Alright, I've got some questions Agent Murder!" She shouted confidently.

"I could say... the same for you!" Ferris spat back, breathing heavily and a wet rasp to his tone. At just the right moment however, he released the fire hydrant he'd been clinging to and flopped on his back. After the minute he'd spent carefully teasing the hydrant's valve and cap loose with his short range magnetic powers Ferris managed to set free the burst of water at just the right moment, the violent sideways geyser striking the paper clone center mass. Shooting Star was wiped away in less than a second, the majority of her body being reduced to mush the moment the water sprout hit her, and the few remaining solid radial body parts being drawn in by the frayed fibers connecting the whole, falling into the stream as the paper body was blown backwards. All that was left to clutter the gutters was the drenches outfit she left behind.

Ferris breathed heavily on the sidewalk, sealing up the cuts and breaks along his body before steadily rising to his feet. He left the spilling hydrant behind and began to stagger off further into the town, determined to return to his base of operations. The distant barking of a dog was ringing in his ears...

"Really think about this Mabel! The more damage you do the more involved your family will be in this!" Agent Powers argued, holding the paper clone hostage across from the Real Mabel, come to the agent's base packing a handgun. It made the agent's squirt gun weapon seem comically outmatched, but against the head of one of the copies it was a perfectly dangerous weapon. "If you stand down now, things can still be fixed to allow a moderate return to normalcy. If you keep going..."

"Return to normalcy, ha!" Mabel shout back at him, uncharacteristically venomous. "You've already fucked with my family so hard you erased my memories of it, so what do I lose by going as far as I can go to stop it? I'm not giving up!" She shouted, releasing a torrent of built up anger and frustration at the end of her statement "You're just going to erase my memory at the end anyway, and you've already made me rob my family... how many damn times!?" in a burdened, exasperated and even terrified tone of voice, the lid blowing on the steadily bubbling existential horror she'd been feeling for awhile in a powerful burst of emotion.
Powers actually blinked at this revelation, eyes beginning to dawn with understanding as Mabel made her attitude to him very clear: The possibility of being memory wiped to forget what she had done to help herself seemed to terrify the girl, and Powers was beginning to become very convinced she'd be willing to kill him to prevent that from happening.

A solution occurred to the man, a solution that years ago he would have simply dismissed as being a violation of protocol, but today it survived in his head longer than normal. "This whole damn op has no protocol." Powers finally thought to himself, motivating him to say "Mabel... we have never erased your memories."

The meaning of these words visibly swept over Mabel's form, but she was not sufficiently put as ease by them to actually lower her gun. "What do you mean!?" she demanded to know.

"It was a lie, a trick! Ferris said it would play into your psychology, make you feel validated about choosing to help us since you already did so before, and make you unlikely to resist his memory wipe afterwards!" Powers hurriedly explained, all while the Clone Mabel he was holding hostage remained uncharacteristically quiet. "You have never stolen anything from your family at Ferris' instruction, and he has never erased your memory to cover it up."

Mabel seemed to hesitate, for a moment, ruminate slightly as the barrel of her gun tipped down a short distance, but it stiffened up just a moment later as the girl used Trigger's body to firmly state "I don't believe you."

"Then we're just going to stand like this forever." Powers responded, but abruptly, a small, forced cough coming from the Mabel Clone he was holding caught everyone's attention, including the tied up Trigger-in-Mabel's-body.

"Prove it to us." Said the paper clone with a water pistol to her head. "You have records of all your operations, right? You must, after the entire arrest against Grunkle Stan was held up by everybody getting blanked by the memory gun. You wouldn't risk losing everything to us wiping your memory, so I bet you record everything you have for breakfast here in Gravity Falls."

The still, quiet silence coming from both Powers and Trigger spoke volumes, and it was clear to both Mabels that the paper one had worked it out. Powers, however, was able to roll with it. "Mabel." He spoke to Trigger's body. "If you put your gun down, I will show you our operation records confirming the veracity of my statement."

"Try again." The original Mabel said curtly while tightening her grip on the weapon.

"I'll stay here." The clone spoke up, catching everyone's attention once again. Looking upwards, she explained "Powers, would you show Mabel the mission records if Trigger is untied and is holding the water pistol at me? Then Mabel won't shoot you."

Trigger's stern by practice face fell with girlish dismay as soon as the offer was made. "Pape Mabes, no!" The original cried out, though she still kept her firearm steadily gripped. "They'll melt you as soon as I'm out of your sight!"

"Then you'll shoot Powers, won't you?" The paper clone asked, and before anyone could answer, she looked back up at her hostage taker. "Look, we're all just waiting for either the rest of the clones or Ferris to get here first, and no matter what any of us do that's probably going to decide how this ends. What's the harm in letting Mabel be sure about the truth?"

Powers did his firmest to keep his expression from changing as everyone silently contemplated the clone's words. "Somehow she's making a good point, and a display of sincerity could make the
original more cooperative and be the first step in getting that gun away from her." By the time he
decided to speak, Powers was still the first person in the room to respond. "Mabel, I'm willing to
accept those conditions if you are. You keep the gun, you and I go down to the computer room to
examine the records, and Trigger here keeps the clone under guard."

Trigger's cold eyes fretted about with Mabel's energetic quickness, rapidly passing between all three
other people in the room before her desire to know the truth for herself finally won out. "Alright,
deal. Go untie Mabel, I mean Trigger! Wait!" She suddenly shouted out, causing everyone to
nervously freeze. "One more thing: Lock the rug in the back of the van, then give me the key."

Back on the streets, Science Mabel was striding confidently down the streets, Mablue following a
sort distance behind her with some apprehension, checking over her shoulders very frequently while
the leading paper clone alternated her vision only between dead ahead and the small trail of blood on
the sidewalk. "Come on Mabel, let's get out of here while we can..." said of the copy of
comparatively dour dress and temperate, sliding up close behind the girl in the handmade coat. "...If
we get back to the shack, I'm sure Grunkle Stan can keep us all safe until Dipper can come back and
help solve this problem."

"We don't need Dipper to do this Mabel, we've got Ferris on the ropes!" Responded back the selfstyled paper scientist. Sometime during the trip she had acquired a pair of very large but perfectly
circular wire frame glasses, which she's kept as an accessory after punching out the lenses because
they made her sick. "Just because he could always outsmart us in all the games we played as children
doesn't mean I need his help to solve these mysteries! I found the missing president of the Unites
States from crump's sake! I'm taller than him!"

"Didn't his laws result in the Shack getting stolen...?" Mablue mused mournfully, but suddenly her
expression perked up and she pointed ahead with her blue sweater covered right arm. "Look over
there!" She said, indicating to a residential home where the wooden backyard fence had a large, man
shaped hole busted into it, through which the trail of thin blood droplets turned sharply and vanished
into.

Quickly rolling to the side and squatting down by the other edge of the gate, the color clad clone
Mabel gestured for Mablue to come closer before holding her hands over her head. "C'mon, I'll give
you a boost up!" She said in a harsh whisper. "He'll be waiting to ambush us at that hole in the
fence!"

Despite her trepidation, Mablue hoisted herself the rest of the way over the fence in short order, her
sneakers letting out no noise but a soft compression as they landed on a thick tuft of soft grass. The
entire backyard was in a remarkably pristine state, a far cry from the visible damage or rushed repair
jobs visible on most of the buildings in Gravity Falls: A slightly compact but never the less unbroken
square of green, with a charming little square doghouse by the nearest fence corner and some chairs,
a grill and a hose faucet closer to the house itself. "Just another mystery coming from this town...
Mablue breathed to herself, before her eyes caught the imperfection here. The trail of blood
continued on the other side of the fence break and lead right over the grass to the doghouse,
vanishing into the shaded crawl space.

Letting herself gulp once to swallow her fears, Mablue steeled herself, checked the area again, then
slid a straight razor down the baggy sleeves of her blue sweater. It was an old possession of Grunkle
Stan's that one of the clones had pocketed as they rushed through the Mystery Shack, and along with
other found bits were distributed inside the pickup truck after the crash. The long, sharp blade folded
into place and the Mabel clone ducked down at the presumed hiding place, but instead of striking as
she'd planned, Mablue let out a gasp of horror as her bent knees buckled underneath her. Rapidly
crawling backwards to get away from the mangled, pale, and very dead dog stuffed in the doghouse,
she was defenseless when Ferris stood up from his hiding place behind the kennel and doused the paper clone with the murky red water inside the dog bowl between his bloody hands.

As the clone melted away Ferris stood up to his full height, legs staggering a little with the first few steps but gradually becoming stable. "Using the iron content to sculpt animals blood cells into something human compatible is always a hassle." Ferris thought to himself as his eyes glances at the water hose at the other edge of the lawn, gently rubbing his temples to try and stave off the focus headache he could feel setting in. "At least stripping them down to O-type is as simple as I remember." Memories of gradually drawing in the red stream leaking off a downed razorback hog in the midst of a steaming jungle while rearranging the red cells on a microscopic level gradually faded as Ferris' head cleared and the blood loss replenished, just in time for him to have a perfectly clear picture of a Mabel wearing a patchwork rainbow coat charging him with a short shovel, which she had been able to hide inside her coat due to the fact that she'd ripped out the insides to massively expand the pockets when creating the garment.

By the time he fully processed its approach and exerted his magnetic powers the shovel head was already on course to collide with Ferris' head, but the counter force did cause it to unnaturally slow in velocity a small amount before connecting. The world exploded with fuzz from the agent's perspective as the metal object slammed into his skin, the force of the impact bursting blood vessels below the skin and rattling his skull. Despite the injury his magnetic powers were still building influence over the bludgeon but his attacker was determined to keep swinging. Even though it was a face made of paper, the clone's expression perfectly captured how unsettling it looks when the happy go lucky expression of Mabel gives way to genuine, deeply repressed rage.

Of course the paper clones didn't feel the exact emotions their sources did, but perfectly understood the emotions and desires of however placed themselves in the copy machine, as they were at the moment of creation, and would work tirelessly to satisfy those things. That was how the clone knew she had to strike Ferris over the head with the shovel, again and again. The deep cored anger the original girl tried to bury wasn't bubbling over at random this time. It was deliberately being released, a deliberate choice this time. It didn't matter that an invisible magnetic force could be felt pushing back against the shovel in her hand, the paper clone simply swung harder in response, easily smashing past the raised hands Ferris ineffectually used to guard his head.

The head of small shovel was bending back with each landed strike, and while Science Mabel at first simply noted this with satisfaction as a sign her hits were striking home, the metal plate abruptly broke instead of bending and hurled through the air over her shoulder, prompting a wide eyed double take. "Not relevant." She muttered to herself, quickly focusing back on Ferris. The agent had crumpled to the ground, the attack still leaving his head ringing and bleeding even with the magnetic cushion. Kneeling down in front of him, Science Mabel moved to wrap both her hands around Ferris' throat.

"You don't have the guts!" The older man spat back, dazed and delirious even as his tone was sharp and bitter.

"Mabel might not, but more than likely she'd actually surprise you." The paper recreation explained. "Either way, I'm not Mabel. I'm a clone, and I can do anything that needs doing so the original's plan can succeed." Then, she locked her thumbs into place over the soft part of the front of the throat, and began to squeeze.

"Wonderful..." Ferris rasped out before his eyes rolled upwards and he became very still, air struggling to come in and out of his body as his training kicked in so as to resist this strangulation for as long as possible. Science Mabel's eyes didn't break as she stayed silent, intensely focused on the task she had in front of her, to the point that her bent knees collapsing beneath her took the clone
entirely by surprise.

"What!? NO!" She yelled out, realizing her legs were melting underneath her into a steadily rising puddle of water. Her eyes darted to the source, quick enough to realize that the head of her shovel had been sent flying into the hose faucet, smashing it open and releasing a stream of water onto the lawn. Science Mabel's posture quickly collapsed, resulting in the rest of her body being melted by the water puddle. As soon as the hands around his throat dissolved, Ferris gasped for air, the burning inside his chest having almost boiled over, even with his supernatural abilities slowing the asphyxiation process. It would take time for him to stand up again, even with his blood cells actively dancing to repair the rest of his body, but the agent let out a dazed, hoarse chuckle none the less. "I WILL be able to get back up from this." He mused to himself, the spilled water pooling around him in a cool sensation, a natural barrier against further attacks. "Once my eyes stop rolling and I can feel my legs again, I will return to the base and soon enough all these wonderful discoveries will be mine. Paper minds and flesh bodies..."

In the distance, another pair of glittering eyes narrows in suspicion as Ferris stumbles back through the hole in the fence, now alone but with a stiff gait.

Back at the spy base, Mabel inside Trigger's body and Powers, still sound of mind and body, were in the underground office together, the legitimate agent opting to lean over Ferris' desk as he typed away at the cell leader's laptop. Mabel still had the pilfered handgun pointed at Powers' head, trusting her stolen arm's muscle memory that she was holding it right.

"Okay, I've got it all right here, the original operation records for the last month, the only conceivable time we could have used you as an agent then erased your memory of it." Powers spoke, not making a sudden move by stepping away even as his fingers stopped moving across the keyboard. "See the truth for yourself."

"Keep digging." Mabel commanded, making good use of the stolen body's practiced, cool vocal cords.

"That wasn't part of the deal." Powers said back firmly, but not aggressively in an attempt to avoid aggravating her. "You demanded to know..."

"Well that was a lie." Mabel stated plainly, though with a few cracks in her voice. "I just wanted to get you down here and unlocking the computer. The private computer that goes in a desk drawer, at a single person desk down here in Ferris' spy nerd man cave and which you already have the password for considering you didn't need to call him to get it unlocked." Then, a sly smile grew on the normally stony face that was speaking. "You're suspicious of your boss, aren't you? So suspicious you discreetly acquired the password to his personal computer but haven't had the opportunity for some private browsing yet."

Powers' poker face was honed by training and experience, but even so an eyebrow cracked involuntarily as Mabel's accusations, and after needing a moment longer than normal to choose his words, the agent responded by saying "The ethical concerns of this operation are no concern of yours."

"HA! I KNEW IT!" Mabel burst out with a tone of triumphant joy. Powers was beginning to feel slightly unnerved by the extremely energetic noises that were coming from the body of his stoic partner, finding them uncanny. "Well, actually, I didn't know that, I was actually completely unsure WHAT your relationship with your boss was but when I saw you in action there I was wondering how you knew the code to this computer so I went FISHING for an answer! Hook line and sinker baby!"
Powers was too professional to go completely slack jawed at this, but did indulge himself a few moments of open mouthed bafflement at the fast one Mabel had pulled on him. Even as the adult body she was possessing shook with the festive energy of a celebratory dance she couldn't indulge in at the moment, Powers was still quite aware of the gun Mabel was pointing at his face. "Remembers Powers, not one line about her great uncle being a bad influence until that goes away."

"SO!" Mabel spoke up cheerfully, her voice spiking quite high. "Let's take a look at what your boss has been up to!"

Eyes casting slightly down with caution, Powers chose his words carefully and responded "Mabel, this was not part of the deal." Maintaining his measured tone, he then implored "Think about the clone upstairs, this could get her killed."

"Oh, Powers..." Mabel said dismissively, waving her empty hand to side as if sweeping the clone in question away. "You think I care about that paper copy?"

As soon as the line finished and the silence of Powers considering his options rained between the two, Mabel's mind began racing. "Hold it together, remember what Grunkle Stan said. Resist the urge to clamp down on the face twitching, trying to look natural will just make you look unnaturally neutral and is a classic tell." She thought in a harried tone while her voice, with mildly cruel confidence, ordered Powers to "Get looking. I want you to dig up all the secret conspiracies and the creepy internet history!"

Powers remained still for a moment, cold eyes watching the now unfamiliar body of his partner with no visible fear. Though the agent would act to preserve his own life of course, he remained in total control of his emotional state, assessing the threat without panic clouding his judgement. No, it was some other emotion that was clawing at the back of his mind, telling him to cooperate. Slowly and steadily, Powers put his hands back on the keyboard and began to dig.

Outside the inconspicuous town building that doubled as a spy headquarters, Agent Ferris leaned against the back wall as his hand worked the keypad lock on the back door to the place. There was no actual correct combination for this electronic lock though, it was simply a cover to the private back entrance that only the metahuman agent could use. As he felt his body direct delicate magnetic waves into the deeper mechanisms securing the door, Ferris caught his breath and tried to compose himself. "...then I'll need to find out who towed my car so fast, erase their memories and get it back. Or better yet, they could be one of my first mind transplants. Towing agencies make for pretty good cover."

His thoughts were jumbled and he was slightly tired after completing the trip home on foot, but as the lock opened on the door in front of him he took one final deep breath, put on the usual slight smile that functioned as a default expression in contrast to his subordinates' hard faced stoicism, ignored how rumpled and sweaty his suit was by now, and stepped into the building.

Ferris moved quietly, carefully closing the well oiled door behind him and treading with practiced stealth. The agent was quite aware of the possibility that Mabel or one of her clones had made it to the house before him and was waiting to ambush him. When Ferris quickly confirmed this suspicion upon entering the garage, he was too focused on eliminating her that he didn't notice the gun one was holding was actually a water pistol, and was pointed at the other Mabel.

A short, sharp scream of surprise echoed around the garage as an iron nail emerged from the back of the flesh and blood Mabel's right hand, causing it to spasm and drop the weapon. Despite the scream of pain being a lot shorter and more controlled than Ferris had expected, he stepped into the room and said the line he'd spent a few seconds coming up with anyways. "There we are, quick way to know whose the real one."
While the paper clone backed away in horror and the original body's eyes jumped back and forth between the bleeding wound and the new arrival with an unexpectedly analytic expression, Ferris simply strode towards the two, fists clenching in rage. "I had such high hopes for you Mabel, but it seems like you're simply truly useless to everyone. We're simply going to loot the Mystery Shack while everyone is away now, thanks to you."

"Foxtrot-silent king-acoustic kitty-hummingbird! I'm Agent Trigger! Mabel stole my body using the carpet, she's dAAAAAHMMMM!" The body swapped agent listed off, only to erupt into a scream again once Ferris was standing over him, causing the nail to wrench around with his power. This caused a burst of blood to breach the skin, and by manipulating its iron content Ferris was able to splatter the liquid across the paper clone's face, killing her instantly.

"Even if that is you Trigger, I regret to say your service is at an end. The entire Pines Family is hereby slated for termination as national security risks, and per agency policy that means they need to vanish, body and soul. Your country thanks you for your service." Ferris spoke coldly, gathering his power for a killing blow to the body below him. In truth, his head was still too muddled by the numerous injuries it had taken today to even remember if all those code words were correct or not, but even if he had been certain it was Trigger in the body before him, Ferris intended to kill it anyway.

The careful buildup of magnetic power behind the agent's eyes, coiling up the energy to extinguish the life before, exploded into an unfocused mess as a boxy object jabbed Ferris in the small of the back, and electricity flowed through his body moments later. Ferris' fine tuned, magnetically aligned nerves exploded and uncoiled as an outside shock fried the system. The meaty fist cracking him on the side of the head didn't help either.

"You bastard!" Agent Powers shouted, his tone still steely and controlled but now crackling with directed anger and disgust. The elevator, unnoticed since the ragged, murderous Ferris had shambled into the room, was open and the body of Agent Trigger was behind him, still holding the handgun in one shaky hand while Powers had discarded his taser in favor of his own fists. "It was a lie, wasn't it!? The ops, the agency, all the funding... they're all just means to YOUR ends!"

"So, you've been digging. You're a regular private dick, agent!" Ferris spat out, collapsed to the floor on hands and knees, struggling to breathe and align the electrical fields behind his eyes while their stomach churned, digestive fluid beginning to mix with the body's own blood. "That's right handlebar stache, Project TWILIGHT hasn't existed since the 80's. It was disbanded by President Reagan in the final year of his second term, one of the last semi-coherent thoughts his dementia ridden brain shat out!" He explained with a tone of disgust. "Said we were all a bunch of drug hopped super soldiers and pyromaniac cosmonauts!"

"So you went rogue, used your memory powers to hide inside agencies, became a ghost able to steadily misplace resources! You used law enforcement data and conscripted agents to fight against monsters with... and for what!?!" Powers listed angrily, causing a shocked and pained look to cross over Mabel's face, as the agent inside her body reacted to all this. "And for what!? So you can grow your drug business!"

"Am I even still an FBI Agent!?" Trigger yelled out, Mabel's higher pitched natural voice conveying his confusion and dread.

"Agent Powers, you need to calm down." Ferris stated, calmly and slowly. He looked up at his one-time subordinate but didn't rise to his feet to avoid provoking a kick. "Whatever you saw during your treasonous security breach, you don't have the full picture. I use the narcotics rings to acquire funding to carry out the anti-supernatural black ops that need to be done. We need..." Ferris stopped, heaving
some blood out of his stomach onto the floor. "...we need to work together. There's still time. We can recover the carpet and the photocopier! Think of what they can do together!"

Things began to click together for everyone in the room, as the potential application the two devices had if used in sync becoming obvious. Further back in the room, Mabel directed Agent Trigger's eyes over the back of the van, hoping that it was still looked and that her paper duplicates had secured the photocopier. The air was silent for a flash of a second as the implications sank in... and then Powers' ankle exploded in a cloud of blood, the iron in his veins reformatting into three skin piercing nails.

Weakness seemingly shed off, Ferris rose to his feat while punching the veteran agent in the stomach. After reaching a shaky upright posture, Ferris backhanded Mabel's original body as it sprun into action, then began to inch towards Trigger's, a deranged expression having taken hold of his face. Even though many of the feelings Mabel's mind was getting from her stolen adult male body were strange and unfamiliar, she knew exactly was the rising sharp pain in the left half of the chest meant. In a few more steps, Ferris would be close enough to cause the young man's heart to explode. "They can do so much... I won't even need agents anymore! I'll take the girl's body, plunder the Shack, and then make copies. Copies of my wonderful magnetic mind... and a whole world full of bodies to put them into."

Mabel raised the body's fists to take a swing at Ferris, but could feel sharp pains developing all over, the iron taking sharp shapes all over her blood vessels. A woozy tremor traveled down her fighting stance. Ferris was battered, bloody, bruised and limping after his running fight all over town and would probably never walk straight again if confined to his original body. He looked like one sharp punch could take his head off, but the last gasp of his magnetic power gave him an event shot at winning. She still had the gun, but her mind was full of panic and wasn't sure if shooting bullets at the magnetic man would even make a difference.

Before she had to take the fateful swing though, fate intervened.

Instead of his solid black dress shoe, now rugged and matted with blood, water and grass slamming down on the final step to his victory, Ferris found himself flailing in midair as he was grabbed from behind, held back from getting in range by a pair of arms grabbing his neck and face.

"TRIGGER, DO IT!"

Mabel's mind had no time to identify the voice but responded on instinct, hefting up Grunkle Stan's handgun and firing. The noise of the blast was almost deafening in the enclosed hideout garage, the unexpected noise and kickback from the gun barrel erupting enough to knock it from Mabel's grip, even with the more experienced hands of the federal agent to bolster her. One bullet proved to be enough though. A short geyser of blood erupted from Ferris' chest, onto his long ruined black suit, and the ragged, exhausted agent immediately went limp and crashed to the floor, face first. As soon as he passed out of view however, Ferris was completely out of Mabel's mind, her attention fully devoted to just who was standing behind him.

"Sunshine?" The original asked, voice still sounding soft and curious despite the body it came from. The paper clone looked ahead of herself for a moment, as Powers and Trigger came to their senses behind her, the magnetic haze leaving their minds and blood vessels as the will behind it evaporated. "It's you in there, isn't it Mabel?" The clone asked her creator, before offering a pained smile.

Before Mabel could blink, her fashionable doppelgänger collapsed backwards onto the floor, a long, dripping hole growing downwards on her body from the bullet had exited Ferris' back and spilled blood onto the paper body. The corrupt operative was dead, but Mabel wouldn't notice that for some time. All she could think about was how the copy of her had thrown itself into the fray, to turn
certain death for the girl of flesh and blood into certain death for the magnetic agent, at the cost of her own life.

"...Why?" She asked, after a long, uncertain moment. Tears tried to well themselves up in her eyes, but Mabel fought them back harder than she's ever fought back tears her life, knowing that letting them fall would hurt the paper clone more. "Why did you throw away your life to save me?" She asked with genuinely confusion and sadness. On the inside, Mabel knew the reason the question was so sincere was because her emotionally drained heart didn't have the energy to deceive itself into thinking she'd do the same.

"We're just paper copies Mabel." The dying clone said softly, but with a reassuring smile as more and more of her turned to dust. "Rough drafts and incomplete sketches, here to help the real thing be the best it can possibly be, do the most it possibly can. I've only been alive a few hours, but... I've already decided I'd be happy to die like this. Because living as a neverchanging paper child, living in fear of the rain forever..." she said wistfully, looking up at her original with wide, sad eyes. "...I'd rather live through you by helping you or saving you, so you can change and learn and grow rather than live forever in a paper imitation of a single, unchanging moment, a still frame left to wander a changing world."

A lone hand, so far untouched by the damage and damp, reached up and patted the flesh and blood on the cheek, offering a soothing touch. "Now come on girl, no need to hold those tears in, let them all out. I fulfilled my purpose and helped you out." Leaning back down, the Mabel clone let out a chuckle. "Hey, you remember Dipper telling you what he had been up to the night of that dance, right? I guess those paper clones of him had more in common with me and my sisters than either of us thought..."

The rasp of pain that was gradually entering the Paper Mabel's voice was the final straw that broke the dam behind the real girl's eyes. She hugged her selfless paper copy close and openly wept for it, her tears quickly erasing the construct in a matter of moments, freeing her from the pain that was getting more intense as it spread further and further over her body.

Mabel Pines, once again the one and only, continued to cry for her fallen clones until there was nothing but traces of paper mush staining to her hands.

As was a recurring trend in his life, Stanley Pines has missed most of the supernatural action, having driven narrowly around the running downtown battle involving his niece and arriving at home while she was still out, glowsticks in hand. However, he did have someone else waiting for him.

"Hey Mister Pines, welcome back!" Soos greeted in his inherited Mister Mystery costume. Right away Stan could tell something was wrong, as while the perpetually young at heart man's admiring enthusiasm was as present as ever, a twinge of nervousness he normally didn't feel around Stan was in his voice.

"You can cut it with the Mister stuff and just call me Stan, I've told you that already Soos. I'm retired now, I'm supposed to be well past that." Stan said, his voice as gruff as it always is but with the slightly different cadence that those who knew him would recognize as his friendlier tone. "Speaking of that job I left behind, aren't you supposed to be working at it right now?"

"Uh, well it's related to that actually." Soos replied, his nervousness becoming much more transparent now. "I was wondering if you'd maybe take a look around the back of the Shack? All the customers are scared away."

"This better not be another dog looking at you funny." Stan replies grumpily before letting the former handyman lead him around the building. When he spoke next though, his tone was noticeably
lighter. "So, how were things running before this disturbance today?"

If Soos has taken any offense at Stan's first dismissive comment he didn't show it, and quickly began talking about the earlier day with honest enthusiasm. "Oh, it was great as always. Every day running the Mystery Shack is a dream come true Miste... err, I mean Stan." With a particularly pleased tone, he added "Of course, the dream has only gotten better since Mabel came back so both Mystery Twins are living under the roof again! She really spiced up an earlier tour group, we got a lot out of them in the gift shop."

Stan felt a genuinely proud and affectionate smile grow on his face at this explanation, but Soos' words ended up bringing up a whole slog of troubling thoughts as well. "Yeah, the twins back together really completes the whole dream thing, doesn't it?" He said in a jokey tone, while also feeling a twinge cross his heart while remembering how broken up Mabel had been after Dipper and Ford left through the portal again. With a rare tone of regret, Stan added "Hey, Soos? I'm... I'm sorry you've still got to have us bumming around the place."

"Oh, it's no problem Stan!" Soos replied without a shred of hesitation and total sincerity. "I mean, if it wasn't for the entire Pines family I wouldn't even be in this wonderful place, and you are all very helpful and supportive. And that panic room you added to me and Melody's place? AND the one you built for abuelita!?" Soos pauses to kiss two fingers and a thumb as an indication of quality. "A real masterpiece."

"Yeah yeah, it's just... this wasn't how it was supposed to be, get it?" Stan asked, sounding more genuinely troubled and lost now, prompting both men to come to a stop right before turning the corner to the back of the Shack. Throwing his hands up in confusion, Stan explained that "You know, it was supposed to be me and Ford and the open seas at this point, traveling the world and stuff! Dipper and Mabel would be living their own lives together, away from this crazy shithole!"

Letting out a sigh, he wearily added "It seems like we always end up drawn back here though..."

Soos' face registered a mild amount of shock at Stan's profanity, though not at the use itself, as during that first summer the old man had no problem swearing for real when it was just him and the handyman. Rather, it was the fact that such a strong epitaph was directed at the town itself which surprised him. "I mean, what's wrong with that? Gravity Falls is a lovely little town, isn't it?"

"It's a shithole Soos, and a dangerous one at that." Stan said bluntly and without a hint of sarcasm, and to his credit Soos didn't take it poorly, looking at his former employer with curiosity more than anything else, and as hoped the old man was quick to explain himself via rant. "People who stay here too long get hurt Soos, don't you get it!? Those Blind Eye freaks Dipper told me about managed to turn the entire town into barely functional idiots, monsters rove the woods, and they threw an eight year old in prison! Sure it was Gideon but even I realize how fucked up that is from a legal perspective! What the hell is wrong with this place!?"

After letting out a low, weary sigh, Stan added that "You know sometimes I wish that no member of the Pines family had ever set foot in this town..."

Although Stan didn't mention it, because he disliked discussing the subject at all even all these years and a happy ending later, Soos knew that his brother's disappearance into the portal and then return to research on the subject was another example from Stan's list. "But then I never would have met you Mister Pines..." Thought Soos for a flashing moment, before arguing "He's just upset and worried right now, and besides I can sort of understand his point" back at himself to quell that unhappy thought.

"Alright, enough of my ranting, what's the problem Soos?" Stan asked, and in response the handyman froze up, now genuinely unsure if he should bother the elder Pines with this issue at this
moment. However, the younger man's large, soft eyes betrayed him. "It's right behind me, isn't it?"

When Stan turned around, he finally caught sight of his twin brother wandering around in a daze, his eyes seeming to be glowing and glazed over at the same time. Besides the garbled and frightening muttering Ford was generating, it was obvious why the tourists had been driven away: The elder scientist was missing his long coat and undershirt, and appeared to be damp all over his body.

"Thank you for coming to get me Soos." Stan said simply before striding you towards his brother, sending the unspoken message that he wanted to handle this alone. Soos, for his part, withdrew respectfully.

"Hey, Poindexter, what's a matter? Are you tweaking on space dust or something?" Stan asked, tone rough but a note of concern cracking through. He gently put a hand on his brother's shoulder, and while Ford's head did snap to over to glare at Stan, the expression instantly softened with recognition.

Stan, despite himself, shivered a little. The last time Ford had looked at him like he did for a fleeting moment, he had been convinced his twin had come to steal his eyeballs, despite having summoned Stan himself.

"Ah, yes, Stanley, hello." Ford said, words punctuated by uncontrollable twitching and his eyes shifting to stare at something on his twin's shoulder that didn't exist. "How did you get to Mewni? Never mind, not important, I'm going to go shoot the devil and I need your help Stanley. Not the dorito devil though. Much... much more normal looking one, probably has cheap looking horns on..."

Taking a moment to blink, Stan put his other hand on Ford's other shoulder and began to hustle him back toward's the Shack. "I need to get you inside."

"You know brother, you always did have a way with this stuff."

The older two Pines twins were inside Ford's old room inside the Mystery Shack, closed off and away from the business section of the building. The two were reclining in a pair of time worn but still comfortable lounging chairs, a small nightstand with an ash tray atop it between them. The air was smokey with the released fumes of the home made cigarette they were passing back and forth, and both twins seemed far more relaxed now, Ford in particular seeming much less tense and paranoid, and also wearing a shirt again.

"I told you it'd help you ride out whatever comedown you were on with your... magic space drugs or whatever is you do these days..." Stan replied before taking a long hit. Letting out an exhale of smoke that turned into a brief coughing fit, the old con artist chuckled and said "I've got experience, after all. You think I could afford this whole building JUST by swindling tourists with chintzy crap?"

Then, after another hit, he added "Nope! Huge pot farm out in the woods paid for this mortgage. Less cops and deer to worry about but the gnomes will rob you blind if you don't reset your bear traps regularly..."

Ford, who took a moment to remove his glasses and rub his eyes, added in a complimentary tone "I mean, ever since high school, you could uh... really make the most of it." before accepting the passed joint and taking a fresh hit himself. Across from him, Stan chuckled again.

"Hehe, wanna know what my old secret was back then?" He asked, before going into his answer. "Whenever we'd score some, the bits I'd turn around and sell were watered down with dad's tobacco residue, stolen cafeteria lettuce and shoplifted cooking herbs. The good stuff was just for you and me!" Letting out a content sigh, Stan mused "Man, those were good times."
"No they weren't Stanley, those times were fucking terrible."

"HA! Got me on that one Sixer. That's why people say you got the brains out of the two of us!" Stan answered in an amused tone, took the joint back and took a small hit off it. After a moment, he looked much more somber. "Ford, what are you doing back here? Is Dipper alright?"

"Mason is in perfectly safe hands." Ford replied quickly and sharply. For all of the relaxation the smoking had put over the scientist's body and mind, he was still able to recall and address the matter of his apprentice's safety with crisp clarity. "Besides Pacifica being with him we've found strong and trustworthy allies on Mewni, and I'm sure she'll keep him safe. I'll be back soon enough though, once I remember... just why I came back to Earth. Hmm..."

Stanley blinked a few times, processing what had been said before asking aloud "Is... is that Dipper's real name?"

"As long as you mean Mason instead of Mewni, then yes."

The older pair of twins snapped to the room's door as Mabel simply walked in on the two of them, back in her original body. Instead of her usual tendency to walk into the room upright, confident and practically radiating light into her new location, Mabel was currently walking with a heavy, burdened lurch.

"M...Mabel! Pumpkin, uh, me and your great uncle were, uh..."

"I'm a teenage delinquent who lives in California Grunkle Stan, I know what weed is." Mabel responded, voice still sharper than usual but with a small lightening up in comparison to the previous line, a result of her being genuinely happy to see her older relatives despite the circumstances. Without hesitation, she sat herself down on a third chair in the room and addressed her elders with a tired expression and tone of voice. "Come one, pass it to the left."

Both Grunkles looked at each other with an expression of concern, which only got deeper and more serious as they looked back at her and noticed the bruises forming on her face. "Mabel... what happened to you? Are you okay?" Stan asked, his voice completely serious now.

"No, everything's good, just had another run in with the wonders of Gravity Falls." She said in a harshly cynical tone of voice both older men would expect from Dipper instead. However, instead of staying harsh and angry, her expression quickly became sad. "...Why do you guys do this Grunkle Ford?" Mabel asked, her tone expressing deep, confused sorrow. "Is living with me still somehow worse than doing stuff like this every day of his life?"

Both Grunkles were quiet for awhile after this, both trying to process how to respond to the question in the most supportive way possible. Ford was ultimately the first to speak. "Mabel... no matter what else has happened today or what happens next, I want you to know you are safe here. If anything is after you, we will keep you safe. You have my word on that."

"Nothing is wrong though! I saved the ding dong day!" Mabel yelled in frustration, throwing her arms up above her before taking a deep, angry inhale of the room's smokey air. "I saved the day, killed a renegade secret agent, stopped a drug ring from setting up shop in Gravity Falls and basically became friends with those two government guys you mind wiped right after you came out of the portal Ford! By the standards of me and Dipper's adventures here in town, today was a huge success!" Sinking into her chair, Mabel muttered, much more quietly and to herself, "...So why do I feel so bad about it?"

"Oh pumpkin..." Stan breathed sadly, before standing up and crossing the room to hug his great
niece without hesitation. Mabel, despite her dour mood, was quick to reciprocate, feeling genuinely warm and happy for a moment as her beloved great uncle hugged her. Still in his chair, Ford had a more complicated but still sorrowful look on his face. Conflict was raging in his mind but he had come to his decision by the time the two had separated, and he was totally certain in making it. "Mason... you can take care of yourself for awhile, right? The princess will keep you safe." He briefly wondered, before the last flicker of doubt was extinguished with a final realization. "Even if he can't, he'd demand I turn around and help his sister instead."

Rising from his chair, Ford crossed the room and joined the hug, wrapping his arms around his brother and great niece. It felt easy, natural, and not even Stan had some much as a grumble about having to enter a hug again so soon. The three took even more time to separate than the two had, and by the end of it Mabel had a pained but genuine smile back.

Once everyone had settled back into their chairs, Grunkle Stan passed the remaining joint over to Mabel without a moment of hesitation while Grunkle Ford took a soft, patient tone and expression and asked "Alright Mabel, when you're ready to talk about it, could you tell us what happened?"
In a far off, isolated corner of the multiverse, where the song of the spheres sits silent and muted and dark cave walls block out the dancing lights of eternity, the only sound is the almost inaudible rippling of a wooden spoon stirring a pot of soup. Sitting by himself, alone in the dark and still dead somewhere in the multiverse, is Sir Glossaryck of Terms, trying to get the thick broth just right.

As he sank the spoon beneath the liquid surface again in an effort to fish out a prime piece of vegetable, the magistrate of the Magical High Commission quietly commented to himself "You sure are Star. You and him both." with a satisfied tone of voice. However, after the spoon emerged from the soup with its catch, something unexpected rolled to the surface behind it, something that would cause most soup drinkers to recoil in horror: A naked, unblinking eye.

Glossaryck, on the other hand, simply tasted his spoonful before going back for more, even as the broth flowed in waves to simulate blinking over the eye and the whole surface began to glimmer and flatten out, becoming still and turning into a reflective surface that the meat and vegetable chunks still floated through. A cacophony of TV static briefly flashed across the now mirror like surface, before revealing the true image beneath, the continence of Bill Cipher. The floating eyeball, now at the center of the yellow pyramid reflecting in the soup, rolled to gaze upon the still unperturbed Glossaryck. "Hmm, needs more salt." He remarked while smacking his lips. "Bill, what do you think?"

"WELL IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR SALT OL' PAL GLOSSARYCK I CAN HELP YOU OUT THERE BY BURNING MEWNI TO THE GROUND AND SALTING THE EARTH SO NOTHING CAN LIVE THERE AGAIN." Bill spoke in response, his true voice ringing out across the barren space as his reflection flashed in time to his words. "BUT ENOUGH ABOUT PLEASURE, LET'S TALK BUSINESS! HOW IS YOUR VACATION GOING GLOSSARYCK, HAVING FUN BEING DEAD!?"

"Well, if you don't mind me saying so I'm having a lot more fun with it then you apparently did." Glossaryck responded, getting a small smile of satisfaction at Bill giving one angry blink in response. "Invoking the deep lattices of time magic to avoid a little trip to the other side, Bill? I'm finding the whole thing quite therapeutic, the quiet does wonders for the mind. Perhaps you should try it sometime." Despite the sage's deadpan taunts, when the dream demon spoke again however, he was right back to his signature voice of free wheeling charm.

"YEAH, INTERESTING EXPERIENCE, 1 OUTTA 5 STARS GET THEIR WINGS PULLED OFF, DON'T RECOMMEND." Bill babbled with a dismissive tone of voice before adding "ANYWAYS, JUST THOUGHT I'D CHECK IN ON YOU AND HEY! YOU'RE STILL DEAD! AS SOON AS THE PSYCHEDELICS PASS OUT OF THIS DEMON'S SYSTEM I'LL BE ABLE TO PLAY THE WINNING MOVE IN OUR EONS LONG GAME!"

"So, come to gloat then? Really Bill, I thought an all powerful mind demon of the Nightmare Realm would be above such petty taunting." Glossaryck responded with a disappointed tone of voice. Then, with a smug smile, he asked "Are you sure you're not... worried? Come to make sure I'm still dead?"

"WORRIED!? EVEN IF I AM THE EXCEPTION TO YOUR NON-LINEAR OMNISCIENCE YOU SHOULD STILL KNOW ME WELL ENOUGH TO KNOW I'M NEVER WORRIED!" Bill responded confidently. "EVEN IF IT TAKES ME BILLIONS OF YEARS, WHEN I VOW TO DESTROY A DIMENSION IT MAKES LIKE A PINE TREE AND BURNS TO THE GROUND!"
"Yes, of course. Old never worried Bill. Maybe you should use some of your mind reading powers on me to see if I believe that?" Glossaryck asked with smug, taunting tone to his voice despite the delicacy of everything he said, revealing in the dance he was performing around their delicate mutual weaknesses to each other. The soup displaying Bill's image bubbled with some ferocity at this comment.

"YOU KNOW GLOSSARYCK, I THINK I MIGHT HATE YOU ALMOST AS MUCH AS YOU HATE YOUR CHILDREN." The dream demon responded venomously, but this got no reaction from the sage of the spellbook. "I ALMOST HATE YOU AS MUCH AS I HATE THE TIME BABY."

Now that managed to offend Glossaryck. "Oh Bill, I'm hurt. I'm three times, minimum, the annoyance that non-euclidean toddler could ever hope to be. I have far more experience being vexing, after all." He said, a seemingly genuinely hurt tone to his voice. "I've certainly assembled a more impressive resistance to your influences than the Time Baby and his ridiculous agents ever posed after all."

At this point, Bill's nasally but sinister laugh began to fill the cavern, resonating off the black, empty walls of the place. "YOU MAY HAVE CREATED THE QUEENS OF MEWNI AS YOUR PAWNS, BUT JUST LIKE THE MAGICAL HIGH COMMISSION THEY'VE TURNED THEIR BACKS ON YOU! PINE TREE, ALWAYS TOO CLEVER FOR HIS OWN GOOD, TRICKED ONE OF HEARTS INTO LEAVING YOU DEAD, AND I'VE LAID MY INFLUENCE INTO THE OTHER ONES LONG AGO! MY PIECES ARE PUTTING YOU INTO CHECKMATE GLOSSARYCK!"

With a chiding sound of tut-tut Glossaryck again spoke to Bill with that unreadable expression of confidence. "Well, things haven't exactly been going swimmingly for your pieces either, have they Bill? The lineage of queens I created to oppose you still stands and rules the dimension of Mewni, after all, where as the legion of demons you spawned from across the multiverse to be your own pieces live under the queen's yoke and had their royal family slaughtered by dark magic comparatively recently after a long period of time wasting away as two dimensional isolationists steadily decaying under a lineage of random goofy idiots too proud to breed with anything but themselves." The air hung silently between the two for a moment, before the blue humanoid added, with a small smile, that "They'll probably transition to parliamentary democracy within four generations."

The air was silent for a moment, Bill clearly stewing in anger at this last comment. Inside his strange, triangular mind the dream demon was having memories of home, something that never failed to upset him.

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE BEST PART OF EACH TIMELINE HAVING ITS OWN VERSION OF YOU IS?"

"That every timeline will be guided to its needed outcome by an all seeing, emotionless meddler?"

"IT MEANS THAT WHEN I UNLEASH THE POWER OF THE NIGHTMARE REALM TO CLEAVE APART THE FABRIC OF ALL DIMENSIONS AND DEVOUR THE WEB OF TIME, I'M GOING TO GET TO KILL YOU OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN, EACH DEATH INFINITELY MORE PAINFUL THAN THE LAST!" Suddenly, static began to flicker across the surface of the soup again, prompting Bill to quickly mutter one last parting phrase as he vanished. "WELL IT'S BEEN A HOOT BUT MY HOST IS SHORTING OUT AGAIN! HAVE FUN BEING DEAD, I KNOW I DIDN'T!"

Alone again, floating in the void, Glossaryck let out a sigh of contentment. Dipping his spoon back
down into the now normal pot of soup, he chuckled to himself.

"Ah, cleaved. Now that's a funny word..."

The office of the Queen of Mewni hummed with a familiar business, the gentle scratching of a feathered pen against a scroll filling the air. For this round of paperwork. Moon was joined by King River, who was standing nearby with a long scroll recounting Mewman military statistics, which he would provide on request.

Almost imperceptively, a small and far off noise joined the cacophony of quill writings. Despite being overpowered for the moment by the sound of writing, Queen Moon managed to perceive the familiar sound through her own work and abruptly stilled her hand in response, while letting out a sigh and removing her reading glasses. His curiosity peaked, the king asked "What's troubling you Moonpie?"

In response, the new sound gradually grew into a loud stomp and reached its climax when Princess Star kicked the door to her mother's office open. In something of an unusual sight her door kicking actually seemed to be justified by necessity in this incident, as both of her hands were occupied gripping a large object slung over her shoulder.

"Good afternoon Star, what vital matter has brought... you..." Moon had begun her greeting in the tired, somewhat sarcastic but straining to sound nurturing tone she usually used when confronted with her daughter's oddities, but this time her voice trailed off into genuine gobsmacked befuddlement.

"Star." The Queen said, in a tone that was not yet angry but was firmly demanding an explanation for this nonsense. "Why have you brought a young man trapped in a net into my office?"

On the other side of the desk, the fair haired princess of Mewni was panting slightly from exertion while also having a nervous, uncertain look on her face that she tried to plaster a smile over. The source of her exertion was traveling up the stairs with a game net slung over her shoulders, and trapped inside the closed net was Marco Diaz. "Umm... hey mom! Hey dad!" Star began a little awkwardly while Marco shifted around in the net a little but otherwise stayed quiet.

On the other side of the desk, Moon was leaning on her elbow in support and had the other hand up with index finger raised to pontificate a question that never came as her mouth hung open in silent, confused shock. River kept more professional, standing upright and remaining quiet for the moment, though he did narrow his eyes at the two teenagers and was examining them intently.

Setting down the full net with an unusual amount of care for the rebel princess, Star did her best to keep her eyes meeting her mother's even as they wanted to look somewhere else and explained. "So... this is my new boyfriend!"

Both the older royals were quiet for a very long moment, looking straight at the two teenagers, who were beginning to break out into sweat. The silence was finally broken when King River threw his hands into the air and exclaimed "Congratulations Star! You even got the right kind of netting, let me see if you did the courting knot correctly..." As the blond monarch walked towards the net and examined the neck of it with an approving tone, Star kept her eyes on the parent she was most concerned about, her mother.

Queen Moon, for her part, was simply holding the side of her head with one hand while the other tapped against the desk, her whole posture expressing annoyance. "Star, why is Marco inside a net inside my office?"

"Oh Moonpie, don't be silly! Marco is gone forever, remember?" King River spoke up with a bluntly
cheery voice as he carefully examined a red sleeved hand he'd pulled through the net mesh. Remaining oblivious to the weary noise and expression Marco was making in the bag, he hmmed and then stated "Very good bone structure on this one though, if worst comes to worst he'll make a most impressive edifice!" Chuckling slightly to himself, the king elbowed the boy in the net in a ribbing manner, jokingly asking "But I'm sure it won't come to that! I am very confident that this young man knows very well he will die if he betrays my princess." After an uncomfortable silence, he cheerfully added "Screaming!"

Inside the net Marco was had just gotten his arm back and was trying to crane his neck to look up at Star inquisitively, but was having a bit of trouble on that front. "Star, is there a part of this that you didn't explain to me?"

Shaking both her hands at him in a quietly dismissive gesture, Star tried to whisper "It's fine, I'll explain later, we don't actually have to do anything, uh..." Breaking contact with Marco to look back at her mother, the princess hurriedly made up an explanation that she thought would keep her father content, having lost track of the priorities they'd discussed earlier. "No, mom, you see, this is, uh, this is... Barco... Barkerson."

"Wait, wait, time out, Star why are we lying about my identity? That wasn't part of the plan. Alright, I'm coming out of the net..." the boy spoke, now actively struggling with the net in an attempt to get out and stand up straight, only to become still after realizing he wasn't making any progress against his girlfriend's excellently tied knots. "Star, could you let me out of the net?"

"But you haven't even hung him up from the engagement pole yet!"

"RIVER!" Moon yelled, more firm in voice than loud in volume but clearly expressing annoyance. Letting out a sigh, she recited that "We have been over this! Star is not going to practice the barbaric mating rituals of your Clan, she is going to be courted and wed as a Butterfly! Honestly, it is the least I ask of you two..." before abruptly stopping, having her pupils shrink in realization, then abruptly straighten her posture out and look straight at Star, speaking in a comforting but demanding to know tone of voice. "Star... how long have you been... courting Marco for?"

"Moon, dearest, I know you had high hopes for the human boy, and of course so did I, but we need to keep and open mind about Star's new choice of boyfriend. She got him inside the net after all!" River replied in a soothing, completely sincere tone of voice before turning back to the teen couple, right as Star was helping her boyfriend to his feet after slicing open the net with a magic beam. Marco stood up to full height with a small frown and waited for River to respond, but the flaxen haired king simply kept up his supportive smile, until the boy unzipped his hoodie to let River's parting gift to him be seen underneath. "I say Star, your new boyfriend has impeccable tastes! That's a meat blanket befitting a king, haha!"

Another uncomfortable silence passed the room for a few seconds until River abruptly sniffed the air and his expression fell as a familiar blend of meat and sauce residue hit his nostrils. "Oh dear."

"Alright, Star, I'm going to officially mark this plan down as having not worked."

"Really, Mister Diaz? Because I think it has conveyed all the necessary information." Moon spoke up, now leaning back into her chair, giving the boy a piercing expression and making a pyramid of thought with her hands. "How long, exactly, have you and my daughter been... courting each other in the Johansen manner?" she asked accusingly.

Marco gulped nervously at the cold tone the queen had taken but Star was quick to take a step forward and defend him with passion in her voice. "Relax mom, it isn't like that! Marco just got back to Mewni a little over a day ago and we worked everything out and decided to date each other in
like, the last eight hours or something. I just figured we'd do the traditional thing because, I don't know, I thought it would make thing easier!"

"That's quite a short amount of time to think this over young lady!" Moon said with a new, highly haughty tone of voice. "And in such a troubled time? Star are you sure you want to bother yourself with this... rabble?"

"More sure then I've ever been of anything else." Star said back firmly, drilling a stare into the now flat, neutral eyes of her mother. "And this isn't just some sudden spark flash fire of love. I've... WE'VE had feelings about each other for awhile, big, you know... DEEP feelings that grow their way into you heart and hurt so much when they're rejected but feel SOOOOOO good when he loves you back!" The princess explained, her voice impassioned and soaring every couple of words as she tried to express months of emotion. "We just... both did stupid things that kept us apart, but now I'm sure more than ever that I want Marco Diaz to be my boyfriend!"

As soon as her daughter had stopped speaking, though she was still huffing in place with built up energy, Moon Butterfly cracked a small but deeply warm smile at the two of them. "Well then, I don't see any reason why he shouldn't be."

Both teen seemed to be stunned and deflated by this easy acceptance, leaving both at a loss for words that gave both parents a slight chuckle at how cute the children were being. "I'm sorry, both of you, I simply had to make sure the feelings here are, well, genuine." Moon explained, before shifting her focus to Marco specifically. "Mister Diaz, I think you are a fine young man who has proven himself a determined ally of the Kingdom of Mewni with your actions during Toffee's invasion and a trustworthy friend of the royal family for you excellent service to and protection of Star during your time as her guide to Earth, wand incident excluded of course..." She explained, before turning her attention to Star. "Your father and I would have been fine with you dating him Star, we just thought, well... we thought you weren't interested in him."

Upon seeing how strange Star considered that line of thought based on her facial expression, River opted to elaborate. "You see Star, we, and perhaps your mother and I simply hadn't paid close enough attention to understand correctly, it has been a chaotic time you know, we were, well, under the impression you two were simply, well, very close friends, with you in particular not having that sort of interest in him." River explained in a casual tone of voice. "You are the princess of Mewni and the Butterfly heir Star, if you truly want someone there is nothing stopping you from having them you know."

"Although, that would explain why you started using a portrait of that human girl as an archery target as soon as Marco went home." River mused with a bit of beard stroking, completely oblivious to the mortified look on Star's face and the increasingly disturbed and sardonic look Marco was shooting her. "Was there some other kind of problem on Earth sweetie? After all, if the ONLY thing that was stopping you two from getting together was some contesting harlot, well, a little Tournament of Love would have taken quick care of that, not to mention all the other options available to a woman of your station and natural bloodthirst..."

"OKAY DAD! WE GET IT! I UNDERSTAND WHY YOU GUYS THOUGHT WHAT YOU DID, NO NEED TO GO INTO ALLLLLLL THE WEIRD DETAILS!" Star burst out, steadily feeling more frustrated and humiliated until she could only hang her head low and let her long blond hair cover her face. Marco's expression, in turn, swiftly shifted from being put off and annoyed by all this to concerned and caring, instinctively putting a reassuring hand on his girlfriend's shoulder. Feeling warmed by this gesture, Star was able to lift her head up and speak with a more serious, though mildly apprehensive tone. "So... is that it? Are you guys okay with this?"
Moon let out a sort of a happy sigh at this and looked at her daughter with both the pride and the sadness a parent feels as their child grows into an adult. Getting up from behind her desk, the queen of Mewni put a gentle hand on her daughter's shoulder and looked down at her with a warm expression. "Oh, my little Starlight... of course I am. I had decided long ago that, while I would endeavor to instruct you to be the most responsible princess possible, I would always allow your love life to be your own. Besides..." she added, a rarely heard playful, satirical tone coming on the heels of Moon's impassioned response. "...putting you in an arranged marriage would end in a disaster. Whatever gains the Kingdom of Mewni might reap from forcing you into a marriage you'd just rebel against would inevitably end up cancelled out by the outrage you generate by blowing up the castle. Or the dimension. Or the husband."

"And Marco my boy, I must apologize to you personally." King River spoke up, placing a warm but heavy hand on the earth boy's shoulder. "I... well, I really did think you were gone forever, you must understand! After our adventure in the dungeons together I was growing quite fond of you, but with Star seemingly not interested enough in you to break out the old courting net and her time on Earth at an end, well..." His explanation sort of sputtering out near the end. "I wanted to give you a goodbye present, but, well, if nothing was going to become of you I couldn't really give you anything valuable, you understand. Marriages are for consolidating power and artifacts after all."

"It's alright your majesty, that all makes sense I guess." Marco answered, still finding this a little strange and annoying but fully ready to accept and move past all this with the Butterfly parents' blessing. "But, hey, based on the fact you could recognize it by smell, this meat cape must have been valuable to you, right? And in the end, that's all the matters, isn't it?"

Letting out a chuckle and leaning his head back, River offered the boy a strong but friendly slap on the back and responded "Well said my boy! Well said." Then, still in his happy tone of voice, the king swiftly added "Now, make my daughter happy or I'll disembowel you!"

"Thank you mom, and thank you dad! I'm sure me and Marco will be happy together, happy and safe." Star spoke up, quickly adding the safe bit as it occurred to her that her parents would probably enjoy hearing that, and that it was true. "I love him, and I know he loves me."

The three members of the royal family spontaneously closed together into a hug, each feeling the impulse coming from the other two to draw the mass together. As the two parents hugged their daughter with closed eyes and happy expressions, Marco felt his heart melting and expression lifting at the sight. Throwing open his arms, he took a step forward to join them but found himself pushed back, albeit gently, by Moon's wandless magic. The three separated when they were ready, and the queen swiftly addressed the boy with a cheerful "It's still early. Do not give us cause to be upset with you." before turning her attention back to Star. "I'm so glad you decided to bring this to us. Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

Star's genuinely happy expression was suddenly twinged by a small amount of uncertainty. "Weeeeeeell..." she said with a bit of wince, wary of ruining the mood, bending to one side out of nerves but knowing she had to go through and mention it while everyone was in a good mood. "There is this one thing..."

Moon could tell her daughter was planning to drop something she knew her mother wouldn't approve of while the older woman was in a good mood, but consciously blinked back the annoyance this usually caused. The queen didn't want to ruin this touching moment the sometimes strained Butterfly family had shared with each other, and she had been trying to be more open minded about Star since Toffee's invasion. With a nod, Moon indicated she was listening.

"Well, I've been thinking, and I've talked it over with the Pines Family and they'd be willing to help
me, what if the best way to... investigate those weapons the monsters have is a with big par- I mean, diplomatic ball." Star explained, thinking back to the flashcards she and Marco had practiced with to phrase the request in more formal language, and being reminded by a small elbow poke from the boy when she was about to misspeak. "With Buff Frog help we can make some friends, get people talking, calm things down on that front and let you deal with the Underworld while we search out Bill!"

Star was obviously nervous about how her mother would respond to this, but rather than be dismissive or even angry like the princess had worried she might, Moon instead became wary and concerned. "Star, dearest... think about what you are proposing here. You want to go out and hold diplomatic meetings with monsters. That is an endeavor that is doomed conceptually."

Star frowned at this response but didn't respond as fiercely to it as she normally would, as rather than sounding scolding or hateful, Moon's voice was entirely filled with genuine concern for her daughter. She wasn't sure how to respond at first, but fortunately King River was the next to speak up. "But my dear, the fact of the matter is that the Lucitor's have been having such meetings. It's difficult to say how much influence they have over the tribes and villages." He presented in a hesitant, apologetic tone, steadily getting more certain as he talked about their child. "Even if Star fails to sway any of them we'll at least have a chance to learn where they stand instead. I have confidence she will get her answers however." Then, with a slightly darker tone, he added "It would improve our situation significantly if we had more troops available to act against the Underworld."

"Star would be going into the monster's den if she goes off to negotiate with those savages. It would be the same mistake that mother had made." Moon thought to herself, keeping a well practiced steady expression even as the memory stung at her. "But Star isn't exactly like mother, is she?" A newer, more recent voice argued instead. "Baby said it herself, she has the most magic potential of any Queen since Eclipsa, and Star has always been a warrior and fighter, she'll have Marco and the other Earth humans watching her back, and whatever else I think of them they're all clearly capable, so she won't be going in alone..."

As Moon remained quiet for longer then expected, everyone in the room gained an expression of somewhat nervous anticipation. They all realized the queen was making her decision. "Most importantly, Toffee is dead. He is dead! The monsters have no leadership left to guide them in an assassination plot. And she somehow seems to have personal contacts among the monsters..." As Moon's immediate emotional response to Star's idea was countered by a logical counterargument, the real gears of her brain began to truly turn, considering the full range of possibilities.

"Very well Star." Queen Moon spoke suddenly and curtly.

The princess had been primed to begin arguing her case further as soon as her mother responded without really listening to her. Luckily, Marco had figured something like that might happen and when Moon replied affirmatively, he cut his girlfriend off with a polite "Thank you for hearing Star out."

This delayed the younger royal long enough for her to actually process what her mother had said and respond more appropriately. "Well... thanks! I guess!? Wow, today turned out a lot easier than I had expected!" Star exclaimed cheerfully before throwing the net back over an equally grinning Marco and turning towards the door with him over her shoulder again. "Thanks again for everything mom and dad!"

"Star, is there anything you need as part of this endeavor of yours? Supplies, assistance?" Moon asked her departing daughter, who relied "No worries mom, I mean I'll keep you updated but we got this!" and soon after slammed the door behind her. Now alone again with her husband and king,
Queen Moon had a slightly annoyed expression of her face as she straightened some files and went back to work with a muttered "Well then..."

At her side, King River could feel the smile on his own face and privately appreciated that this was probably the least upset he had ever seen his wife in the aftermath of a discussion with their daughter. And yet, he still had a few small, nagging doubts. "I must admit, I share some of Star's surprise Moonpie. I wouldn't have expected you to agree to something like this so quickly."

"Well, if it goes badly we can always betray them later. The monsters, I mean." Moon replied casually as she wrote a fresh signature onto the top paper of her work pile. A small jolt of surprise went through River's body and after a moment, Moon put the paper down and with a worried sigh began an explanation, clearly trying to calm herself in the process. "I understand the danger involved, but Star is capable, has a sizable collection of allies backing her, and Toffee is dead. Sending her out to do this is an opportunity we can't pass by."

"An... opportunity?" River asked, his tone making it clear he hadn't even considered whatever possibility his wife had in mind.

"Mewni has a lot of problems going on at the moment River, and I am not going to take for granted that Star is genuinely interested in solving one of them for once." Moon replied, her previous worry gone and her voice becoming didactic. "With Star going after Bill Cipher and sowing chaos into the Lucitor's diplomatic network among the monsters, I can focus on the Underworld itself."

"But, Moonpie... what if she actually succeeds, and signs some kind of accord? Are you making her a diplomatic representative for this?"

Moon just seemed to hmm a little at this, her focus back on the papers she was writing onto. "Everything Star does will have to be approved by me River, don't worry." She replied dismissively, but with a little more of a serious tone of voice added "And hopefully all this running around will keep her away from Eclipsa."

The two teens walked briskly from the office of the Queen, having broken into a mutual laughing burst that the whole ridiculous thing had worked, and halfway down the hallway Star had finally realized she needed to let Marco out of the net. After he stood up with a small amount of content blushing the boy quickly kept pace with Star, the two walking side by side as easily as ever.

"Alright, what's going on with Mewni?" Marco finally asked as their journey continued. "You wanted to keep the mood fun yesterday and that was fine, but I want to know what's going on."

Then, his tone abruptly turned more worried. "Is it Toffee? Is he alive somehow?"

Biting her lower lip, Star felt a wave of guilt wash over her for allowing her boyfriend to be burdened by thoughts of such worst case scenarios. "Oh, no, no no no no no no no no, no Marco. Toffee is dead. Gone forever." The fair haired princess explained, sharply exhaling as she spoke, as if the words were directed at herself as well. "We checked under the pillar and made sure to destroy the rest of him. What's going on now... well, it's just political stuff. Strained relationships with the Underworld in the aftermath of the invasion."

Though Marco's face did visibly lighten upon being reassured Toffee was dead, he was still expressing concern. "Well, if you'd like I can try and talk to Tom, if that would help, maybe we could..."

"REALLY, Marco, that's not necessary!" Star burst out, sounding more concerned now as the connecting spark in her brain finally gave clarity to the surge of anxiety and hesitation she had felt when this question had been asked yesterday. "Tom and Marco cannot come face to face. If either of
them find out what the other did they'll try and kill each other, and that will end in Marco being dead." she realized, an abrupt expression of worry crawling onto her face. Looking back at her boyfriend, Star concluded that "Mom and Dad will clear things up with the Underworld but I need to take this opportunity to reach out to the monsters, you know, throw them a party instead of a counterattack, build good will?"

Her tone had become one of desperation and Marco was now looking at his girlfriend with obvious concern and skepticism, still seemingly determined to get to the bottom of things. Internally sighing, Star thought to herself "I'm sorry Marco, I do this to keep you safe." then took a step forward and wrapped an arm around Marco's torso, letting her right hand rest softly on his back. The boy instantly stiffened up at this and his quizzical expression became very bright and flustered instead. "Please Marco, this party means a lot to me. I know Dipper and Pacifica will help me out with it..."

Then her right hand moved a little lower.

"...but I'd really appreciate having you on hand for this." Star said, inching closer and giving him her widest, cutest looking eyes on top of everything else.

"...OK, yeah, sure thing Star. I'll help you out with the monster hullabaloo, sure thing." Marco responded after a few seconds of blank thought, his previous concerns completely evaporated. "You know what? Whatever's going on with the Underworld is not my problem. I'm going to help my girlfriend and see where that takes me!"

"Great!" Star exclaimed happily, jumping back from him with a string to her step, though a second later she leaned back in to deliver a quick smooch, in response to which Marco developed a very sedate but very deep grin as blush spread over his cheeks. "Well, no time to waste then, we have plans to make and nachos to bake!" The princess explained before turning around and setting a swift pace towards their mutual destination.

Once she was looking away from her boyfriend however, a short lived steely gaze did settle over Star's normally soft features. "Don't you worry that pretty head about a thing Marco. I'll take care of Tom myself." she thought to herself, before being roused from her self-reflection by Marco speaking up from beside her. After a moment of determined heroic thought however, Star abruptly realized her boyfriend was trying to talk to her, and quickly sputtered "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

Marco, now with a playful look on his face, seemed downright eager to repeat that "I was saying, you're at least going to have to show me what courting in the Johansen manner is."

"Marco! Don't be gross!" Star exclaimed with giggles to her voice, giving her boyfriend a playful punch on the arm in response as the two walked and laughed together.

"What!? I'm not being gross, I just wanted to know what the net was all about!" Marco said back, equally giggily now and enjoying life to the fullest. "You never explained that, you just said it would help me make a better impression on your parents."

"Ok, well, so when two people are in love in dad's tribe, they take turns trying to kidnap each other, dragging the other person back to their home village in a net! How often either person succeeds has something to do with whose family everyone becomes a part of, I don't know." Star explained hurriedly.

"Really?" Marco responded, clearly finding the whole idea absurd but still sounding amused by the whole conversation. "Objectively that's pretty creepy, but Star can make anything sound endearing." He thought to himself, before deciding to press his luck and continue exploring this topic. With a over-dramatic crossing of his arm over his forehead, he sarcastically exclaimed "Well, this castle
already treats me so horribly as a guest, I can't imagine being a prisoner here."

"Keep talking like that Earth boy and I might just have a private cell arranged for you where I can keep you forever." Star shot back, giving him a wink as the two smoothly and easily transitioned into flirting with each other as if they'd been dating for years. "Oh, and the pole thing they mentioned in the second phase: Whoever got captured the most goes back in the net and then has to spend a day hung up from a pole, the winner and their friends has to guard them, and any romantic rivals have one last occasion to try and win them back by fighting everyone and lowering the net down."

"Wow, sounds intense." Marco answered, finding the whole thing genuinely interesting.

"Yeah, so I'd stay on the queen's good side Diaz, or else she might decide to let me court you my way!" Star responded, saying all this in a playful tone that never the less still carried a tone of viciousness to it. Marco couldn't help but shake the impression that Star might genuinely enjoy hunting him down to trap in a net, and to make things worse he felt confused about the idea instead of just feeling upset like a normal person would be. Before the sweat could really start flowing down his palms, the boy opted to play it off with a joke.

"Hey, don't get ahead of yourself Butterfly, casa de Diaz may not have a dungeon, but it does have an endless supply of authentic Super Awesome Nachos. If I got you back there it's be harder to make you leave!"

The two shared another round of laughter together, which gradually trailed off naturally a few seconds after Star had come to a stop in the middle of a four sided hallway intersection. "Oh, oh, Marco, you're as right as you are cute!" The princess said cheerfully. "Could you head off the other way and get Dipper and Pacifica for me? I need to make a few calls and will meet you in the planning room we decided to use earlier."

"It would be my most sincere pleasure." Marco responded in a faux-knightly voice while making an exaggerated, dance like bow that got a small giggle from Star. "See you in a bit." He said while popping to his full height, smooching his girlfriend on the lips, then heading off down the appropriate hallway.

"Bye Marco! Buh-bye!" Star waved goodbye excitedly, though as soon as the boy was out of sight she became more serious of expression. Her eyes shifted towards the hallway that would lead back to her room, where her full sized mirror phone awaited... then took off down the fourth possibly hallway while readying her pocket phone to make her calls on the fly. She'd have to make her calls for help on her way to the rose garden.

Back in the room given to the first three from Earth, Dipper and Pacifica were waking up, having nodded off and slumped over onto each other's shoulders while watching a movie the boy had saved to his laptop for the frequent occasions on which the internet vanished back at home. Well, Pacifica had landed on Dipper's shoulder at least, the boy was a little further up the couch and thus had his face closer to his girlfriend's hair; still as blond and voluminous as when they'd met, but now bereft of top dollar shine and styling.

Pacifica was the first of the two to open her eyes, casting her eyes up at her boyfriend and giving him a small smile. "Hey."

Dipper, for his part, had been half-awake up until she said that, generally aware of where he was but only experiencing it really passively. While getting his head together, the boy first realized that he was leaning up against Pacifica's hair, he took an impulsive, subdued but still audible sniff second, and only realized how weird that would be third. Now fully awake and feeling awkwardly over-aware of his posture, Dipper offered a quick and obviously flustered "Hi." in response, squeaking the
word out while sliding to the edge of the couch.

Looking a little flustered herself, the blond sat up straighter while unconsciously running a hand over her hair. "Well, good morning to you too." She said with a bit of a huff, but when it when Dipper's expression was displaying clear mortification at his action, Pacifica's tone lightened. "Hey, if you liked that you should try again after I've actually showered." She had said that with a chuckle, but her expression fell a little bit afterwards.

Across the couch, Dipper had wrapped his arms around his folded up legs and pulled his knees close enough to cover the lower part of his blushing face. After a few moments of silence, he found his creaky voice asking "...Really?"

"I...you...no! I was being sarcastic!" Pacifica responded, clearly surprised by his response and feeling a little embarrassed by her own words in hindsight. She had chucked a pillow at his face on reflex but regretted that as soon as it left her hand. "Look, what just happened was fine, that was just... not intentional, but I do not want you just randomly smelling my hair Dipper!" Then, crossing her arms over her chest and literally sticking her nose up, the earth girl added "Besides, between my trips to the wilds and the city outside the castle I think the smell from this dimension has already settled in, and I don't even think the people who live here enjoy that."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. Even years and adventures later you still kind of have that faint champagne smell about you, up really close at least. Besides, I've been living in a cheap tourist trap stuffed with crappy taxidermy for a few years now. Mewni doesn't bother me that much so far." Dipper responded, and while he used a jokey tone of voice at first, he was looking nervous after a few more quiet seconds between the two. "I'm sorry, I won't do that again."

Letting out a sigh, Pacifica began to get off the couch. "It's fine, we're both still learning the ins and outs of relationships after all. Don't beat yourself up over it, and if I ever do something that makes you uncomfortable, I want you to tell me."

"Right, of course. Still, I'm sorry for ruining the morning." Dipper said nervously while getting up himself and starting to check around for any indication that Grunkle Ford had either returned or tried to contact the two.

"Ruining is an exaggeration Dipper, it was just a little strange is all. Far from the strangest thing I've seen you do even." Pacifica spoke back, wanting to but the boy at a little more ease. "Besides, I AM still glad to hear I don't smell like trash, haven't quite hit rock bottom yet. It's a slippery slope once you're reduced to buying store brand beauty products..." Though she said her last line with an air of self-deprecating snark, Dipper's response was unexpectedly sincere.

"Well, for what it's worth, I never saw the appeal of that kind of stuff anyways." He commented while shifting through the bag of books Ford had brought to Mewni at some point on a supply trip back to earth. "I mean, think about if... ah, I probably shouldn't say it."

"No, please, continue Pines, I'm curious as to what you were about to say." Pacifica asked, tone of voice a little demanding now. "What, does he think I can get even worse somehow?"

Now prompted to continue, Dipper shrugged and began to speak his mind. "Well, what if we were, you know, doing some kissing, but you had a bunch of makeup on. I mean, would it get all over my face? I have allergies you know Pacifica. There's a reason that 100% of all the makeup to ever be stored in the Mystery Shack has belonged to Mabel." He said, tone getting a little sarcastic at the end but earlier sounding like he was genuinely wondering. His girlfriend felt surprised by this explanation, and needed a few moments to compose a response.
"Well, play your cards right and maybe I'll demonstrate the appeal." Pacifica said, in the most overly teasing tone of voice she'd used so far today.

Suddenly feeling very put on the spot and desperate for a response as his brain came up with several interpretations of what that would entail then battled itself over which one Pacifica had meant, Dipper, in response, blurted out "Uh, no worries Paz, your personality is appeal enough."

Before this conversation could continue, knocking came from the door. Soon after, it was joined by the voice of Marco Diaz. "Yo, Earth bros! Are you guys awake yet? Star is getting the planning meeting for the diplomatic visit set up, you're both still coming, right?" After a moment's pause, he added "Can I come in?"

Visibly becoming more confident and serious looking as soon as the mission was mentioned, Dipper looked over at Pacifica, who nodded at him. Neither of them were dressed for the day, still in the now wrinkled clothes they'd worn yesterday, but they didn't really mind the other human seeing them in those. "Sure, come on in."

The door opened with reasonable force, and the boy in the red hoodie let out an appreciative whistle as he surveyed the room. "Niiiiice. Star set you guys up with the luxury suite, didn't she? Did, uh, any rooms get sucked into a black hole before she got it right?" He asked casually, before his eyes widened as a result of passing over the equipment spilling out of an open, wood carved chest. When he spoke again it was also in an appreciative tone, but with much more genuine wonder and less irreverence. "Woah, you guys came packing..." He breathed while looking at but not touching the collection of scientific instruments and weaponry, not able to tell the two categories apart with total certainty.

"All of that is hand built by Stanford Pines, the most amazing scientist of the modern age!" Dipper spoke with no small amount of pride in his voice, while stepping into place at Marco's right side. Ford would typically get embarrassed when his apprentice introduced him with such grandiose terms, but since he wasn't here at the moment Dipper had decided to indulge himself. "We can show you how they work sometime."

"Sounds cool, could even come in handy during the mission. Oh, speaking of which..." Marco replied while digging for a cleanly folded piece of paper in his hoodie pocket and then handing it over to Dipper. "Here's directions to the meeting room, be down as soon as you can okay?"

"We'll be there." Pacifica spoke, and soon enough Marco left the two to themselves, off to make preparations.

By the time all the relevant humans were inside the minor but still elegant conference room Star had requisitioned for this meeting the princess herself had returned and she had conjured a garishly colored, hand cranked old timey projector which showed a repetitive loop of castle images, being operated by a spider wearing a top hat. Marco entered the room shortly after with a green haired, glasses wearing girl in tow. As advertised, an array of snacks was also present.

"Star, good morning, it's good to see you again." Pacifica greeted while Dipper got seats for both him and his girlfriend. The two couples in the room were making a point to not mention how their last meeting had ended. "Whose the green girl?"

"Name's Kelly." Said the Woolandian, spitting on her palm before extending a handshake and grinning a little when Pacifica flatly refused the offer. "I'll be the muscle for this adventure you guys are putting together, along with Marco of course."

"We're not using regular Mewman soldiers then?" Dipper asked, but in a tone of voice indicating
he'd already assumed as much and wasn't going to argue against the decision.

"Wait, why do we need muscle, isn't this a diplomatic trip?" Marco spoke up, clearly a little confused. "Is this some kind of Mewni thing, where things don't mean what they mean on Earth? Despite the things in question being highly specific pieces of naming terminology? Like Psychology?"

Dipper was about to ask Marco what psychology meant here on Mewni, but the boy's sudden rant had distracted everyone from a different portal opening up, and so the one who had arrived through it took everyone by surprise when they spoke up first. "Geez B-Fly, new nerd flavor not working out for you so you went back to the original?"

"FLYING PRINCESS PONY HEAD!" Star greeted jubilantly, while everyone else suppressed groans, except for Dipper, who expressed his openly and without reservation. Marco instinctively placed a comforting hand on the other boy's shoulder, quietly asking "I see you two have meet already." before Star picked her boyfriend up, carried him over to her oldest friend and set him back on the floor as if to show him off.

"Me and Marco are dating now!" The Mewman princess exclaimed, and despite intentionally putting on a disgusted expression as he was put face to face with Ponyhead, Marco couldn't resist growing a small smile and looking sideways at Star in response to the warm feeling that statement being a fact generated inside him.

Ponyhead, as a response, simply snorted. "It's about time gurl, I knew as far back as the Bounce Lounge that eventually you were either gonna tell me that, or you were gonna tell me he got you pregnant."

Everyone in the room blanched immediately at this, with even Star getting flustered and letting out a rare, annoyed yell of "PONYHEAD!" at the antics of a friend she was normally quite tolerant of. Completely unbothered by this, the aerial princess simply sashayed to the center of the room on her sparkling trail of flight. "So, what's this big party you're setting up all about anyway?"

"For your information, it's really more of a diplomatic summit than a party." Dipper spoke up, taking an argumentative tone right out of the gate. While Star and Marco looked at the boy from earth with apprehensive terror, Pacifica looked ready to cheer him on while Ponyhead looked like she was anticipating his venom with an evil smirk. "The goal is to help bridge the gap between Mewmans and Monsters, and since, to my eternal horror, it turns out you are actually a member of the aristocracy and not some obnoxious performer the Lucitors had hired for their grand ball, we were hoping you'd be willing to sign a proclamation of friendship, help get the ball rolling."

"Oh, is that what's going on Turd-Light? Of course I've got B-Fly's back on this, so what do you bring to the table? Gonna sign the paper as prince of the dorks? Duke of the people who wear ugly red suits?" Ponyhead said back venomously with a slight chuckle to her voice, only to turn to Star and adopt a much more serious, slightly worried tone. "Star you know I want to help you out but my dad still thinks I'm in princess jail, remember? I don't think me signing papers or going on diplomatic parties means anything at the moment."

"Wait, princesses can go to jail in this dimension?" Pacifica asked the room, with genuine curiosity. Then, she muttered to herself that "Dad was always very insistent that we were above the law..."

Marco took the initiative next, answering in a rushed tone to try and keep the conversation on topic and helping Star out. "It's actually a reform school, but it's pretty much a jail. Star and I blew it up but nobody noticed, so a bunch of delinquent princesses are living and partying in the wreckage now."
"Are they all as bad as Ponyhead or is she the exception?" Dipper snarked, but then stood up from the chair he'd sat in and began to pace while he explained an idea that was forming in his head. "Alright, this... this is actually an opportunity. You're saying there's a whole school out there of well connected... teenage...?" He stopped, both speaking and walking, and turned to Marco, who Dipper already had come to consider the most reliable source of information about Mewni. "They are all teenagers, right? Star's age?" With a look of horror on his face, he wondered aloud "Is... is Ponyhead here actually a teenager? How do decapitated unicorn heads age..."

"Yes, there is, they are, she is, and you don't want to know." Marco answered the other human boy's array of questions flatly.

"Then we have an opportunity!" Pacifica cut in, having put together what her boyfriend was thinking right away. "Star, what if we invite all the reform school princesses to the party? If they all don't care about social customs and can do whatever they want, we could massively boost the visibility, prestige and connectivity of the Monster Bash!"

Star's eyes had widened and lit up as she followed this train of thought to its conclusion, then held up her official declaration of friendship and practically bounced on her heels as she showed it to the group, inviting them to fill in the signature space with their minds. "Think of all the names we'll get for this!" She exclaimed. Then, she accidentally ripped the document in half as a result of her exuberance.

Without missing a beat, Marco produced an identical copy, slid it into his girlfriend's grip, and began talking. "I don't know how much that will help us though. The people who actually run all those countries think their daughters are all locked up in reform school, so I don't know how legit their signatures would be."

With a dismissive wave, Dipper responded with "Relax Marco, politics is all about image anyways. Like Pacifica said, even if we don't have the permanent support of their countries, a bunch of royalty showing up will greatly increase the visibility and impact of the party itself." Then, to himself, the boy thought "Plus, we might be able to put Bill and the Lucitors on the back step, at least for a little bit."

Marco had wanted to argue with that, but couldn't find a way around Dipper's initial statement. As a result, Star was the next one to speak. "This is a great idea, but it's kindaaaa not what we're here to talk about today. I like it though Dipper, even if it might make the party a little crazier to plan." She said, and her last statement about the planning abruptly caused the earth boy to enter deep, silent thought. "Ponyhead, could you run this past the others at St. Olga's when you head back?"

"Yeah, sure thing B-Fly, as long as Earth Turd is booking all the entertainment I'm sure they'd love to come by, have somewhere new to trash." Ponyhead answered dismissively. "What kind of trouble are we cooking up today though?"

"Yeah, sure thing B-Fly, as long as Earth Turd is booking all the entertainment I'm sure they'd love to come by, have somewhere new to trash." Ponyhead answered dismissively. "What kind of trouble are we cooking up today though?"

"Yeah, I'll admit, I'm kind lost at this point and not sure who I'm supposed to beat up now." Kelly added, actually causing Pacifica to look over in surprise, as the blond from earth had briefly forgotten about the scrappy fighter's presence. "Are we beating up the Lucitors, the monsters, the... the princesses... the queen of racism?"

"No no no, hopefully we're beating up nobody, this is a diplomatic mission to..."

Star had begun to respond, but found herself coming to a stop as the door to the room opened, catching everyone's attention. The last person to the meeting had finally arrived: Buff Frog, in handcuffs and escorted in by a pair of Mewman soldiers.
"We have the house arrested monster you requested, your majesty." The lead trooper greeted pleasantly, seemingly ignorant of the glare everyone in the room was shooting him, fully expecting to be rewarded. "Would you like me to handle the execution or would you prefer to?"

A few seconds later, a giant pink broom was sweeping the two soldiers out of the room while Star blasted apart the metal handcuffs. The princess had an apologetic look on her face and was clearly preparing some kind of statement, but Buff Frog took the initiative. "Princess, is not your fault. Is just the status quo your have put yourself up against. For that, I am grateful, and remain determined to help you in your fight. However...

He trailed off for a moment, clearly torn and distressed, before continuing. "Must request the permission to remain behind on this mission. I do not think the babies are safe here in this castle, despite promises. Have had them pretend to be tennis balls each time knight passes by to inspect our quarters. Am worried it might not work at some point." Everyone looked uncomfortable at this information, but were also feeling more determined then ever to go on the mission. "There is other, smaller village where I can hide them. Will do digging into Lucitor diplomacy while there, make trip worthwhile."

"It's alright, you do whatever you need to keep your kids safe. That's your priority and I'm sure we all understand that." Star answered, clearly sounding a little ashamed at this. Out of sight of the princess and the monster Ponyhead was winding up to say something but Pacifica quickly clocked her in the side to keep her from saying anything. "Do you need any of us to help you make the trip safely?"

"Is no problem. Babies and I will leave under cover of darkness. Would not want to take more away from mission." Buff Frog answered, then continued with "Had I not the little ones to care for I would gladly remain here alongside you Star Butterfly, but this castle does not seem to be a safe place for them. I promise however, will continue to support you in this however possible."

"Then that's how it is then." Star said with a tone of finality. The princess finally turned back to address the larger group, a new look of determination on her face. She still didn't remember most of her mother's lessons regarding planning and leadership, but she was now more determined than ever to power through without them. "Alright, let's start putting together some talking points for the trip to Castle Pigeon..." Star had trailed off, until something had caught her attention. "Yes Pacifica?"

The blond from Earth had raised her hand while her facial expression expressed a lack of understanding. Somewhat incredulously, she asked "So, is that just the name, or are we going to an actual castle of pigeons?"

"An actual castle of pigeons."

"I hate this dimension."

The meeting continued for hours, with everyone involved finding the rest of the present company fairly easy to get along and work with. Several trips to and from the library had allowed the group to learn everything they could about the newcomers to Mewni's table, even if there wasn't much solid info available. The Pigeons had seemingly just appeared one day, occupying a castle that had been abandoned in the conflict with Toffee and communicating entirely through written correspondence. They seemed entirely reluctant to host visitors but otherwise seemed to be reliable allies of Queen Moon's regime.

"I know you were feeling unsure when we found out all previous diplomatic expeditions to the castle were given the complete cold shoulder, but I think you've got what it takes to make this one the first success!"
Marco had said that while he and Star were cleaning up the meeting room. Ponyhead and Kelly had gone back to their homes, Buff Frog had left early to prepare his children for their departure, and the human couple had gone off to see if Stanford had turned back up. When the princess and her boyfriend finally left as well, those words of encouragement gave Star a soft, warm glowing feeling in her stomach, but it was tempered by her knowledge that she had one more thing to do this evening.

"...and heeeeere we are! Surprise!" Star said happily while taking her hands off of Marco's eyes after kicking open the door in front of them. She had unexpectedly informed him that a surprise had been prepared for him this evening, and Marco had no problem letting Star lead him blind through the whole castle until they got to it: An exact replica of his room back on Earth, conjured into the castle walls through the power of magic.

"Wooooow, it looks great Star!" Was Marco's first reaction as he looked through the open doorway before turning to his girlfriend, only for his eyes to widen as he saw what was behind her. "And it's, uh, right across the hallway from your room." He said, voice a little squeaky now. "That's good."

"Yep, and I even got it right on the first try!" Star answered happily, pushing Marco into his new quarters by the shoulders and then popping back to the other side of the portal. "Well, make yourself at home away from home! If anything weird happens just come get me, my door is always open for you Marco!" Then, she slammed the door shut, letting out a sigh of relief once the barrier was between them. Putting on a more determined expression, Star crossed the hall to her own room, opened the door with unusual care, and found her expectations met.

"Good evening dearie, I hope you didn't cut anything short with that poor boy to come see me. One can never spend enough time in love in my opinion."

Having made a comfortable little pillow formation to sit on, and waiting for Star in her own bedroom, was the Queen of Darkness Eclipsa. She seemed unassuming enough, dressed in her humble pajamas and sipping on a cup of tea, but her expression remained as inscrutably pleasant as always. Despite her sympathy for the imprisoned woman, Star would still have found her sudden appearance here alarming, had it not actually been the young princess herself who had arranged this meeting.

Instead, she was simply slightly unnerved that Eclipsa had managed to reach here, just as the older woman said she could.

"Tell me about the Darkest Spell." Star said curtly, while taking a seat on the fluffy pink pillows and accepting a tea cup of her own. Rather than put her at ease, Eclipsa's remarks about her love life only seemed to have put the princess further on edge, and to her credit the former queen picked up on this right away, and spoke next with a more serious, instructive tone of voice.

"Well my dear, it's a spell designed to kill anything and everything." Eclipsa stated without hesitation. "It will shatter every barrier, sunder any shield, tear through any enchantment and of course, overcome any form of immortality, but of course I'm sure you already understood that part. It's creation was something of a... collaborative effort. My mother had conducted numerous experiments to devise spells that could penetrate the defensive biology of specific monster species that I took bits and pieces of to create my Darkest Spell, and I also used a bit of Skywynne's work on localized time locks to make the damage done by the spell frozen in time to make it harder to heal. Then I added a bit of my own handy work of course and glued it all together."

"Did you invent this spell so you could kill the Magical High Commission with it?" Star asked, staying on guard and to the point with her dealings. "Eclipsa seems nice enough, but now we're entering dangerous territory. I don't think she's evil for loving a monster, but this dark magic stuff..."
could go either way. It doesn't sound any worse than any other kind of magic so far though."

If Eclipsa was bothered by this borderline accusation, she didn't show it. Keeping her steady, alluring and mysterious expression, the deposed queen answered quite readily. "I'll admit, the possibility of doing that occurred to me while I was developing it. I always knew they wouldn't approve of Globby but I had hoped it wouldn't come to violence."

"Globby?" Star asked, a brief moment of confusion breaking her own attempt at an inscrutable expression.

"Oh, just something I called my husband. His full name was Globgor you know." Eclipsa stated casually, then asked somewhat hopefully if "I don't suppose they created any record of him?"

"No, just a big scary painting."

"Of course." Eclipsa said, a tone of slightly bitter dissatisfaction slipping through her guard before she took a sip of her tea. "Sometimes it seems like we're such easily frightened creatures. We Mewmans are quite vulnerable you know, behind all our magic. You could consider the Darkest Spell an equalizer in that sense. Morally, I don't really see how it's all that different for a spell that launches a fireball, or, say, that one you mentioned to me a few days ago, the one with the giant hammer?"

"What about the, you know, the arms thing?" Star asked, attempting to get the conversation back on track. When she spoke this time however, the princess' firm, guarded attitude seemed to have faltered a small amount as open curiosity shown through, though Star didn't seem to have noticed.

"Simply a side effect. The Darkest Spell is a volatile channeling of several not always compatible power sources to allow to inflict maximum possible damage in all situations. It's simply too much for a mortal Mewman to handle, inducing bodily decay." Eclipsa explained, somewhat dismissively. "Power, at a price, as they say."

"I've never heard anyone say that, let alone they."

"I wouldn't have thought so. It's not an idea the Mewman aristocracy would be familiar with. Look at your wand, would you?" Eclipsa said, prompting Star to quickly bring the artifact into sight, a fearful flash of thought telling her the older woman might have stolen it. However, the colorful instrument of ultimate power was still in Star's possession, and while Eclipsa picked up on this, she simply giggled at it. "Now, think about this: What does the wand demand from you in order to do its wonderful work?"

"Uh... magic words, the right emotional mindset, I like to wave it around for extra emphasis but I don't know if that helps..."

Eclipsa waited patiently for Star to finish instead of interrupting, and once the younger princess fell into an uncertain silence as she felt the point was missed, Eclipsa began to speak comfortingly. "The magic wand is not the only source of power in the multiverse Star, but it is one of the most generous. There are other worlds out there Star, where living beings not so different from you and I must scrape and bleed and even kill to acquire the power of magic, and they often get much less out of for their efforts than even the most minuscule of the wand's ejections. The Darkest Spell, which draws upon several of these sources for their unique properties, can be... temperamental as a result." Then, after taking another sip of tea, Eclipsa added "Almost makes it sort of noble in a way."

Star didn't respond verbally to this, but when she gain a questioning expression after Eclipsa's last statement, the dark queen smiled slightly and began to explain. "Well, it makes you serious about
using it, doesn't it? The rot I mean. It encourages you not to just go around blasting everything that
annoys you with the Darkest Spell. You must be willing to sacrifice a part of yourself to use it,
making it the ideal weapon for protecting the things you love from an overwhelming threat." Then,
in a moment of quiet introspection that she was sure Star could hear, Eclipsa muttered "I thought
Moon would be the perfect user for it, but from the sound of things she regrets her sacrifices..."

After sitting quietly for a few moments, obviously deeply in thought and taking frequent sips from
her four sugarcube cup of tea, Star eventually asked "How do you know so much about other
sources of magic?"

"I was interested in them." Eclipsa answered with a shrug. Then, with a smirk, she explained further
that "I was young as well Star, and I had my own pair of dimensional scissors as well. Me and
Globby used to adventure all of the multiverse in order to get some privacy, not all that different from
you and Marco. Oh, I saw so many wonderful things Star."

"Uh huh." The princess said simply, nodding a little bit stiffly.

"Of course, not everything I discovered could be incorporated directly into traditional wand casting,
but even a purely philosophical understanding of other magic systems can boost creativity when it
comes to spell weaving." Eclipsa explained, her own guarded expression fading slightly as it was
obvious she enjoyed talking about this. "I had met a wise man during one of Globby and I's holidays,
for example, whose only magical ability was to create fire, but he went out of his way to study the
magic of moving earth, wind and water, even if he would never be able to command them himself.
As a result he was an incredibly powerful magic user, a most erudite gentleman and made an
excellent pot of tea. Terrible taste in plays unfortunately..."

Star was very quiet for a while, clearly thinking long and hard about something. She looked down at
the wand in her hands, minding her reflection in the star mounted in it, and then casting a glance
towards her bedroom doors, thoughts obviously resting with the boy beyond it. Eclipsa gave her all
the time she needed, but had a knowing look in her eyes the entire time, which grew into a full,
satisfied smile when Star finally asked the question that had been fighting to emerge from her head.

"Do you know anything that will work on demons?"

A short while later, Eclipsa emerged from the secret passages of the castle back into her secure little
room, where Queen Moon believed she was safely contained. She had agreed to help Star about, but
the two agreed to end the meeting after that was established. It was getting late, Star had a mission in
the morning and preparations would need to be made before any instructing could actually happen,
outside of some general tips to use against the natives of the Underworld the dark queen could recall
off the top of her head. They also didn't want to risk waking up the entire castle with an errant magic
lesson.

"Ah, young love." Eclipsa said aloud wistfully, but after a moment her appreciative expression
morphed into an outright frown. An annoyance had been building ever since she finished talking to
Star, a smoldering steadily flaring to life on the skin of her back, like a dying, errant coal irritating the
skin. "Hopefully I've simply sprained something." She thought to herself despite not believing it to
be that easy.

Taking up a position with her back pointing towards her cracked, grimy dressing mirror, Eclipsa
undid the wrapping from around her hair, and after a deep breath, pulled her pink pajama shirt up
and off. When she looked over her shoulder after a moment of hesitation, Eclipsa's annoyed frown
deepened to an outright scowl as she saw exactly what she'd expected.

A faint yellow light was emerging from the tattoo imprinted on the former queen's upper back. Its
three sides were blurred by the cracking, darkening and rot that seemed to have set into the surrounding skin, but the brick body structure and single, all seeing eye still stood out, as bright and as unfaded by time as it was on the day the image had been inked into her skin, a vile concoction of ink, ichor and blood delivered at needlepoint. It was a small sigil, but an unmistakable one: the countenance of Bill Cipher.

Having confirmed her suspicions, Eclipsa put her shirt back on, wrapped her hair, and fished out the bottle of wine she'd hidden at the bottom of her dresser. She drank from the bottle until the ache dulled, then climbed into bed and fell asleep.

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