Summary

The blooming romance promised by possibly-matching soulmarks couldn’t have been further from Dipper’s reality as he’s grappled with liking Bill, much less loving him. But as their friendship transforms into a tentative crush, he’s reluctantly embracing the idea of destiny.

Now all he has to do is convince Bill too.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Welcome to our latest longfic project! This has been sitting among drafts for quite a while, but recently we've had some time to polish and publish it.

About the co-author- that's my personal account, which is attached since I'll be carrying most of the workload for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Squinting, Dipper waited for his eyes to adjust to the brightness of the outside world as he and Mabel departed from the student center. It was quieter than usual around campus, the number of students reduced and sounds of chatter dwindling as the academic day wound to a close. The only disruption was the marching band practice from the direction of the large sports field.

A California sunset had engulfed the area in pinks and oranges, brilliant rays streaking across the asphalt of a parking lot situated between an apartment complex and the dormitory.

The dormitory was their destination, and he was thankful it wasn't far from the center since walking long distances wasn't his specialty with a body determined to rebel against him at every given opportunity. Scaling a single parking lot was manageable when they'd foreseeably make this trip often, being the newest members of the Environment Club.

Speaking of, Dipper turned to Mabel, casting a grin at her. "So, what did you think of the first meeting?"

"It was fun!" Mabel declared with a dash of enthusiasm. "I can't wait to go to the meeting next week. What about you, Dipper? What did you think?"

"Everyone was really nice, especially the club president," he commented as they walked, mind traveling back to the pretty redhead who'd introduced herself as Wendy. She seemed ideal for a leadership position, going out of her way to make them at home. It was a deeply-appreciated gesture considering Dipper already felt like he was in over his head with his transition to university life, undertaking a complicated major that he didn't even like.

Unwilling to let his thoughts drift into stressful territory, he added, "It would have been better if you didn't volunteer us to hand out these flyers." The tone suggested a teasing accusation, and he gently hit her in the stomach with his half of the stack of papers, the other half in Mabel's hand.

One surprised noise later, she whapped him back with her pile of papers, a playful smile across her face as Dipper fell into laughter with her. "It's so worth it, though. We got a can of silly string!" Oh, right. That was how Mabel had gotten them both roped into this. All it'd taken was a little bribe from Wendy, a can of silly string, and Mabel had been jumping from her seat and wildly waving her hands around. "Who could say no to that? Think of all the things we can do with it!"

Stepping off the sidewalk onto the pavement of the parking lot, he said, "I seriously cannot think of a single thing." Well, he could've if she'd mentioned this several days ago. Being startled out of bed at four in the morning for a welcome-to-college practice fire drill, followed by gathering on
the lawn of the dormitory as the sprinklers went off and chilled them to the bone in icy water… silly stringing the hall director for pulling such an evil stunt would've been extremely satisfying.

Returning to the issue at hand, Dipper went on, "Besides, we probably shouldn't do anything with it. Silly string is generally pretty bad for the environment." In retrospect, it was kind of ironic that it'd be offered as an incentive at a club with the specific goal of protecting the earth.

"It can't be that bad!" Mabel began to object, pulling the can out of her sweater pocket to look at the label. "See, Dippy? It's biodegradable, and it'll make for a great advertisement. We can spray 'join the Environment Club' on the ground or walls with it!"

Amused, the idea elicited a smile. "If you were just going to use the silly string to convince people to join, why are we going to be wasting our time standing around and handing these out?" As if to demonstrate, he waved his share of the papers in front of them.

However, he was aware they were more than simple advertisements for Environment Club. Along with various facts about pollution, they had tips on how to save water and reduce one's carbon footprint, important information their fellow college students would probably ignore or throw in the trash instead of recycling. And honestly, he may have been the same way if their parents hadn't instilled a sense of environmental consciousness in them from a young age. As the children of two influential political figures leading green campaigns, it would be near-blasphemy to go against what they were taught.

Mabel shook her head, turning away. He could see the corner of her mouth twitch up in a grin. "Way ahead of you, Dipper! I have a better plan. We can put the flyers all over the cars! It'll be quicker than standing around and more people will see it!"

Attention shifting to the parking lot, his eyebrows raised. "Oh, like… right here? I guess that could work. We could put them under the windshield wipers to make sure the wind isn't a problem." It wasn't windy this evening, but California mornings could carry a chilly breeze sometimes.

"Yeah! I wouldn't make you stand around all day. I got your back." Mabel said with a finger gun and a wink as she looked over her shoulder at him. "C'mon, let's get rolling! We'll be done in no time." And thank the heavens above for that, he was already beginning to feel the creeping twinge of pain.

Trailing after her, he thumbed through the stack and prepared to begin distributing them, mentally occupied by thoughts of gratitude for Mabel's courteousness. Ever since the car accident several years ago, his body was set on self-destructing. The broken bones and hip fracture had healed, according to radiographs, but they were never quite the same post-recovery. Staying in one position too long or prolonged walking produced discomfort which escalated to a dull ache, then shooting pain, and finally an agonizing cramping, but which of those it'd be was dependent on how much his body hated him that day.

Physical therapy could only help to a certain extent; doctors were at a loss, and no amount of questionnaires or x-rays had been able to correctly uncover the source of his chronic pain. Three years of visiting different specialists and intrusive testing had brought him to his wit's end, forcing Dipper to come to terms with the obvious, the inevitable — medical personnel would never diagnose the issue.

The incident put a bittersweet spin on his soulmate marking that'd made it almost unbearable to look at for a while, but time had soothed the hurt. Pulling back the sleeve of his pine tree-print hoodie (he'd dressed appropriately for the Environment Club), his left arm had those dreaded words scrawled across his pale skin in wonky, smooth strokes of inky black, the handwriting of his
supposed true love.

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

Oh, if only he knew. An answer to that question would be a fulfillment of his hopes for a painkiller prescription and the state's recognition of his disability. Unlikely, but it was nice to wish.

If nothing else, it'd inspired a new theory pertaining to the identity of his soulmate, which he'd pieced together using the location of the marking. Because his soulmate mark appeared on his left arm, it suggested they, his soulmate, would spark the initial conversation. In addition, it led Dipper to believe they would be a doctor, perhaps one of the many that examined his case and couldn't pinpoint the root of his discomfort. 'What the hell is wrong with you' would be an unprofessional but understandable reaction to his medical anomaly.

It did elicit sympathy for whoever his soulmate happened to be. His first words to them, a response to their 'what the hell is wrong with you', was inscribed on their right arm in his handwriting. Considering he was an awkward mess of a human being, that response was undoubtedly something oozing socially-inept cringe, and he hoped his soulmate would forgive him for being the reason their inner arm was forever marred by an embarrassing use of the English language.

Passing out the flyers with Mabel wasn't as much of a drag as he thought it would be. She was his favorite company, cracking jokes and making lame puns whenever she could, and despite his best efforts, he was laughing at each one of them. They were making decent progress too, as approximately fifteen minutes of work had half of the lot's cars decorated with a flyer promoting the Environment Club.

He and Mabel made a good team, and he was glad they were able to continue to stay together past high school. It'd been concerning for a while, the thought of losing her to a different university or life path, but ultimately was relieving when they'd decided they could pursue programs at the same institution without being split up. Adding to his relief, Residence Life had permitted special accommodations, allowing Dipper to stay with Mabel in her dormitory, though the all-female aspect was more of a chore than a bonus since the gender-neutral restroom was a hefty journey from their room.

The vast majority of their college experience had been positive so far, including the club meeting tonight. If he could change anything, it would be his lackluster field of study: physics. Regardless of what he did, he was finding it impossible to get engaged with the subject matter— it was bland, uninteresting, and he wished his parents hadn't essentially pressured him into choosing it.

But with his cousin Ford Pines in the graduate program for physics at this university, he should've seen it coming, should have realized they would want him to follow in his footsteps of unanticipated academic success.

He was shaken from his thoughts by Mabel pointing out, "Uh, Dipper! That's our car!"

"Wait, what?" Dipper asked, blinking, then realized his arm was extended over their own vehicle, as he'd been about to place a flyer on its windshield. Retracting his hand, he rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish, "Oh. Right." Keeping one of the flyers for himself wasn't a bad idea if they ended with extras, but putting one on their car was unnecessary.

"Silly-dilly," her tone was good-natured as she approached, and Dipper paused to give her a chance to catch up. "Are you on auto pilot mode? You must be eager to get back to our room!"

That was groan-worthy. "Ugh, no. I could go my entire life without seeing my textbooks and
unfinished homework ever again." It was still the first week of class, but his professors equated that to an opening to pile on assignments. "Sometimes, I regret doing college coursework in high school. It's weird to say, but I feel unprepared now that I'm here."

With most of his general education courses completed by the time he entered college, he was in a position to tackle upper-level physics, yet it often seemed as though he was without the foundational understanding for advanced concepts. He'd excelled at academics until this point, but being shoved into third- and fourth-year classes was taking a toll on him.

"I don't get it," he started to confess, gazing to Mabel. "Mom and Dad got on my case about choosing a major that would have a guaranteed job in the future. Why didn't they have an issue with yours?" Studying theater arts and the acting career Mabel aimed to achieve couldn't be more unstable and uncertain. Worse yet, securing a job was usually short-term and didn't pay well to his understanding, not that he lacked faith she could make this work if it was her dream job. When Mabel's heart was set, there was no obstacles capable of deterring her.

After placing another flyer onto a vehicle, Mabel giggled. "Oh, I told them I was going for nursing! They ate it up like candy!"

"Are you serious?" Dipper deadpanned. "What are you going to do when they expect you to get a job related to nursing?" Faking it wouldn't last forever, a particularly dangerous path when their family was in the media spotlight due to their parents' line of work.

"I'll just act like a nurse!" she said as if it happened to be the simplest solution in the world, and he had been blind not to see the fix that'd give imposter syndrome a new level. "It'll be easy once I'm a professional!"

It was hard to bite back a laugh at that, and he replied, "I'm pretty sure that's not how it works." But nevertheless, he was glad she was doing something she enjoyed rather than studying a major prescribed by their parents. A gutsy move, but he always had admired her courage and wished he could muster the same backbone.

Mabel shrugged. "It'll work! I'll get my degree, go to Hollywood and make it big, then I'll tell them I'm not a nurse."

Although it sounded like a distant, impossible future, Dipper didn't want to be discouraging. "Well, don't forget about me when you're at the top and they make a star for you on Hollywood Boulevard." They could go there together—it wasn't a terrible drive—and take a picture in front of it, and perhaps then their parents would be accepting of her choice of career.

Mabel continued, "Plus, they can't be too mad! It's not like they're paying for our college, I am!"

A flash of guilt hit him, igniting a storm of uneasy feelings within Dipper, and a gentle sigh tumbled from his lips. "Yeah, I... I, uh, hope you know I appreciate that." He'd told her before, many times, but it couldn't be said enough. Clearing his throat, he restated, "I appreciate you."

Mabel balancing part-time school with two jobs was a feat, and he was left feeling responsible for their circumstances since he couldn't exactly get a job. The jobs he was eligible for required either standing or walking, neither of which were comfortable for extended periods of time. Nobody would hire him, not when someone who was fully physically capable was eager for the position as well.

"I appreciate you too! And I'm going to appreciate the thick stacks of cash that'll be coming my way." She double-clicked her tongue at him, and they rounded the corner onto one of the final rows
of vehicles. "Just you wait, Dipper. This school will be mine when I'm famous."

It was fun to envision fame and fortune, though it likely wouldn't become a reality. "I don't think President Cipher would let you buy out his university. From how he talks about West Coast Tech, it doesn't seem like he has much else going on in his life."

"Doesn't he have a son here?" she asked, and Dipper shrugged his response because he wasn't sure. "Maybe he'll leave when that dude's graduated and outta here! Step aside, President Cipher! President Mabel is coming up to bat!"

"Okay, President Mabel," he began with an elbow nudge, "what would you change?" This conversation was silly at best, borderline nonsensical at worst, but it was easy and relaxing to talk to Mabel. It made the task of placing flyers on cars faster, less boring, and easier to ignore the growing sensation of discomfort that came with standing and walking too long.

She grinned at him. "First things first: our tuition is free!"

Raising an eyebrow, he questioned, "Is that all?"

"Nope! Environment Club meetings will be mandatory, and attendance is determined by scanning their student IDs. If you don't attend, there's a ten dollar absentee fee but if you come to the next meeting with cupcakes, it's waived!"

"So your second order of business is getting the entire population of the university addicted to sweets," he clarified, handing out his final flyer. They were running low, and it was just in the nick of time for the last section of vehicles in the front of the parking lot, the side closest to the student housing.

"Yes. And…" an expression of anger crossed her face while they approached the end of the row. "If this prick keeps parking in this spot, I'll have them given a five hundred dollar ticket because other people should be able to get it! I can't believe it's still here!"

Aware of which spot Mabel was referring to, Dipper still followed her gaze to the golden sports car that resided in it and frustratedly huffed, "It's been a week." Pinching the bridge of his nose, the annoyance in his voice raised. "This person has the best spot in the entire parking lot and doesn't bother to use it." To add salt to the wound, it was a parking space he and Mabel could benefit from because complications in his health made driving to class a better option than walking.

But no, because of this car and its selfish owner, they were forced to trek the extra distance, and he certainly felt it later when every inch of him ached from the unwarranted albeit additional exertion.

Mabel glared at the golden sports car, and she reached into her pocket to retrieve the can of silly string. "Guess what? We're out of flyers." She gave the silly string a shake as she wiggled her eyebrows at him. "Do you think they'd like silly string all over their windshield?"

"I don't know," he said, shifting from foot to foot, but that caused him to wince from a spike of discomfort. It was nothing compared to what he would've endured standing for hours to hand out the flyers personally, but a slow walk through the parking lot had triggered the pain. Trying to ignore it, he asked, "Do you think it'll leave a mark?" As long as it didn't inflict lasting damage or traces of permanent residue, the owner of the car would probably see it as the prank it was.

"Nah," Mabel said with a dismissive brush of her hand. "It'll be no big deal. It comes off glass easily! I'm not going to put it on the hood or anything." Better not since this car looked to be high-end, quite expensive. Cupping his hands around his eyes, they narrowed to slits as he leaned toward
the passenger window in an attempt to see the interior, but tinted windows hindered his success.

But she was right, it would wipe off of glass with very little effort, so he caved by saying, "Yeah, just make sure not to damage anything, and it should be fine." Though he doubted Mabel would, she was careful at curating her pranks to maximize the enjoyment aspects for all parties and minimize negative side effects.

With a grin, Mabel prepped herself by rolling up the sleeves of her vibrant sweater and tossing her long hair behind her, widening her stance. It was entertaining to Dipper how seriously she took this, and after shaking the can a second time, she began to decorate the window. "Maybe this'll lighten their mood so they park elsewhere!" she said eagerly, leaning back to admire her artistic masterpiece: a poorly drawn cat face that spanned the entirety of the glass. "Voila!"

The green lines were squiggly and reckless, but the cat face was still decipherable among the strange linework, though it did have an uncanny resemblance to a semi-deflated football that'd sprouted eyes and whiskers.

"Looks like Meownaise," Dipper said jokingly, propping himself on the hood of the car to halt the trembles of exertion. It was difficult to ignore an inevitable stab of homesickness that came with the mention of Mabel's cat. While he preferred the companionship of his cockatiels over Meownaise, the fuzzball of a feline held a special place in his heart.

Mabel beamed, then she turned the nozzle of the can on him, blasting him in silly string before he had time to react. "Got you, Dipper!"

"Oh gross," Dipper complained lightly, shaking the sleeves of his sweatshirt and trying to scrape it off the pine tree-print fabric. "I seriously never wear this," it'd been for fun, a cheeky choice for the club meeting, "and you just had to desecrate it with silly string. Hey, give me that."

Snatching the canister away, he shot the semi-sticky substance at Mabel's sweater, her laughter transforming into squeals of mock protest, then succumbing to a fit of giggles. "It's not my fault you decided to wear that nerdy tree shirt to an environment meeting!"

"It's not nerdy!" he defended, but it may have been a little nerdy, just a pinch. A hoodie with tiny, scattered pine trees and deforestation facts on the fabric were treading the border between faintly nerdy and normal attire for SoCal weather.

"It's like, totally nerdy, bro!" She stuck out her tongue at him, her hands scraping the silly string off her own clothes. "Oh, Dipper! Are we heading to our room, or do you want to hang here?"

Glancing down at where he was perched on the hood, he explained, "I was, uh… taking a break." It was sort of euphemistic to describe it like that, sitting down because the aches would be unendurable otherwise, but he didn't think Mabel would pry. She didn't have to when she knew.

Motioning to their dormitory building across the street, he offered, "You can go back without me, I'll catch up in a few." Forcing her to wait while his body got itself together would make him feel guiltier, so he didn't mind if she went ahead. It wouldn't be long until he joined her.

"Okay!" Mabel grinned at him. "Don't let the silly string bite!" Managing a half-smile at that, he looked down at the can but through the corner of his vision could see Mabel walking away. "I'll see you soon!"

Returning the sentiment, he replied, "Yeah, see you in a bit."

Rolling the can over in his palm, it was surprising to see Mabel had been right about the contents:
it was biodegradable. Reassuring, but he didn't think they'd use any more. Silly stringing a rich
someone's sports car—the car constantly parked in the most convenient spot—and covering
themselves in it was about the extent of its purpose, the rest likely to be kept untouched on a desk
in their dorm among their other odd and end belongings.

Like the bowl that contained mints stolen from the dining center, a new hobby of Mabel's, or it
could sit beside the decorated-with-stickers, framed photos of family and pets. Hit with a sudden
yearning to see the pictures, Dipper mentally cursed his lower back and legs because he knew if he
left now, therefore depriving them of a few more minutes' worth of resting, the walk to the dorm
room would be an excruciating hobble.

But dwelling on it wasn't an option when fate appeared to have alternative plans, announced by an
angry bark, directed at him:

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

He jumped as he was startled from his thoughts by this new voice, one he didn't recognize, but then
realized…

Unlike the source, the words were familiar, strikingly so. They'd taunted him for years, and now—
now, he felt dizzy with a wave of shock and euphoria.

Eyes going wide, his heart took a leap into his throat, and he remembered his soulmark; this could
be it, this was potentially the person. The shadow of his could-be soulmate, the one the universe
predestined for him as a match that would prove superior to all other romances, not that he had
experience in that department.

Ugh, this wasn't the time to think about that.

Dipper snapped his head up to pull the source of the origin into view, and all he could manage was
a choked gasp.

"Oh my god, it's you." The breathless, stunned observation fell from him before he had a chance of
stopping it, and his eyes swept over the lean form standing in front of him. A deep scowl of
displeasure tainted his handsome face, prominent cheek and jaw bones giving the stranger a harsh
vibe, and the tallness factor didn't assist in lessening the intimidation either.

Classy apparel, a black and yellow business suit with slacks, renewed a misplaced feeling of
inadequacy when Dipper remembered he was in his brown cargo pants and pine tree sweatshirt,
apparently quite under-dressed for the occasion. The lingering remnants of silly string on his
clothing probably weren't helping his case.

"You vandalized my car." From a potential soulmate, that certainly wasn't the reaction he'd
expected to receive, and he was incapable of doing anything but dumbly stare in surprise. He'd
thought the initial interaction would be more along the lines of a fateful uniting of combined
astonishment and elation over finding the one they were destined to be with, their best suited
romantic partner. This… wasn't remotely close to the predicted response, and it didn't seem as
though the guy cared, wasn't fazed in the slightest. "What's the deal, huh? Why the fuck did you do
that?" The irritation in his voice hadn't faded, and the strength of the accusation had him jolting
away from the car as if it'd burned him, taking a few steps to establish a safe distance between
them despite the flare of discomfort.

A golden gaze flashed dangerously, but Dipper tilted his head as he noticed a trace of blue in one of
his irises. Maybe it was the sun's evening lighting, playing tricks on his perception. "Look," the
blond beckoned to the hood, "it even got on the damn paint. I'm going to have to redo it entirely."

That was laughable, and Dipper followed his line of sight only to roll his eyes at the "damage." The silly stringed cat on the windshield remained intact, barely touching the body paint.

The shock and excitement of finding his possible soulmate was fading quickly when this individual appeared to be in the running for Biggest Jerk on the Planet. Looked like they had an easy winner — this overreaction coupled with the fact he was determined to park here and never move his car would surely net him the title.

Patience draining, Dipper snapped irritably, "Why? Are you eager to paint it a decent color?" It was colder than he'd intended, and a groan formed on the tip of his tongue as he guessed stooping to this guy's level wouldn't get them anywhere. Giving it another go, he tried to be logical, "It's just silly string, man. Relax."

"Do you know what silly string does to vehicles?"

"It's on the windshield. It'll wipe off with like, hardly any effort required on your part," Dipper pointed out, raising an eyebrow, "but I guess that's probably too much to ask for from someone like you." Namely, someone who'd stolen the closest parking spot and refused to give anybody else a chance at it.

If looks could kill, he figured he would have been dead a couple minutes ago because the glares this guy dished out over a harmless prank were impressively unparalleled. "My car needs to be repainted because of you, and guess what? You're paying for it. Cough up the cash."

Honestly, he was half-tempted to use the remainder of the silly string on this jackass, soulmate or not.

His response was flat, unwavering, "Yeah, no." Peering to the sports car in question, he added, "If you can afford this vehicle, you can afford a better paint job." Then again, it wouldn't surprise him if this was one of those 'mommy and daddy bought me a nice car' situations with how demanding and entitled he was about it. West Coast Tech boasted excellent academic programs and was a lovely university, but it attracted a handful of the wealthy crowd.

"It's not about that. This is to punish you." Although Mabel had actually been the one to silly string the car, so she'd theoretically be the correct one to rain down his wrath of punishment upon, he didn't care to mention that.

"You can't be serious." The dark look he received confirmed he was most definitely serious, and that elicited a bitter scoff. "I don't have the funds to pour into some rich boy's pocket, okay?" He and Mabel scraped by, the result of parents forcing them to make their own way in the world instead of riding on their bank account. "File it with the university if you want to 'punish' me so badly." It was doubtful anything would arise from the complaint since administration would understand it was merely a joke and hadn't permanently disrupted the property of someone else.

The response was a huff. "Do you want to take this to my father? He'll have it added to your account balance as a required fee if you want to continue taking courses at this university."

Great, this guy's father was likely a donor for the university. A loud-mouthed, rich snob that had an equally loud-mouthed and snobby son, but at least he wouldn't have a sway in their decision-making.

"Oh no," he said exaggeratedly, "don't call your daddy on me." Adopting a more down-to-earth
tone, he asked with mild frustration, "How are you possibly a college student? You act like you're fourteen, threatening to get your parent involved." When they were both adults here, it was childish, especially over something that didn't require the dramatics to begin with.

"Think again because it's not an empty threat, vandalizer, when my father is the president of this university." Oh.

Stunned into silence, his fingers twitched at his sides. If true, that could actually be a dilemma. His mind traveled back to an earlier conversation with Mabel, the living embodiment of the rumors standing before him on the dried grass as he leaned against his luxury car. "You want to remain here as a student? Be responsible for your own actions and pay the cost of the paint job needed because you damaged my vehicle."

With a sigh, he swept a hand through his hair and tried to backtrack. "Alright, look, that doesn't change the fact that I don't have the money to spare." The car wasn't damaged regardless, but it was still the truth. "Not everyone can be at West Coast Tech on a parent's dime, dude."

Despite his inability to pay, the guy didn't relent. "Guess you should've thought about that before you fucked up my car. I have to get to work," this was said as he grabbed a fistful of the silly string and threw it on the ground, "but this isn't over. Give me your name and number."

"Jeez," Dipper said sarcastically, "outright demanding my name and number is a really abrasive way of asking me for a date." It was a dry joke, hoping to redirect the attention elsewhere; he wasn't thrilled at the prospect of willingly giving his contact information to someone who had the ability to bring this to the university president, then get him thrown on academic suspension until he and Mabel somehow acquired the funds to pay.

His lip twitched. "I'm not into dating children who ruin vehicles. Your name, kid, so I can find you in the system."

Assuming he wouldn't leave until he had it, Dipper relented with a grumble of, "Fine, my name's Dipper Pines." Technically Mason Pines, his legal name, but the university records would recognize him by either since he'd indicated 'Dipper' was preferred.

Expression flattening, the only reply was, "Oh, you're one of them." It struck confusion into Dipper since he didn't know what that meant, though his bets were on his parents, being local and state political figures.

Before he could question it, the stranger was wiping the last of the silly string away—to reveal an obvious lack of damage, a noteworthy detail that his quick-thinking reminded Dipper to snap a picture of, in case this did escalate. Getting in his car, a smoldering glower was sent in his direction via the mirror, then he was driving off.

If that was his soulmate, the encounter had been a lot less smooth than he'd envisioned it. There were very few ways it could have gone worse, quite frankly— maybe if he had hit him with his car, but on the bright side that would've finally silenced years of bodily discomfort.

The impression, positive or negative, didn't make a difference. Dipper couldn't imagine himself ending up with that guy, his audacity through the roof and ego a sight to behold. His lack of an appropriate response, the special moment of bonding that he'd thought his first meeting with his soulmate would have, was completely absent, which fed him hope this wasn't the right person.

Preferably, his real soulmate would be somebody else entirely, somebody better. But Dipper figured that wasn't a difficult baseline to rise above when anybody who wasn't an inconsiderate
douchebag would be leaps and bounds ahead of that jerk.

Being forced to stand throughout their conversation had reawakened the hurt that stirred deep inside his bones, and a step forward had him inhaling sharply. This wasn't going to be a fun walk to the dormitory, physically or emotionally, the latter bogged down by the heap of fresh problems that'd been stacked on his plate in the past ten minutes.

Well, at least the parking spot was open now. Maybe he'd see if Mabel was willing to grab it for themselves.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed & thanks for stopping by! If you have a moment, comments and kudos are appreciated. :)


Chapter 2

Leaving the parking lot behind, Dipper's walk to the dormitory was a struggle with an uncooperative body fighting him every literal step of the way, his gait a brisk wobble. Despite the rising discomfort, he powered on until he was dragging himself through the open door of his and Mabel's dorm room, flinging his shoes off to flop onto the lower bunk in a pathetic puddle. Digging his phone from his back pocket and tossing it to the side, he relaxed into the sheets. The relief was short-lived, but it finally coaxed his lower half to stop screaming at him with each movement. It was wonderful to be in a familiar place surrounded by the comforts of home. Well, some comforts of home. The dorm wasn't the most spacious environment, so they'd packed only what was necessary.

Mind still abuzz with the excitement of the previous fifteen minutes of his life, he didn't know where to begin when Mabel leaned down from the top bunk, "Hey Bro-bro! What kept you so long? You don't usually spend a lot of time catching your breath!" Any other time, he may have taken a moment to internally appreciate the idealistic wording, glad she didn't bring attention to the incapacity of standing or walking for long periods.

But today, he was dealing with bigger issues that demanded his full attention, and he was worried about how Mabel would react to finding out her silly string idea hadn't been taken kindly to. Instead of a harmless prank, it was apparently the reason they might be facing disciplinary action or getting fined.

"I know," he said, swallowing a sigh and wondering how to approach this. "By the way, I met the owner of the car."

"Ooh! Did you give them a piece of your mind?" She had moved off the bunk and climbed onto his bed, looking at him with interest.

Shuffling to lean back on his elbows, Dipper laughed joylessly and averted his eyes. "Uh, not quite. If anything, he actually gave me a piece of his mind." A harsh lecturing of how he'd somehow damaged the car without any evidence to back the claim. "Remember your silly string cat? Turns out he wasn't a fan of real creativity. Sorry, Mabel." Although he'd thought it was nice, it wasn't as nice now that they had potential fees looming over them.

The grin on her face faded, and Dipper's turned sympathetic, gaze softening. "Oh, he didn't like Mr. Meownaise's portrait?" There was a beat of hesitation, then she blurted, "What a jerk!"

"Pretty much, yeah. I think that describes him." It would be Dipper's word of choice for the guy, but his offenses as a jerk didn't stop there, and he figured he'd have to tell Mabel sooner or later.

After a pause, he gathered the courage to say, "He didn't care for the silly string either. I guess he thinks it got on the paint and caused damage." His voice was flat as he recollected an encounter he'd prefer to forget, regardless of the soulmate aspect. "So... he kind of lost it and started spouting all this stuff about how he was going to make me pay for the paint to be redone, and uh, hey—"
some sort of good news, you were right about the university president having a son that goes here. The bad news is it's this jackass.

It might explain why he had the spot in the first place and always managed to keep it. Dipper recalled he'd mentioned he was going to work, hence the briefness of their interaction, which suggested he did move the vehicle on occasion so perhaps it was an unwritten rule that designated it as his parking spot.

"It was just silly string!" Mabel objected. "And it was on the car for like, five minutes tops! That won't cause damage! He's just being a rich dick."

There was a groan of agreement, and he replied, "Yep, he's basically the worst." At least Mabel had been spared the displeasure of meeting him, that was a plus. "I seriously hope nothing comes of this. Maybe…" he proposed thoughtfully, "he was just frustrated and will forget about it by tomorrow." It was a doubtful scenario, but having the university president and his son breathing down their backs wasn't a future he was looking forward to.

She frowned. "I hope so too! We can't really afford to pay for that, especially when there's no damage and he's just being a... a big baby over it." It made him snort, though big baby didn't begin to encompass the behavior he'd seen exhibited.

"I tried to tell him that," Dipper said, mindlessly tracing a pattern into the fabric of his bedsheets, "but I don't think he cared. We'll just have to wait and see if he reaches out, since I had to give him my name." Mimicking the superior, high-and-mighty tone used, Dipper imitated with an exaggerated chest puff, "He's going to find me in the 'system'."

Mabel giggled at his chest puff. "Doesn't that mean he's going to email you?"

Honestly, Dipper wasn't sure how they were going to be contacted since he'd asked for his number but had settled for a name. "Probably. If he's actually going to go after us over this, he'd have to get it in writing." Emails would be proof, but he had proof too, a picture that was clear enough to show no damage had occurred.

"Will he?" she asked. "What stops him from just.. trying to add it to our account balance, if he's really the president's son?"

Lifting his shoulders in a shrug, he said, "I'm not sure, Mabel. He might not, because when I told him who I was, he... responded like he knew our family." 'One of them' was what he'd referred to them as, but he still didn't know what that meant. "Which isn't the most outlandish thing in the universe, but he phrased it kind of weirdly."

Mabel let out a hum, seemingly in thought before she lit up. "Do you think he knows Ford?"

Caught off guard by the idea since the possibility hadn't dawned on him, Dipper tilted his head in consideration. "He could?" It was tentative. "Ford's been going here for a while now, so it's not impossible. We could always ask." It wouldn't hurt when the worst that could happen was Ford stating he had no idea who the guy was, which would push them into phase two: trying to locate him online. Collecting as much information as possible would facilitate educated decision-making, according to his forming but intricate mental plan.

"I'll text him!" She whipped out her phone, fingers dancing across her screen. "He'd better respond soon!"

"I think we can cut him a little slack," Dipper said with a faint grin. "It's not like we need an answer
this minute, and Ford's probably busy." It seemed the average graduate student was, especially at West Coast Tech where the programs were verging on the strenuous side.

Leaning into Mabel, Dipper silently thought about their conversation so far, wishing he had a better idea of how to tackle this silly string dilemma that didn't result in having to go hungry for a month as they shelled out massive amounts of money. It was ridiculous, demanding they pay for an entire paint job, meanwhile there was an utter absence of damage.

And then… there was a completely different problem, manifesting as that jerk's potential for being his soulmate. Dipper wanted to smack his head against a wall. "Hey Mabel," he started, sounding a bit distant, "you know how the media and our parents and everyone who ever lived said that the day we meet our soulmate will be amazing?"

"Of course," Mabel bobbed her head, and as she spoke, Dipper pulled back his sleeve to reveal the marking. The words rang in his head, exactly how he'd heard them, but Mabel's voice interrupted the memory. "It's supposed to be super duper romantic! You were made for each other, after all!"

That put the uneasy feeling back into him with a vengeance, but she was right. The world seemed to collectively adore the concept of soulmates, seeing it with rose-tinted glasses, and yet the pressure of pursuing a relationship now that he'd actually found his would be overwhelming if he passed the news onto his parents. It was how things were, nobody could escape the societal expectation.

Dipper went on, "And everyone says there'll be a spark, we'll instantly hit it off, we'll go for a romantic walk, and then we'll be considering marriage by the end of the week?" Frustration was inching in his voice, body increasingly tense. "Well, that's a bunch of bullshit because I think I may have just met mine."

There were no romantic walks, no chaste kisses under a street lamp in a drizzling rain, no connection upon meeting one another. There was still a glimmer of hope, though. The lack of reaction implied there was a minimal chance his soulmate wasn't that jackass.

"You met yours?!!" She looked up from her phone. "Who, him?" His confirmation was a miserable nod and a 'mm-hmm', similarly wishing it wasn't true. "You can't be serious!"

"I mean, he said…" Dipper motioned to the mark, the 'what the hell is wrong with you' scribbled into the underside of his left arm. "And I didn't get a chance to see his soulmark. I couldn't because he was wearing a blazer, so it might not be the right person…? When I talked to him, he didn't seem to flinch or anything, he just kept ranting about his car."

Mabel made a face. "Yikes, Dippy, it better not be him! He sounds like a piece of work. You deserve better."

"I wasn't going to act on it." If he did have to interact with him in the future, soulmates were staying out of the discussion; he couldn't risk it, didn't want to be stuck with somebody like that. "Don't tell Mom and Dad, okay?" Dipper asked near-pleadingly, rubbing his arm in guilt. "They're already pressurring me to get a job," easier said than done for someone in his position, "so I bet they'd really push for the whole… 'be-with-your-soulmate' thing." It was a common worldview when soulmates were generally seen as gifts and enhancements to a single lifestyle, but Dipper knew better.

"I won't say a word," she told him with a serious expression, using her hand to 'zip' her lips, and he exhaled a strained puff of air he hadn't realized he was holding. "I don't want you to be forced into a relationship with Mr. 'My-Car-Is-Ruined-Because-of-Silly-String'. Gross!" Neither did he, so he was glad Mabel was on board with their plan to keep it hushed from their folks, who could quasi-
force him to go through with a courtship.

Dipper snickered and said, "Mr. 'My-Daddy-Will-Make-You-Pay'. Who cares if we don't have the money? Obviously, this rich boy's car can't wait on peasants like us to scrape up enough cash."

Mabel clicked her tongue. "I hope I meet my soulmate soon! I hope he's better than your maybe-maybe-not one, or my… previous relationships. They were all kind of duds."

"With a little luck, your soulmate will be the complete opposite of mine," he dryly commented, beginning to list off traits on his fingers. "Compassionate, genuinely a good person, and oh- right, not a pretentious asshole with absolutely no sense of humor." While he spoke, he was sending a prayer to every god he could think of that his soulmate wasn't that guy he'd crossed paths with earlier.

"I don't know if he's got all that, but there's a cute boy in one of my classes and he's so mm, I just want to rip his shirt off and make out with him all night."

"Oh god. That— that is something I did not want to know, Mabel," Dipper said, giving her a playful nudge, "I get that we're in college now, but I still don't want to hear about it." Letting her gush about her crushes was one thing, the specifics of what she wanted to do with them was another entirely, and as her twin brother, he wasn't interested in conversations better suited for Mabel's group of friends.

Mabel gave him a small grin. "You might be hearing it more since we share a dorm, Bro-bro." Slightly horrified at the implication, his lips dropped into a deep frown as he stared at Mabel. "What? If you really don't want to walk in on that, we can set up a system so you know when to not come in. Likeeee," she dragged on the word as she thought while her eyes danced around the small room, "you know how we have the whiteboard on the outside of our door? I can draw a winky face on it. If you see it, you know things are happening!"

Or he'd know from the fact the door was closed since Mabel had a strict policy of keeping it open whenever they were here (minus quiet hours), claiming they looked more approachable this way. According to her, it was the key to creating lasting friendships around the residence hall, but the few visitors they'd received so far were ladies wondering: initially, if they were dating, a question that never failed to make him gag, and next, why they were permitted to share a room being of the opposite sex.

Despite his thoughts, he said, "Yeah, okay, that works." It'd serve its purpose— warning him of incoming eye trauma that he didn't want to witness.

She leaned forward to peer at him. "You better do the same Dippy! Even though you probably won't be getting any action." At his protesting 'hey', Mabel flippantly said, "You're kinda like Ford with how much you study."

"I'm taking eighteen credits worth of classes! I don't have time for dating or… romance, or any of that stuff." Studying soaked up the majority of his free time, and it was another reason why he clearly shouldn't be bothered with the complications of having a soulmate. His large class load was an attempt to continue cruising through his studies, aiming to complete the undergraduate degree as early as possible so he could get a career position, then help Mabel with the financials. For once, he wouldn't feel so… useless.

Shaking the thought away, he murmured, "Sometimes, I kind of wish I was a blank, like Stan and Ford. Then I wouldn't have to worry about it." Having no soulmark at all would be better than this, compounded by his experience today.
"Why would you want that?" she asked. "If you don't have a mark, you'll never know if you'll find your one true love! And everyone will think you're some sort of freak over it."

Skeptically, his eyebrows raised. "Trust me, that isn't a problem. I already get called a freak with my birthmark." Having no soulmate marking would probably compound that, because no marking meant the soulmate was dead, resulting in a semi-faded mark, wasn't alive yet, or there was no soulmate for that individual. "But look, if it's that—"

Mabel's phone buzzed, and she glanced down at the phone, beaming. "It's Ford!"

Perking up in interest, Dipper shifted to a sitting position beside Mabel to ask, "What did he say?"

Crossing his fingers and hoping for good news, hoping they wouldn't have to pay an obscene sum of money, hoping they wouldn't have to worry about this anymore...

"Let's see… he says his name is Bill Cipher, he's an asshole—"

"Are you just paraphrasing this?"

"—who's actually the university president's son, and that he'll wreck us. He also said they're colleagues. Like, they personally work together so he'll try to talk to him."

"They work together?" Dipper repeated in a question, ensuring he'd heard that correctly. "As far as I know, Ford doesn't have a job." Being a graduate student was his full-time occupation; he taught classes, and studied even harder than he did.

Mabel glanced at him. "Isn't Ford in a science program? Maybe they're Team Science Nerds."

"He's getting another PhD, this one in physics," Dipper supplied, painfully aware. It'd been drilled into him ever since the end of high school with his parents encouraging him to enter the same lucrative field, but luckily hadn't requested he try to breeze through it as Ford did. "So this, uh, Bill Cipher guy—he's… a graduate student too?" And worked with Ford.

Great, he thought sarcastically, this kept getting better and better.

"I think so!" She set her phone down. "If he knows Ford on a personal level, I don't know what else he'd be! Ford doesn't get around much."

"That… is actually really sad," he said, lips curving downward into a grimace.

She snickered softly but gave him an affectionate clap on the back. "It's just you in five years, don't worry!" Although she was joking, he wondered if she was right.

"Gee, thanks Mabel," he rolled his eyes, "I feel so reassured." Perhaps keeping the door open wasn't such a bad idea.

Moving to a previous discussion, the pressing problem, Dipper said, "If Ford can talk him out of draining our funds, that'd be nice. I don't know why he thinks we have the money to spare for this, but we don't." If the Pines name was familiar to Bill, that may have been why, but their situations were different. He and Mabel didn't get parental assistance with funding their educations.

"What do you wanna do if Ford can't? He doesn't sound like a super reasonable dude."

Swallowing nervously, he tried to wrack his mind for something, anything, that might get them out of this. "I… I don't know, but I'll figure it out. I can handle it." Mustering confidence, Dipper tried to restate without his voice wavering. "I'll see what he wants and go from there, but you don't have
to worry about it." Mabel had a lot to juggle between two jobs and a couple classes, so he was determined to resolve this on his own. It'd be the least he could do.

She shuffled to move off the bed, her phone slipping in her pocket. "Okay! Keep me updated, Broster! Do you want to come with me to visit with our neighbors, chat it up with the other open doors?"

"Oh nah, I'll stay." His eyes shifted to the stack of papers, a closed laptop, and textbooks on his desk, the items a silent reminder that joining Mabel on her quest to befriend the student population wasn't a priority. "Got some studying to do." Unfortunately. Socializing would quite possibly be less painful than upper-level physics coursework.

Sore muscles were the lasting effect of a day of strain as he sat upright and left his bed in favor of a desk chair. Much less comfortable, but a necessary evil if he wanted to actually get something done.

There was shuffling behind him, undoubtedly Mabel throwing on shoes and preparing to depart, likely eager to charm the rest of the building with her magnetic personality. "Alrighty, I'll see you soon! Text if you need me!"

"Uh, don't be gone too long! And remember quiet hours start…" he paused, taking a quick glance at the informational sheet pinned to their corkboard, "at ten." The last thing they needed was an additional disciplinary strike against them with this Bill Cipher chaos.

Now that Mabel was gone, there was no distraction from the flood of anxiety that engulfed him, needless fretting over a situation that hadn't come to fruition. If it did, he had no idea what they were going to do. The paint job was too costly, not to mention unnecessary, and academic suspension was a frightening thought but an unconventional solution, an unlikely outcome.

Trying to focus on something else, he cleared a small space on the desk, big enough to open his laptop and begin a study session bound to end in frustration with the subject matter.

Powering on his laptop the following morning greeted him with two surprises.

The first was a hold on his student account, a temporary method of barring him from participating in his courses— if it wasn't removed, that'd inevitably result in failing the semester, though he'd been on that track without the added difficulty. At least now he'd have an excuse, other than being disenchanted with physics and thrust into advanced classes.

Well, a hold wasn't academic suspension, but it was going to be a pain.

The second was a new email from—surprise, surprise—a certain Bill Cipher, and with his heart in his throat, Dipper scanned it:

Dearest Mason Pines!

Thought you could escape by giving me a nickname when I asked for your information? No sirree, you tricky devil! I have placed a hold on your account to ensure you cannot weasel your way out of paying for the paint job.

To remove this, simply pay the eight thousand dollars necessary to cover the damages. While a vehicle paint job is normally around one thousand, I will not be settling for such a shoddy job! My vehicle deserves top quality paint!
If you're unable to reimburse me monetarily, we can meet in person to work out an arrangement for you to pay it off.

You have until 11:59 pm on Monday to respond to this email, or the hold on your account will not be removed.

Best wishes!

_Bill Cipher_

What... a strange email. What a strange guy. Honestly, Dipper hardly knew what to think about that but guessed he didn't have a choice, he'd have to remove the hold somehow. Pleading probably wouldn't help under these circumstances, but when he didn't have the funds to spare, he was low on options.

Looking over the message, the timestamp on the email indicated it'd been sent approximately about two hours ago at an obscene hour of the morning, perhaps when he got off from work, and Dipper wondered if he was still at his computer. Drafting a quick reply, he wrote:

_Hi,

I know yesterday's exchange wasn't the most productive, but it remains true that I don't have money to give you, much less for a paint job when your car doesn't require one at all. If needed, I have pictures to prove the lack of damage.

But as you're well aware, there is currently a hold on my account (thanks), which means I cannot resume normal participation in my classes. I'd like to have this removed, and if organizing a face-to-face meeting is what you'd like to do, then I can accommodate. Let me know when and where, I'm available throughout the weekend.

Regards,

_Dipper Pines_

(Dipper is still my preferred name, but feel free to continue using Mason. Dipper is reserved for non-douchebags.)

That last part would have to be deleted prior to sending, an unprofessional ending to an email that needed to maintain some semblance of neutrality, but he was frustrated and couldn't help himself. It was cathartic, even if its target would never see it.

Dipper sighed and turned away from the still-only-a-draft email, rising from the desk chair and approaching their bunk beds. "Mabel," he murmured, peering over the edge of the top bunk to bring her sleepy form into view, "wake up. Hey." Gently, he hoisted himself onto the bed, sitting cross-legged near the end to shake her knee and rouse her to consciousness. "That jerk emailed me."

Mabel stirred, hand moving to swat his away until she seemed to hear his final comment. "He did?" her voice was a murmur, confused and tired. "What'd it say?"

"Well, he's still convinced we need to pay him back," Dipper said, "but since he seems to realize we can't, he also gave this weird alternative. I guess if I meet him in person, he thinks we can work out a different arrangement?" Aloud, it sounded a little more intimidating.

"What, is he going to have you suck his dick a thousand times?"
Moving his hands aside revealed Mabel with her eyebrow raised at him, slowly sitting up. "I dunno, Dippy. You're not very experienced yet!"

"This… is seriously getting off topic. Look, the point is, I'll probably have to meet the guy today or tomorrow sometime, and I'll let you know what he wants from me." Glancing to his opened laptop, its glow illuminated the dimly lit room, the sun barely over the horizon. "Do you want to see what I have written before I send it?"

"Yes!" She was already moving to hop off the bunk. "I bet it's juicy!" Mabel scaled the room to peer down at the laptop. After a moment, he could see the corner of her mouth twist into a smirk. "It's perfect! I'm sending it, Dippy!" Click.

Panickedly squeaking, a rushed "WaitMabelno!" complete with a voice crack spilled from him as he fought to scramble off the bunk bed and stop her, but it was too late. "You sent it?!!" Hyperventilating, he clawed at his chest in desperation, eyes wide and horrified.

She paused, looking at him. "Was I not supposed to? It looked great."

"Oh my god, oh my god, I… okay," he tried to catch his breath, "did you read it? I— I basically— oh god. I was frustrated so I put in something at the end that I was going to delete!" It was official: this hotshot Bill Cipher dude was going to financially ruin them. "I don't remember exactly what it said, but it wasn't good. I'm pretty sure I called him a douchebag in the email." Here he'd been extended another chance to make amends and resolve this peacefully, but he'd messed it up… again. How could he possibly be soulmates with him?

"It's accurate though!" Accurate didn't always mean suitable for an academic exchange, he mentally noted. "I'm sure he'll appreciate your honesty with him." Mabel gave him a small grin. "Don't worry about it!"

"He couldn't appreciate a harmless prank," he pointed out as his eyebrows pinched together in concern, "I don't think he'll be letting this one slide."

Her grin faded. "Do you think it'll be an issue?"

"I don't know, I just…" a shaking hand swept through his hair, further mussing the already-wild brunet fluff, "hope not." It could result in the retraction of his alternative payment offer, which would be bad since they didn't have an extra eight thousand dollars floating around their bank accounts.

Mabel blinked. "Well… maybe we can hack into his account and delete the email! Or steal his laptop and do it! He probably has all his passwords placed on 'remember me'!"

It would have been a plausible idea, if not for key hang ups: they didn't know where Bill lived, where his laptop was, how to hack, how to steal, or if he'd even read the email by now. "I was thinking something more along the lines of… maybe, not becoming actual criminals over this."

"It's just borrowing it!" she chirped cheerfully.
That sounded familiar, and he narrowed his eyes as he tried to determine where he'd heard it before. Then, it hit him, and he huffed. "Stop spending so much time with Stan. His loose morals are rubbing off on you."

She shrugged. "Nah, his great morals are! That's why I took Richard's spot last night!"

"Okay, I have no idea who Richard is and why you took his spot." There was a lot he didn't comprehend about that sentence, and he was staring at Mabel quizzically as he awaited an explanation.

"Richard is Daddy's Boy because he's a dick. Duh."

Oh, that… made a lot of sense and was weirdly appropriate for the person it described, but then he pieced two and two together. A jolt of shock washing over him, Dipper gasped, "You took his parking spot?!" Sure, he'd joked about it silently to himself, but he didn't think Mabel would have the audacity to act on it.

"Yup! He wasn't in it, so I claimed it." She glanced away, looking at the laptop when it made a quiet ding noise, the alert of a new email. "I think you got a reply!"

Anxiety and adrenaline shook him to his core, and he brushed past Mabel to walk toward the screen. "Yeah," he said, throat suddenly dry, "he got back to me." Trying to suppress the overwhelming urge to shut his laptop and never read another communication from "Richard", Dipper read the message while Mabel looked on over his shoulder:

Mason,

It's clear my vehicle required a new paint job after you vandalized it and sat on my hood! Any images you decide to provide have been manipulated to your favor, and neither the university nor I will stand for such deceit. You're lucky the administration hasn't expelled you for your inappropriate behavior.

About the hold (you're welcome), I knew I couldn't trust you after you tried to give me the wrong name. We can meet tomorrow at 4 am by my parking spot. I'm sure you'll like what I did to the vehicle invading my personal space!

Best wishes!

Bill Cipher

At that, Mabel hummed. "He's so dramatic!"

"Looking forward to seeing what he did to our vehicle," he muttered sarcastically. "Whatever it is, we should ask for eight thousand dollars to fix it." Pettiness aside, he did wonder what the meeting would be like, at four in the morning no less. Forcing himself out of bed tomorrow was going to be rough. "Guess I better go to sleep early tonight so I'm not a tired mess for this."

"Are you really going to meet him at four?"

"I don't have a choice, Mabel. He named his time and place, so..." he trailed off with a defeated shrug, "I can't exactly tell him to change it when we're the ones in trouble if I don't show." The hold on his account wouldn't be going anywhere, Bill Cipher had made that quite clear.

Mabel frowned at him, and he lowered his gaze, resting his face in his palm. "Alright, well, I'm gonna go back to bed. You should too."
"Yeah, I know." It was a daunting task when his thoughts were of the stressful sort, and he didn't know how to calm down enough to rest until it was actually time to start the day.

To his surprise, she grabbed his hand abruptly, pulling him away from the laptop and tugging him over to the bed, and although he was confused, he was compliant to her take-charge attitude. "Sir Dippingsauce," she addressed playfully, and he smiled faintly at the nickname, "it is bedtime. Down."

With a tired chuckle, Dipper lowered himself to his bed and replied, "Whatever you say, Lady Mabelton." It didn't guarantee sleep, but he was grateful for the direction nonetheless- if not for her, he probably would've sat awake for hours simply staring at the email correspondence and fretting over it. "I'll try to get some sleep."

When it seemed Mabel was going to leave, he instinctively tightened his grasp and pulled her closer, not wanting to be alone. She flopped on top of him, wrapping around him as she snuggled close.

Dipper nuzzled her appreciatively, comforted by her presence. "Do you, uh, mind staying here for a bit?" It'd probably help him sleep, but he wasn't going to pressure her to, as it was rather cramped since the bed was only meant for one. He was glad they were relatively small and fit together nicely, they always had.

"Of course I'll stay."

Eyes fluttering closed, he quietly murmured, "Thanks."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 will be out next week. Thanks for reading :)
Chapter 3

As planned, Dipper had gone to bed early but the alarm clock still startled him into a sleepy consciousness. His eyes stung. His head was foggy. The driest desert in the world was nothing compared to how his mouth felt. It was too early to be awake, too early to be doing anything except enjoying another few hours of rest, and definitely too early to be dealing with a pompous prick who may or may not be his soulmate.

Turning off his phone's obnoxious alert so as not to disturb Mabel before she had to wake up, Dipper squirmed out of her embrace, already missing the warmth and familiarity that cuddling provided. After napping together yesterday, it'd seemed to become a welcome staple of sleeping, since he was less restless with her curled around him.

Glancing to her, he blinked when he saw two bright eyes looking back at him. "Mabel? Sorry," he apologized quickly, "I didn't mean to wake you. Just… go back to sleep, okay?" When he'd promised he would be the one to take care of the situation, he was sticking to it; he didn't want to drag Mabel into this messy affair when she had plenty of things to worry about in her own life, such as balancing the two jobs supporting them and a college education.

Mabel peered tiredly at him, shuffling to burrow more in his bed, the red plaid sheets rustling around her. "Come back soon," she murmured. "It's not as warm in here without you." It was tempting him to blow off the meeting and resume resting with Mabel, but he fought down the urge.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he promised. With Mabel seemingly resuming her slumber, Dipper turned away to look through his side of the wardrobe for something to wear, fumbling in the dark. Standard Dipper attire was easy to come by: a pair of jeans, plaid shirt, and the pine tree hoodie, the latter a precaution against a potentially-breezy California morning.

A glance in the mirror had him cringing: ruffled hair, dark bags under brown eyes, wrinkled clothes, overall a disheveled, very four-in-the-morning appearance. Ragged, but perfect for the occasion and an extra 'fuck you' to the guy who forced this meeting.

The crisp weather reaffirmed his hoodie was an excellent idea, allowing the walk to the parking lot to be a cozy one despite the time of day. Not even the sun was up yet, the only light provided by lamp posts and the stray headlight passing through, and he hoped this would be a quick interaction, settling what they needed to so he could return to sleeping. It was unfortunate that the colder weather plus his anxiety combined to spread adrenaline, waking him further.

Leaning against the front side of their vehicle was the jerk known as Bill Cipher, twirling what Dipper could only assume were keys between his fingers as his shadowy figure watched him approach. "Do you have the money, Pine Sapling?"

Unparalleled nerve and still wearing a formal suit, classic Richard.

"Pine Sapling," Dipper repeated as he closed the distance, quirking an eyebrow. "Really." They weren't on good terms, and this guy was going to whip out the awkwardly affectionate nicknames? "Look, I don't have the money." Something he'd mentioned to Bill multiple times. "I'm just here to get the hold off of my account before the end of the weekend." It'd be Monday, the day classes resumed, and he couldn't afford to miss it with a course load a mile high.

"Then I guess you'd better figure out something fast, kid, or that hold's there to stay until you cough up some cash or a check."
Yeah, that wasn't going to be happening. "So what's this alternative you mentioned?" Dipper asked, pausing with about five feet of space between them, a totally appropriate amount of breathing room for a conversation with someone like this. "You know, the Bill Cipher charity fund slash backup plan because you're dealing with a broke college kid who doesn't rely on his parents to handle everything for him."

Bill scoffed. "It's not my fault you didn't think of that before you ruined my car."

"Oh, spare me the lecture," he said flatly, his capacity for this running thin considering he was in bad spirits, being coerced into doing this at an unreasonable time of day. Not surprising since it was set by an equally unreasonable human being. "It's four in the morning, can you get to the point?" The faster they did this, the better— the hold would be removed, he could get back to Mabel, and he wouldn't have to worry about his chronic pain acting up.

"Listen up, princess," his voice had gotten hard, cold. "I don't give a shit how early it is, you're the one responsible for this. Maybe you should've fucked with someone else's car if you wanted this to be concluded, 'cause unlike others I'm not here to let you get away with your poor behavior." Speaking of poor behavior...

Exasperated, Dipper pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled, trying to release his frustrations along with the puff of air. Otherwise, this was once again going to turn highly volatile and probably result in the hold staying. "Okay, okay, show me what I'm responsible for. Like, the damage."

"Have you actually looked at my hood?" Not only had he looked at it, he had a picture that displayed no damage. "There's now a discolored splotch because of the shit you sprayed on it."

Although he hadn't seen the splotch before, Dipper glanced around and said, "Uh… yeah, tiny issue with that. I don't know where your car is."

It wasn't immediately visible since his and Mabel's car was parked in what was formerly this guy's spot. "It's blocking this piece of shit vehicle in."

Bristling at that, it was hard to swallow down the snappy comeback. "Oh," Dipper said as he gracefully slipped between the cars and headed to the back— sure enough, there sat the golden sports car, blocking their exit and bringing him to wonder how Bill thought they could leave if he didn't move it. Leaning over the hood, Dipper squinted, attempting to pick out any sign of discoloration or damage. "Yeah, I'm not seeing anything."

"Of course you don't," he snapped as he followed him. "You're trying to pretend because you don't want to fucking pay for it." Resisting the urge to facepalm, Dipper was about to speak but a comment from Bill silenced it: "You're no better than Stan."

"You know Stan?" he asked, folding his arms as he turned around to face him. The question was an initial reaction, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Stan was living with Ford in their apartment just off campus, and Ford knew Bill via the graduate student program… it was logical.

Bill's glowering gaze was on him. "We work together."

And now it suddenly wasn't as logical as he thought. Frowning, Dipper inquired, "Alright, so exactly how many of my cousins do you work with?" Remembering the first time he and Bill met, the comment about being 'one of them' was slowly becoming less mysterious.
"Ford is a colleague of mine. I work with him as a teaching assistant, and I work with Stan at the comedy club." It explained the strange hours. "Why the fuck do you care, anyway?" There was no hiding the anger in his voice, likely the annoyance Dipper wasn't giving into his every demand. "Going to try to run to them for safety because Stan's a friend of mine? Well, tough shit, kid, that won't work."

Dipper laughed a little under his breath, trying to muffle it with a hoodie sleeve. "Sorry, it's... it's just the thought of you having friends." All Bill had done was curse at him and demand money, there were very few people who would want to befriend somebody like that. Stan didn't seem like the type, and for Ford, it sounded like a requirement of his job to get along with a fellow graduate student. "You have to admit you haven't quite been Prince Charming so far." Only fitting since he'd called him a princess.

Bill's look was smoldering. "I don't want to be friends with someone who'd desecrate a vehicle for no goddamn reason. Did you want that hold off your account? You haven't shown me you do despite your claims."

Kicking his foot at the pavement sheepishly, Dipper wasn't sure how to salvage this, a second meeting ending in utter disaster. "I want the hold removed, sure, but you haven't exactly said how. I'll try to be nicer, okay?" Bill's abrasive behavior, plus the ridiculous four in the morning meeting, had created the perfect storm of exhaustion and bitterness. It wasn't his finest hour, but that should've been obvious with his mussed hair and eyes with bags that had bags.

Glancing over his shoulder at the vehicle, he still didn't see any damage, but he supposed it didn't matter when Bill had the power to keep this hold on his student account. What else he could do, he didn't know, but he was starting to believe there wasn't another option but to pay since Bill hadn't been the most amiable.

Bill's harsh stare lingered before he whirled around, beginning to walk toward the apartment complex. "I'm going to my apartment. You can come and we'll discuss it inside." Maybe it was the morning bite or the promise of getting out of a poorly-lit parking lot, but his willingness to go with was surprising even to him, not that he was thrilled about this new development. Shoving his hands into the pocket of his hoodie, Dipper trailed after with a slowness to his gait, less from pain and more from plainly not wanting to be a part of this.

If he was never seen again, on the bright side Mabel would know who was to blame. Regretfully taking a hand from his pocket to fish his phone out, Dipper texted Stan, who was apparently a friend, on the slim chance he was still awake after his shift at the comedy club.

(4:08 AM) So about Bill

(4:08 AM) Does he have any redeeming qualities whatsoever?

(4:09 AM) bill cipher?

(4:09 AM) why, do ya wanna date him?

Stealing a glance at Bill as he led him inside the complex and through a narrow hallway, dull yellow lights illuminating their way, he remembered the complicating soulmate factor. As fast as it'd come, he tried forgetting, because it wasn't important when he wasn't going to say a word to Bill. On the subject of dating him...

(4:09 AM) Mostly I want to kick his shin
A few times for good measure, honestly.

Bill stopped in front of an apartment door, the clinking of keys filling the air until he unlocked it. Stepping inside, he held the door open for Dipper with one hand as his other began to unbutton his blazer.

Dipper walked past with a near-inaudible "thanks" and paused in the entryway, feeling out of place as he was unsure of what to do in a stranger's apartment except awkwardly stand there. Rubbing his arm, he looked around the room and the first thing he noticed was the spaciousness, it was bigger than his and Mabel's dorm room. A lot more furnished too with shelves of textbooks, a sectional sofa and armchair, posters of the universe's stars, a coffee table, and a television. And that was only the living room— there was an entryway where counter tops were visible, and three closed doors, possibly two bedrooms and a bathroom.

In comparison to what he and Mabel had, one room featuring a bunk bed set, two wardrobes, and two desks, this place was a paradise.

"Nice apartment," he complimented, still stalling in the small foyer. "Do you have a roommate?" If not, it seemed a little excessive, particularly if one of the doors did lead to an additional bedroom.

"No," Bill responded as he closed the door and moved to hang his blazer up, revealing his black vest, and beneath that he could see a yellow dress shirt. If he lived alone, that suggested it was all Bill who kept the area extremely clean, borderline creepy clean. "I haven't had one in a couple years." A retort, something along the lines of that being better for everybody, was on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed it. If he wanted to get through this, he'd have to be civil to the guy.

"Right, so..." he shifted his weight, unsure of what to say. "Any reason you had to bring me here, like... is this going to be a while, or?" As ready as he was to sprint to his dorm room and never look back, he was actually feeling more awake now, not simply operating on autopilot.

Bill sighed as he headed to his couch, falling onto the cushions. "I don't know, it depends on if you decide you want to keep being difficult like you have been. Look, kid, here are my thoughts on the deal. Be a maid of mine or something to pay it off since you're supposedly broke, keep the apartment tidy." The suggestion had him bursting into laughter, though he didn't know if he found the idea genuinely funny or if it was a result of the sheer nervousness.

But it stopped once he realized Bill had been serious, clearing his throat with a tug on his collar and trying to think of something to say to that, the oddest proposition he'd ever heard in his life. "I don't think you need a maid, man." Or a paint job, so he guessed Bill liked what he didn't need. Demonstrating his point, it was accompanied by a gesture to the surroundings, unbelievably pristine.

"Maids don't just clean," Bill reminded him. "They make meals too. Besides, I fucking hate cleaning. It's a pain to keep everything spotless when I have other work to do. Why are you standing there with your mouth agape?" He beckoned around them. "Make yourself at home, Maid Sapling."

Huffily, he reminded, "Hey, I haven't agreed to anything." But what choice did he have? Hesitantly, Dipper slipped out of his shoes and took a couple steps into the living space, craning his neck to take in his surroundings with awe, feeling small in the huge living room. Were all university apartments this large? It wouldn't shock him if Bill had pulled some strings. "Also, you must be pretty confident in me," he pointed out with a skeptical look toward Bill, "letting me cook your meals before you know if I can cook." More like before he knew if he'd poison the dish.
He glanced at him, shifting on the sectional. "There are recipes online, follow them. Easy." Dipper didn't know what Bill preferred to eat, but he assumed that would be provided to him if he went through with this.

Pictures on the wall caught his attention, and he paused by them to sweep his eyes over the snapshotted memories, most of which appeared to be of various dogs. "Is that why you were so mad about the silly string?" Dipper questioned with raised eyebrows. "Because it was a cat?" It was sort of a lame attempt at humor, considering Bill had made it abundantly obvious why he had a problem with the 'vandalism."

"I don't give a damn if it was a badly drawn cat, or any cat," he growled. "You damaged my paint."

Rolling his eyes, he moved on to what he assumed was Bill's desk, as the other one beside it was significantly emptier, and he started sifting through the mound of papers, most of which appeared to be ungraded homework assignments. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked distractedly, the dull ache returning to inform him he'd been standing too long.

"I told you to make yourself at home, do whatever you want."

Taking a seat on Bill's desk, Dipper flipped the papers over in his hand before setting them back down, realizing the stack of books resting on the wooden surface were all… physics. "You said you worked with Ford?" An interesting tidbit from their earlier conversation, and something Ford had mentioned in his texts to Mabel. "So you're both graduate students in the physics program here?"

Bill looked over at him. "No, I'm a physics teacher, as in a teaching assistant. I'm a graduate student studying astrophysics."

Oh, nice and pretentious. That explained the star-related posters and books, he guessed. "You're a teacher, hm? Aren't you too old to be harassing children?" he asked with a quiet laugh, already guessing Bill wouldn't discover the same amusement in it when he was scarily obsessed with the fake damage on his precious car. The guy needed a hobby.

"I'm not harassing any children," he objected, meanwhile Dipper snatched one of the textbooks from the desk and paged through its contents, most of it eerily familiar. It was a textbook he could use for class, the information considerably more useful than the assigned books. Dragging Dipper from his thoughts, Bill said, "Besides, I'm twenty-two. I'm not old." Must have graduated early if he was a teaching assistant, but Dipper didn't ask.

"Oh, come on. I didn't say you were." He'd implied he was too old to get his fancy vest in a pinch over an unnecessary paint job, though.

Gazing over the top of the textbook, he was intrigued to see Bill staring with his eyes narrowed at him. "Why were you messing with those papers, sapling?"

"These?" he clarified, mind snapping to what he presumed was ungraded homework of his students. "You said to make myself at home, so I was just looking." Shrugging his shoulders, he added, "If you want help with grading these, I could probably do it. Isn't this basic physics?" First-or second-year physics coursework was simple and he'd passed those with almost perfect marks, it was what laid beyond that he had trouble with.

"If you want to grade them, go for it. Saves me the trouble." Bill moved to get up, crossing the room and disappearing around a corner briefly. "Do you want something to drink?" he called.
"Uh... bleach? Is that an option?" Dipper asked, craning his neck to try to see Bill, but it was to no avail. Being his maid for... who knew how long, wasn't the most appealing aspect of his future, a little spot of bleach might soothe the burn, or create a hole in his esophagus and kill him.

"I have Pine Sol."

"A Pines in a pine tree hoodie drinking Pine Sol, that's... wow. Sure." Not that he planned on drinking it, fully cognizant of the fact it'd be a trip to the emergency room that he couldn't afford.

A moment later, Bill returned with a cup of semi-transparent brown liquid and a can of Pitt Cola, which may have elicited a questioning look if Bill had a normal person's sleeping schedule, but he guessed it was excusable. "Here you go, Pine Tree." There was that nickname again, worthy of an eye-roll. Taking it, he swished the liquid in the glass and looked expectantly to Bill.

Maybe it was a product of being overtired, but he commented jokingly, "You know, you're supposed to kill the maid after you cheat on your significant other with them." That was how all the crime drama shows portrayed it, at least.

"Yeah," he responded after taking a drink from the can, "I'll stuff your body in a barrel for thirty years and pretend we never happened." That case actually sounded familiar, and he was concerned by the extent of Bill's murder knowledge. Nodding toward the glass, he asked, "Are you going to drink that?"

"Oh, yes," he replied sarcastically, "I cannot wait to put this totally innocuous liquid into my mouth after your so very reassuring statement." Bringing the glass closer, he sniffed it and realized the scent was more reminiscent of apple cider than the signature smell of Pine Sol. Tilting it forward, his tongue experimentally poked the brown substance, and— apple cider confirmed, so he drank a swallow.

Bill took the glass from him, draining the cup within a couple of gulps, much to Dipper's confusion and discontent. "Ah, refreshing. Tastes like Pine Oil to me."

Jaw going slack, he blinked and sputtered, "Dude— I... I had my mouth on that." Unable to do anything but stare, his gaze was astonished and mildly horrified. "My tongue was in that."

"What, do you have herpes or something?"

Trying to keep a straight face and his tone from wavering, he replied, "Yeah." Well, no, but it might be fun to see Bill's reaction regardless.

Bill placed the emptied glass on the desk, meeting Dipper's gaze with a stoic expression as he resumed drinking from his can, bringing it down after a second as he leaned closer to him. "Perfect, so do I! We can be herpe buddies."

With a startled squawk, Dipper shoved him away, and Bill burst into laughter as he stepped backwards. "You do not have herpes, you fucking asshole."

"Neither do you!" Bill managed through his laughter.

This was... a weird conversation, but somehow suitable for twenty minutes past four in the morning, and he smiled a little despite himself. Drifting from that discussion, he glanced downward at the papers and asked, "Hey... I know this is kind of out there," he gestured vaguely, "and probably not allowed by the university, but do you think I could grade instead of.. maid?"

Looking like he was in a better mood, Bill collected the glass and disappeared again briefly around
the corner, returning with a refilled cup. "Go for it, I don't need that headache. No one will care if you do— and even if someone did, they won't do shit with my father in charge."

"Oh, right, I kind of forgot about that," he admitted, rubbing his neck. "Your father is really the president of the university, huh? That's… neat, I guess?"

Bill set the cup down beside Dipper, but he didn't move to take it. "Makes life easier." The cup was pushed slightly closer to him, and Bill was appearing expectant, triggering the realization that he wanted him to drink. In that case… intentionally obstinate, he refused to touch it. "I'll have the hold removed from your account by tomorrow morning, if this arrangement is agreeable to you."

The glass was moved closer, almost touching him, and Dipper shot him a questioning look. Temporarily ignoring the request in favor of addressing the drink being forced upon him by this quirky host, he said, "Stop trying to give me your glass of herpes."

"It's a different glass, and I don't have herpes."

Rolling his eyes at the insistence, he picked up the drink and tipped it back, once again met with the taste of apple cider.

Bill reached to take his can, taking a sip. "It's not a different glass." Dipper spit the mouthful back, it was a reflex. "I still don't have herpes. Stars, kid, it's actually a different glass. That was a joke. Now you have apple backwash."

"I really, really would like to avoid an indirect kiss with you."

"Suit yourself." He took the glass from him, taking a drink from his backwash glass, and Dipper wrinkled his nose, making a noise of disgust. This guy was something else, and he didn't know how he would begin to describe Bill later when he recounted the experience to Mabel. He was everything from frustratingly stubborn, to irrational and eccentric, but still somehow friendly and playful at times. Completely baffling, Dipper hadn't a clue where to start.

Averting his gaze, he was a bit stunned to see a recognizable face staring at him through a picture frame resting on the polished wood. "Is this a picture of Wendy?" Dipper instantly blurted, snatching the framed photograph from the edge of the desk and holding it in front of himself. "How do you know her?" It was definitely unexpected, finding an image of the Environment Club president resting among his office supplies.

Bill finished the glass, glancing over at the photograph. "I could ask you the same thing, considering she's my girlfriend."

"Is this another one of your weird jokes?" Moving the picture invited light to dance over the glass cover, bringing new highlights to Wendy's defined features and her wild red hair. She was still so pretty, and he teasingly said, "Because she's way out of your league." She was chill and funny, nothing like the rage-at-a-prank, demanding Bill Cipher, but then he realized how that could be taken. "Uh, I meant, because she's… super nice and fun to be around, and it's not that you aren't those things—"

His eyes became slits at him. "Oh, so you're one of them, aren't you."

That again, and Dipper didn't know what he was referring to, that never had been explained. "...One of them," he mused contemplatively as he recollected the last snippets of their conversation in which he'd flubbed his words, "as in, socially awkward? Wow, you got me figured out. I'm kind of surprised it took this long."
Bitterness had crept into Bill's voice, stealing his attention away from the picture, which he set down as he realized Bill was suddenly angry with him. "You think it's so fun to go around and fuck someone else's on-and-off girlfriend, sneaking around in the night after we've broken up, like horny fucking asswads, to have sex in the bed of your hick truck." That… was unexpected, and Dipper blinked at him, trying to process what he'd said and connect it to something, anything, having no idea where that'd come from.

Tugging on his hoodie collar, he gave an uncomfortable cough. "I… I wouldn't know if it's fun?" his voice was higher in pitch with strain and anxiety. "I don't— uh, have any clue what you're talking about. I don't have a truck, and I'm not, um, seeing anybody. Like that." Sexually. There was very much an absence in that department, one he didn't mind when his studies took up the majority of his time.

"That's what all the others ones said, too." Bill looked away, his hands tightening into balls. "I need a drink."

"Dude," Dipper frowned, "do you actually think I have a chance with Wendy? She's like… amazing. I only know her from Environment Club."

A hollow laugh escaped him. "You don't know her like I do, kid. She's not picky after a breakup."

"Look, it's... not important," he said with a shake of his head. "I don't need to know what your relationship, uh, politics are, and I don't want to be involved in that. Just know that I'm not seeing Wendy, okay? So you don't have to give me the whole furious, overprotective boyfriend lecture."

All he was to them: a member of the Environment Club, and now a grader to a teaching assistant.

"I'm not overprotective," he growled. "Don't you dare call me that. I'm not the bad guy here."

"Hey, man, I didn't say you were. It's weird," he commented, lost in his thoughts, "how much of a shift this place has seen. Like, twenty years ago, being an overprotective boyfriend would've been 'cute' or some messed up demonstration of your affection for her. It's nice that everyone's finally realizing it's sort of a dick move, abusive at worst. I can't believe people think it's somehow acceptable to 'possess' women like that, they're not objects and men don't own them, y'know?" The response he received was Bill staring at him, annoyance across his face, and Dipper's smile turned sheepish. With another cough, he glanced to the corner of Bill's desk. "Maybe got a little carried away there."

"You think?" Bill huffed. "You went on some.. tirade over possessing woman, and you weren't paying attention to me."

"Uh, okay. What did you want to talk about? I thought we pretty much had this situation dealt with... You'll release my account, I'll come by maybe once a week or something, grade your papers, and then we'll call it good after the semester?" And in addition, the best part of it: he'd be using Bill's extra textbooks to increase his understanding of the subject and spare him money that he would've spent buying them himself, that would be a neat benefit of the arrangement, as well as having access to Bill's knowledge on the subject. It wasn't exactly a chore or payment, this was closer to having his own private library of information and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of struggling with physics.

"We'll see about the ending," he responded. "That depends on how well you do the assigned tasks."

Dipper waved a hand dismissively, reassuring, "It'll be fine. I've taken the equivalents and beyond of the courses you teach, so I'll know how to do everything." Besides, Bill would have an answer key and probably debrief him on the assignments themselves. Easy enough.
Bill raised his eyebrow at him. "Oh, so I guess I'll need to make you take a test to prove your skill, and throw in a few challenge questions to get those brain juices flowing."

"Why does it matter?" he asked with a short laugh, entertained by the possibility. "You'll be giving me the answer key anyway. If you want to see how I did, get a transcript or something. Shouldn't be too hard with your family in high places. Or, I have an idea, you could 'look me up in the system.'"

"Anyone can cheat their way through school," Bill told him. "But this test would be for you. You're being evaluated on your physics skills, to ensure you're the right choice to join Team Me."

"Okay, fine, give me the test so I can go," Dipper said with a glance at the clock in the kitchen. "It's almost five, and I'm really tired." Why Bill had to meet him at four in the morning, he didn't know, but he was beginning to feel the effects of it returning. He'd been adequately awake for a while, but it wouldn't last.

Bill moved away, rummaging through his desk to pull out a sheet of paper with black text across it. "Here, do this." Collecting the paper from Bill, he tucked it away with a half-hearted promise that he'd return it during their next meeting, though didn't have high hopes of completing the exam when he had more pressing matters to attend to.

"Alright," he cleared his throat, sliding off of Bill's desk, "well, I'm going to go. Here—" he found a blank sticky-note on the desk and used a nearby pen to scribble down his cell number. "You can text me to set up our next meeting, okay?"

"Are you going to fire back a text that calls me a 'douchebag'?" The clear reference to his email had him stiffen and flush with embarrassment, but it faded when he realized Bill was gazing at him with amused eyes.

"Depends," he said dryly, "are you going to demand we meet at four in the morning again?"

"Probably. Unlike some people, I have a job that requires I stay late."

"I figured," he replied, though he'd honestly thought it was set up this way to punish him more than being because it was convenient for Bill, or a healthy combination of both. "Aren't you available in the evenings though?" Since his classes and work as a graduate student would be during the daytime.

Bill shrugged. "Except Tuesdays and Thursdays— I have my own classes and other shit going on." Although he found it somewhat concerning, somewhat intriguing, that Bill had Fridays open and seemed to choose not to support his girlfriend's club, he didn't ask about it, unwilling to restart his angry rant into their issues.

Nodding a little and gathering his things to prepare to leave, he clarified, "Yeah, so we're doing this in the evenings, not an obscene hour of the morning that I'd rather be spending in bed than with you." And the specifics of that could be arranged over text sometime.

"Are you sure? This time is perfectly reasonable. I think we should meet at three forty-five, actually. You didn't need those fifteen minutes this morning, you're perfectly awake."

He had been pretty awake for a while; the new environment, conversation, and their negotiation doing wonders for stirring his mind to life, but idle discussion was lulling it into sleep mode. "I'm seriously not," Dipper replied. "I feel like a zombie going through the motions, and I would probably take a nap on your floor if I wasn't concerned you would do something asshole-ish to me.
in my sleep." Like, drawing on his face or scaring him into an alerted state, none of which would be a welcome surprise.

Bill raised an eyebrow at him in alarm. "You think I'd *rape* you?"

His eyes went wide at the suggestion, words catching in his throat. "Uh. No. That… didn't cross my mind *at all,* but now I'm definitely awake again and sort of fucking terrified. Like holy shit dude, I was thinking more along the lines of pouring ice water onto me or— or, I don't know, playing a loud sound into my ear."

"You might want to pay attention to your wording, kid— what the fuck, I'm not going to rape you. Or touch you. No."

"Likewise," he said, "but I didn't know you'd jump to *that.* Wow." Scratching the nape of his neck, he looked away and wondered where to go from here, this odd place they'd ended up. Quieter, he mumbled, "This is why we shouldn't have meetings at four in the morning." Overtiredness made him apparently careless with word choice, not as restrained in his speech, and he was only half-aware of what was going on.

Bill shook his head. "This is exactly why we need meetings at three forty-five, Pine Tree."

"Nope, no way. I'm leaving." His statement was demonstrated by a slow, shuffle-like movement to the door of Bill's apartment, an attempt at sluggishly creeping away.

"Did I do something wrong?" Bill called after him, trailing behind him at a distance.

Pausing in the foyer at Bill's words, he turned around, uncertainty and confusion resting on his features. "No, it's just…" he rubbed his upper arm, "I already said I'm super tired. You didn't do anything." The urge to ask why he'd thought that was chewing at him, but he held his tongue, eyes searching Bill's—this time confirming they were dichromatic—as he awaited an answer.

Bill stopped, looking at him then glancing away. "Okay. I guess… I'll see you around?"

"Yeah, I mean, you have my number." Dipper shrugged, motioning lazily to the desk. "I'll see you some *evening* this week," it was said a touch pointedly, wanting to ensure they were in agreement on that, "and then I'll get started on grading for you."

"Okay." Bill had an expression of dissatisfaction across his face. "See you next week some morning, bright and early."

"Nope. Guess we're never getting together again."

"...before we worked out the grading arrangement, the first thing he wanted me to do was be his maid, which was pretty weird since the place was spotless," Dipper relayed the experience to Mabel, now much later in the day. By the time he'd gotten back from his meeting with Bill, he'd been too tired to do anything but crawl into bed and sleep for a few extra hours. "I'm glad I don't have to do that. I wouldn't know where to start, but he also mentioned cooking for him if I'd agreed to it."

With his study session over and Mabel done with work, they were walking toward the Student Center to see what the yearly 'nightclub dance party night' entailed, partly at Stan's request to join him there. It was technically for students only, but Stan had a reputation for stealing Ford's ID and slipping in for the free food.
Mabel made a face of disgust. "Did he want you to clean him? What a sicko!"

"I don't know," he confessed. "I didn't ask about it." Housekeeping was a job he could tolerate, but grading papers for Bill could benefit him academically, making it a better choice. "I think he's probably capable of doing it himself, though. Oh! Or getting his girlfriend to. Did you know he's dating Wendy?"

"He is?" she asked. "What'd he do, kidnap her and force her into the relationship?! I can't imagine anyone wanting to date that jerk!"

Laughing at that, he added, "It sounds like they break up and get back together a lot, if that helps explain anything." He ended the sentence by kicking a small rock on the sidewalk, watching it roll toward the grass and disappear into the dry greenery. "But honestly? I'm with you. I still think he's a jerk after talking to him, but he's also a… quirky jerk. Really strange dude." Unpredictable and chaotic might be better words to use.

Mabel shook her head. "I bet he's a nut! No one in their right mind would take offense to the silly string prank!"

"Yeah, your drawing was amazing," he said with a grin, then it gave way to a more thoughtful expression. "After spending a while with him, I'm wondering if he's sort of… looking for something to complain about in his life. He seems lonely." Their last encounter had been the oddest of them all, Bill asking if he'd done anything wrong, questioning his sudden leave despite the conclusion of their time together. A thought occurred to him, and his breathing hitched, "Or… maybe he knows about the soulmate mark? I wore my hoodie to avoid that, but.. I don't know, maybe he found out somehow and wants to get to know me."

"Lonely?" she glanced at him. "Maybe because he's unbearable! I can't imagine him being much fun, can you?" She scowled, and he merely shrugged, unsure but not eager to determine that for himself. "He'd better not try to mess with you over that dumb soulmark! You're too good for him."

Flattered by the compliment, Dipper offered a quiet and flustered few words of thanks and shot an appreciative glance to Mabel. "I wish our folks would see it that way." But then, it always had been like that, hadn't it? He and Mabel were on the same wavelength, they understood each other and constantly had the other's back. Good thing they were in agreement to keep it hushed from their parents, knowing the truth could start a relationship he'd be pressured into and didn't want.

Looking away and focusing his attention on the building looming ahead, brightened with festive lights that stood out against the evening rays, he asked, "So, uh, what is this thing at the Student Center supposed to be?" It'd been Mabel's idea, spurred on by Stan talking about how he went to it every year for the delicious handouts.

Mabel's expression twisted into a delighted grin. "It's like, a party! There's free food, and music, and dancing, and meeting people, and it's going to be so fun!"

Most of those elements weren't particularly appealing to him, but he didn't want to sour Mabel's mood or ruin her time at this… nightclub-esque event, whatever it was, and he knew that she'd offer to leave if he voiced any sort of discontent with it. "Oh wow," he said, "that sounds interesting? I'll probably find Stan, get some food, and hang out on my phone, or something. That should give you plenty of time to rock the dance floor and befriend everybody there, right?"

"Are you not going to be joining me?" she asked. "We could rock it together! Pines forever!"

"Maybe," he replied, shifting his weight. "You know I don't exactly— uh, do dancing, so I'm not
sure if I'd be rocking anything except a trip to the emergency room or public embarrassment." And
if he did get conned into dancing, it wouldn't last long because he'd be forced to take a breather
after a bit, however he was certain Mabel wouldn't mind.

She grabbed his hand to begin an all out dash toward the building, luckily not very far now, and he
picked up his speed to match hers, laughter from both rising above the scuffling of their shoes on
the pavement. "Sounds like the perfect night to me! Come on, Dippy!"
The backseat of Stan's ancient car was about as comfortable as he'd thought it would be, falling somewhere between the equivalent of sleeping on the floor or on an old lady's sofa. Different positions may have staved off the discomfort if the drive wasn't going onto hour four — two hours to the studio, two hours back to the university.

Every time he was reminded of his restricted movement and growing discomfort, the tiny resentment toward Stan and his opposition to public transport deepened.

"Her acting was amazing tonight," Mabel excitedly chattered to Stan, animated gestures over the top of the passenger seat. "I still can't believe we got to see Those Sunny Days live."

"I don't know how you guys can watch it. The show is super cheesy," Dipper commented idly, not looking away from the glow of his phone with a notepad app opened. His observations from the live taping were stored there, impressions about technical details and production methods ready to be transformed into a two to three page, experience-based essay for his film studies course.

Stan burst in with a sound of disbelief. "Cheesy? The show's the best thing on television. Ya have no taste in art, kid." That alone was enough to encourage an eyeroll, but he restrained. "You spent the entire time gawkin' at that.. notebook thingy of yours."

That was the push needed to convince him to give into temptation so Dipper rolled his eyes, though it likely wasn't discernable to Stan since he was driving. Hopefully, he was keeping his attention on the road. "That's called a smartphone, Stan. Welcome to 2018."

"...should smash the damn thing for that, stupid technology," he muttered. "I meant the app."

"Oh, that. This app is nice because it supports speech-to-text and voice recording. Really helpful for classes." Mostly because he had no idea what was going on in his physics courses anymore, and he could trick himself into thinking the recordings of lectures would help him understand someday. Everything would occur to him in a brilliant, prophetic flash prior to midterms then finals, and his grades wouldn't be ruined forever.

Yeah, right.

At least he would probably pass the laidback film studies class, an element of general education that had yet to be fulfilled. He tried to avoid thinking about how he enjoyed the subject matter more than his major, wishing to pass this off as a rough patch that'd be over eventually and a life of loving physics would welcome him with open arms.

"I don't see why ya bothered comin' with, kid. You spent the entire time on your phone. No wonder you don't like the show, ya don't know what's goin' on."

"It's for one of his classes," Mabel explained and Dipper nodded the confirmation, but Stan merely grunted.

The response that suggested mild displeasure elicited a good-natured protest, "Hey, it was a free taping. It's not like we're down anything by me being there." If Dipper knew his cousin decently well, monetary arguments worked best on him; he said he was thrifty, excellent at managing
money, but Dipper preferred the term 'cheap.'

"We're down in gas," he rumbled disapprovingly. Dipper had been about to indicate the extreme flaw in Stan's logic, but he talked over him, "I don't understand ya, kid. You could've found a video online, couldn't ya? There ain't much of a reason for you to come if all ya wanted to do was not pay attention and talk about how much it sucked."

"I don't think that would've worked. I'm supposed to be watching for how they manage the set, control aspects of the production, basically everything behind the scenes. Look, if sitting in bed watching Netflix qualified, I'd have done that." If not for the assignment, he wouldn't be on this journey, nor would he even be awake at this obscene hour of night when he had classes early tomorrow and physical therapy afterward. Suddenly realizing how that could sound, Dipper added, "Not that being with you and Mabel isn't fun, but tomorrow's going to be horrible."

"Isn't that later today?" Mabel asked. Dipper wanted to groan as he peeked at his phone's digital clock; she was right, it was past midnight already. "I can't believe you have morning classes, those are nasty. I like my sleep."

"I can't believe you have late classes. I mean, I know why you have to with work and everything, but I don't know how you can sit through them." Mornings were easy. They required him to roll out of bed and put minimal effort into appearing presentable, followed by sitting through lectures, but then the rest of the afternoon and evening was his to do what he wished. At the cost of sleep, it created more productive hours in his daily life.

Mabel laughed. "How can you sit through the morning? I'd fall asleep as soon as I plopped in my seat!"

"I know you would," he chuckled, mind drifting back to high school. "Hey, do you remember when we were in Mrs. Moon's science class together, and I had to keep waking you up?"

"Yeah! Oh, she was real cranky about it too—"

"Hey, do you two twerps mind if I make a pit stop?" Dipper couldn't determine if they had a choice when Stan nudged the turn signal on, the ticking audible. "I want to pop in at the comedy club real quick, Bill's closin' solo so I wanna make sure he's okay an' getting out at a reasonable hour."

"I don't mind," Mabel chirped. "I wish I could get a drink," Dipper raised an eyebrow, "but it'd be better if that Bill jerk wasn't there. Did you hear what he did?"

"Yeah, I think you and Stan talked about it on the way over to the studio," he reminded her, suspecting that it was lost to her memory among the other long conversations they'd had. Many had pertained to their soap opera, but Mabel had given him a thorough update and rant on the Bill-situation. "I don't care either, though. Stop in if you want, that'll give me a chance to stretch."

"Good thing because we're almost there. So about that debt you're payin' to Bill right now," Stan addressed him, intrigue in his gaze as he adjusted the rearview to make eye contact. "I don't give a damn what happened between you two but if you slobber on his dick, use a rubber and don't go dyin' from no Bill-diseases or whatever he'd spread to ya after sucking him raw."

"Whoa, gross," he groaned over Mabel's equally disgusted noise. Why did everyone jump to sexual favors when they found out that he was paying a debt to Bill? "First, I'm not going to do that, but second, I don't think he has anything. Well, he doesn't have herpes, at least." Now that he'd said it aloud, it was a strange thing to know about Bill since they'd met only twice with a couple non-face-to-face conversations between, but it'd somehow arose organically during one of those meetings.
"Why do you know if he has herpes?!" Mabel asked, concern in her voice. "What brought that up?"

Shrugging, he said, "There was... a glass-sharing incident, but it's seriously not important."

Stan sighed, but it turned into a huff of laughter. "Soon it'll be ass-sharing, just ya wait." Dipper forced a nervous-sounding laugh, the joke reminding him of the unfortunate reality that was his soulmark. Maybe it wasn't Bill. Hopefully. But it didn't stop the concern from weighing on him.

Mabel let out her own laugh, though it didn't sound happy. "I hope not. Dipper doesn't like him, and I don't either when I can't figure out what's TO like. He's a dick, from what I've heard."

"Ya haven't even met him," Stan reminded her. "He's a good guy, ya got off on the wrong foot. Dipper spendin' time with him will be good for 'em both."

Although he wasn't sure what that meant, he could safely refute it. "I don't think so. It's nice that he knows about my major and even assistant teaches it, so he has all the textbooks and knowledge I could ever need, but he's... sort of weird." It wasn't a problem in and of itself—Dipper knew he boasted his fair share of weirdness as well—but rather his unpredictability that threw a wrench into already-challenging social situations. "I hope he turns out to be a good guy since I'll be helping him with grading for the remainder of the semester."

Stan chuckled. "You'll be fine, the guy's lonely. You'd think otherwise with that fiery broad of his, but they.. ain't doing so well." Spinning to peek at him, Mabel made an 'ooh' noise and waggled her eyebrows.

"Is that why you wanted to find out if he had herpes?" her question was directed to Dipper. "So you can win Wendy over?"

Blushing at the suggestion, his fingers anxiously tapped on the car door's armrest. "Wendy's sweet and... y'know, obviously pretty, but we don't know each other very well," he said with a small chuckle. "I wouldn't want to do that anyway. I think they have issues, but it sounds like they're on-again-off-again, so there's a good chance they'll keep getting together." Which was fine, he wasn't interested in pursuing either of them.

Mabel snickered and jokingly said, "Not if you get her first! They go off, you go on. Maybe you can break the chain of their relationship drama.

Despite her playful tone, Dipper replied, "Yeah, about that... Probably not a good move when I'll have to work and interact with Bill for the next few months." Bill didn't need a fresh stack of reasons to dislike him. "Considering what happened the last time we did something that upset him."

"When he threw a fit?" Mabel asked. "I wasn't there, Dipper."

"But you saw his emails," he pointed out, "and I told you what happened both times we met up."

"I know. I kind of want to put more silly-string on his car."

"We're here," Stan announced abruptly, parking the vehicle after pulling into the lot and seemingly ignoring his mumble of 'thank god.' "Don't put anything on Bill's car, ya hear me? We've had enough trouble from that, all of us—he rants to Ford an' I too, y'know. I'm gonna make sure everything's square at the bar, alright? It'll take a few minutes or so, I don't know. Depends on how messy it is in there. Come if ya want or stay." Dipper was beginning to exit as Stan and Mabel did, but he lingered near the vehicle to stretch. It'd been a tedious evening of driving, then sitting, and
finally more driving.

The series of stretches drew a low whine from him as he tried to shake the pain clinging to his lower half, wishing this didn't have to be such a struggle. It calmed his muscles screaming in protest but was far from a permanent solution. It would be lucky if he wasn't in agony tomorrow. Well, later, from how sore everything was going to be.

While he considered returning to the vehicle, he ultimately decided against it when he didn't know exactly how long Stan would be assisting Bill in closing the place.

Walking into the comedy club, he saw most of the venue was blocked off for the evening, ropes discouraging guests from the stage and small seating area, leaving only the bar section of the building open. Dipper paused to take in his surroundings, intrigued by the off-black walls and splashes of various colors decorating the interior. It was a modern establishment, leaning toward upscale but still comfortable for casual visitors.

The lights were lowered with closing time underway, but he could still see everything: there were a couple of patrons hanging around the bar, the slurring of their voices suggesting they were the last of the evening… and quite out of it. Behind the counter was a familiar figure, the tall-blond-quirky-jerk, wiping the wooden surface with a towel as he seemed to be preparing to shut it down. Stan stood nearby, talking to Bill, saying something about cleaning the kitchen before he was heading through the double doors with Mabel in tow, who Dipper could overhear asking excitedly about snatching leftovers.

Bill glanced in his direction, attention snagged by his presence. An irrational bolt of panic swept through Dipper as he wondered if he could slip away, but Bill's greeting erased all hopes of avoiding a confrontation, "Surprised to see you here, kid! Isn't it a bit late for you to be out?" His words were laced with amusement, and Dipper sighed, defeatedly embracing his fate. "I thought your bedtime was a few hours ago, seeing as you couldn't get up at four in the morning without a fuss."

"Are you kidding me?" he asked while he approached, sarcasm in his tone. "You say that like there's actually a good time to be dealing with you." Perhaps it was bordering on the moody side, but he was exhausted after a dragging day and the excessive sitting had given him the added hurdle of fighting an uncooperative body. Stiffness guided his movements as he clambered toward the bar to claim a seat on one of the stools, a bit further down from the two noisy patrons.

"I'm not the one being dealt with," Bill hummed. "Not with that attitude." Aware he was right, he buried his face into his hands and exhaled, wishing Stan and Mabel wouldn't be long. Dipper tried to picture himself nestled into bed, a decent night's sleep soothing a tired mind and body, but that would only last so long before classes rolled around in the morning. Therapy in the afternoon. Ugh.

Nearby, he could hear the other patrons chatting:

"...shame the pretty ladies have gone home, guess we're stuck with the last of the night." The words were slurred, and accompanied by a roar of laughter.

"Hey, you!" One of the patrons must've moved, judging by the slide of the stool legs and the scuff of feet on the floor. "What'sa darlin' young man like you doin' alone?" His friend erupted into more giggles, goading him on from afar. "Come with me, I'll show you a good time, boy."

God fucking dammit.

Raising his head from his hands, he jadedly stared at the man that'd invaded his personal space…
well, not really, but he was within a five foot radius and that seemed to be pushing it when his night was a wreck at this point. "Look, man, I'm... uh, not interested." Dipper knew the patron wasn't being genuine in this conversation, it was a combination of drunken foolery and amusing himself and his friend, and he was half-tempted to leave for the kitchen.

"C'mon--" the man began to insist, and Dipper was beyond fed up but didn't have a chance to speak because Bill interrupted the interaction.

"Want a lemon water? I know you usually like a drink while you're waiting for me to get off, sweetheart. I promise we'll be going home soon."

His expression turned quizzical, confused, until it clicked and Dipper connected Bill's intentions to what he was doing. "Oh, uh, yeah, that'd be nice? If you don't mind, I mean." Awkwardly, he cleared his throat and added, "Thanks, ...honey." If luck was on their side, this would be enough to convince him to stop being unnecessarily forward.

"Almost forgot, did you bring that assessment with you?"

"I didn't know I'd even be seeing you tonight, so no." Stan's "pit stop" hadn't been on their list of destinations, and besides, he hadn't completed the mock exam. Hadrn't looked at it since the day Bill handed it over, with the exception of one time he'd been feeling particularly frustrated with physics after a brutal study session and flipped it off because it was the last item remaining in his to-do pile.

Shaking his head, he made a *tsking* noise. "Bring it with when we get together this week for grading." Behind the bar, Bill was quick while he finished pouring the glass of iced water and slipped a large lemon slice onto the edge of the cup. The patron grumbled in displeasure, the humor seemingly lost as he wandered back to his friend.

"Damn, Mister C. Didn't know you had a side-boy."

"*Oooo*, don't go stealin' Mister C.'s partner!" His companion hollered through slurred words, laughing, and simultaneously reminding Dipper of why he didn't care for the company of intoxicated individuals. Dealing with them was an added stress, thoroughly annoying.

"It's Bill," came the snap, though the anger was light-hearted. "You boys should be heading home, it's getting late and you both have to work in the morning."

Although he didn't look as there was presumably an exchange of money for the tab, he heard the squeak of shoes and slide of a bar stool, then Bill's inquiry if they had a ride lined up for themselves. Not caring to hear the rest of the discussion, Dipper busied himself with his lemon water, sipping it lazily as he zoned out waiting for Stan and Mabel to be done in the kitchen. If they took much longer, Dipper guessed he'd have to engage in a second round of stretches since the bar stool wasn't providing the best support for his lower back and pelvic bone.

"Hey, kid?" Bill's voice broke his thoughts. "You want a refill? Or a Shirley Temple?" Dipper shook his head and mumbled a 'no thanks' to the offer, his glass still containing more than enough water to last this short visit. "Stars, you look like you'd make a fine Shirley."

Dryly, he responded, "I don't know if you're saying I'm feminine. I'd be good at making the drink, or if you're suggesting I'd be a prime candidate for when Hollywood decides it needs another child to sexually exploit."

"That's not the point. Do you want anything...? The guys're gone, they won't bother you anymore."
"Oh, right. Thanks for stepping in, that was kind of uncomfortable." In the perspective of someone with lacking social tact, it was impressive how Bill had deterred them gracefully and sent them home yet maintained an upbeat, approachable attitude. "You're pretty charismatic when you want to be." And from previous interactions, it was evident that he didn't want to be when confronting the fiend that'd allegedly silly stringed his car.

"Yeah," Bill said. "Not a problem. Kind of my job, I have to handle shit like that all the time." He turned from Dipper, resuming wiping down his station. "I'm always charismatic, kid."

"Sure," he muttered sarcastically after he took a drink of the water, resting his head on his arm again. "The first time we met, all I could think about was how charming you were." Ranting about his vehicle, about damages, threatening him. Fun stuff.

Dipper had been glad to leave it at that, but a laugh escaped Bill, a signal their conversation wasn't over. No peace for him, not yet. "Wendy was the same way, dazzled by my charm and chivalry." Immediately, Dipper discredited the notion of Bill possessing either of those traits. "I'd recently gotten my job here, and a group of guys were trying to hit on her. Catcalling, trying to make her leave with them, all that stupid bull. I stepped in when I saw that she was attempting to get away from them. It's how we met."

"Jesus Christ," he groaned quietly at the saccharine recollection, swiping a hand through his hair and ruffling the strands everywhere. "You might want to serve me alcohol if you're going to insist on talking to me about this." A chat about his love life, meanwhile Dipper wished to crawl into bed and sleep for the next year.

Despite his mixed feelings toward Bill, he guessed he didn't have to allow his irritation to drip into this and taint what could otherwise be an alright exchange after Bill had gone out of his way to rescue him from an uncomfortable encounter. Repositioning had him biting back a hiss of pain, and he exhaled as he mumbled, "Sorry. It's... it's, uh, just been a long night." Fostering a good relationship, or at least a decent one, was imperative if he wished to get through this semester without a hold on his account or failing grades.

Bill discontentedly grumbled, and when he turned back to look at Dipper, his facial features betrayed his annoyance. "'What's the point in talking to you if you don't want to listen?' It was almost a demand. "I don't know why I bothered with you."

"Yeah, I don't know," Dipper conceded with a shrug, feeling drained. All he could do was repeat, "Sorry." Bill was right, his moodiness was projecting, and it wasn't his fault he was being sour; really, he had nobody to blame but himself since he didn't have to attend the live taping this evening when he could've found another method of watching a production.

"Right." Bill grumbled, moving away to wipe along the various surfaces of the counter. "Don't you have something better to do?" he questioned him. "Stan's car probably wants your company."

"I was going to wait until Stan and Mabel were done with... whatever they're doing in the kitchen, but I can move if you need me to," Dipper said through a tentative half-suggestion, tilting his head as he peered up from his almost-emptied drink. "I'm guessing it'd be easier to clean if I'm not here."

Whether that was true or not, Dipper didn't know, but he supposed it would be nicer to hear than have his suspicions confirmed that Bill didn't want to see him.

Bill shook his head, crouching down to scrub under the bar. "I was wondering more for you. You don't seem like you want to be here."

"Honestly? I want to be asleep," he confessed, then gulped the last of the water for Bill to collect
his glass. For the first time, he noticed the unrolled, full-length sleeves, and Dipper couldn't decide if he felt relief or frustration over Bill's elusive soulmark, but he didn't preoccupy himself with it. "I thought Ford would've told you we were going to a live taping of the soap opera that Stan and my sister watch religiously. That was a two-hour drive there, and we're finally back in the city."

"Fordsy told me you volunteered to go," Bill pointed out. "You could've stayed home and gone to bed if you wanted to." Dipper supposed that was true, buried in his thoughts as he unconsciously chased the straw around the rim of the drink, the ice clanking within.

"I could've," he agreed, "but I have an experience-based paper due soon for a film studies class. I have to analyze production techniques after seeing them in action, and this was the only opportunity that made sense." Resting with his elbows on the bar, Bill leaned to draw closer.

"You do realize you could've observed a Drama Club production, right? It'd have been a hell of a lot easier on you."

"Like… the Drama Club at West Coast Tech, the people who do the plays and the musicals?" Dipper asked, momentarily puzzled and in the midst of consideration. "I didn't know they were doing anything." If they were, Bill was right because staying on campus for an hour-long performance would've been much easier than traveling.

Bill got back to his work, stifling a yawn as he did a final polishing of the bar and counters. "Yeah, who else would I be talking about? I don't know how you missed the current production we're working on, it's posted all over campus."

"I guess I don't stop to read posters very often...? I have enough issues getting around as it is, so I don't have a lot of energy to stop and look at what's around campus if I happen to see a flyer since it's reminders about treating schoolwork like a full-time job or… I don't know, facts about student services," he said with a light frown and shrug. Thinking about what Bill had told him, he realized his wording. "Wait, are you a part of that? The Drama Club, I mean?"

"Of course." Bill proudly puffed his chest up, and Dipper bit back a smile at the display. "It's my favorite group on campus, actually. You should come sometime, I think you'd enjoy watching us." If he was feeling pettier, perhaps he'd point out the amusing connection between Bill's over-the-top reaction to his car being vandalized and his status as a member of the Drama Club, but he refrained.

"Keep me updated on the productions, I guess? I wouldn't mind going to some, and I'm sure Mabel would love to see them. She's majoring in theater arts and would be interested in attending that." Maybe joining the club as well, he wondered if she was aware of its existence. Curious, Dipper asked, "Do you participate in the actual productions, or are you only in the club?"

Bill's face lit up in excitement at the further inquiries, his enthusiasm almost intoxicating in how he brightened. "I'm usually the male lead," he explained, and Dipper caught the hint of passion in his tone, but he guessed he should've known from the various theater-related posters on his apartment walls. "If I'm busy with my classes though, I let other people take the role so they can gain more experience in their field."

"How noble of you," Dipper commented slightly teasingly, back to twirling the straw in the glass. "An astrophysics grad student letting the theater arts majors or hobbyists partake in their own productions. But, uh, yeah, I'd like to check that out sometime, maybe."

"It's a date, then." Bill spoke in a clear, playful tone, but Dipper scoffed at the idea. They had plans to meet so he could help Bill with grading, and receive assistance on his own homework, but it was far from a date.
"You know we're not dating for real, right? Those guys are long gone."

Ignoring that, Bill went on, "And I'll see about slipping the club details to Mabel so she can look into it if she wants to."

There was clanking and shuffling in the kitchen, and Dipper glanced up in time to see Mabel appear from the back with a salad bowl in hand. "I heard 'Mabel!' What'd I miss?"

"Oh, hey," he greeted with a smile, motioning to the seat beside him. "You didn't miss anything, but uh..." his questioning gaze slid to Bill, "I think you were going to mention the Drama Club stuff?" With his attention returned to Mabel, he added, "By the way, that's Bill, but I'm assuming you kind of got that." Being the only ones here wouldn't leave many options.

Bill raised his eyebrow, glancing at Mabel, then back at Dipper. "As I was telling your brother, I'm a member of the West Coast Tech Drama Club. I thought you might be interested, based on what he's been saying about you. Here," he grabbed a pen and scribbled something down on a napkin, sliding it to her. "This is the information you'll need to find us during our next meeting, if you want to drop in and say hello to everybody." Mabel narrowed her eyes at him, unmistakably distrustful of Bill's intentions, and Dipper couldn't blame her when Bill hadn't been the kindest to them.

"Okay," she said, hesitantly accepting the napkin. "Thanks."

Unwilling to let the silence settle into an awkward one, Dipper asked, "So... what's Stan doing? Is he almost ready to leave?"

"He was doing dishes," Mabel said, sitting down beside him as she began to dig into her salad. "I dunno how long he'll take." That wasn't reassuring in the least, and he wondered if Stan's estimate of only a short visit had been vastly understated.

Bill sighed, shaking his head as he tossed the dirtied cloth into a bucket. "It'll only take him a couple minutes. The guy's a beast with his dishes. Is that all he's doing? Is everything else done?"

"Yeah, he said everything else was taken care of." Mabel munched down on lettuce, the low crunch joining the background music of the radio, and Dipper coughed into his shoulder in an attempt to alleviate the creeping discomfort in the atmosphere. How much longer could a few dishes take?

In the presence of anybody else, Mabel probably would've been chatting happily as she ate, but they were stuck with Bill. Mabel's demeanor, her posture, subtle facial expressions, everything suggested she didn't care for him, though it may not have been plain to someone unfamiliar with her mannerisms. This would've been a great moment to ask if Mabel wanted to wait in the car, but the situation was complicated by her salad. Couldn't exactly take that with them and expect to resume eating in Stan's car.

Instead, they were sentenced to a silence that'd gone on for far too long. How did extroverts delve into meaningful conversations?

Tugging on his shirt collar, he grew restless in his seat and leaned onto his arms, twisting his lower half back and forth on the spinning bar stool. Making conversation seemed like an impossible feat when his thoughts had gone blank, leaving him helpless and unable to recall what they'd been discussing prior to Mabel's presence. Drama Club, but he couldn't remember anything else, so he resorted to burying his face in his hands as he waited for Stan or an early death.

Relief came in the form of Bill moving away from the counter to head toward the kitchen. "Don't
touch any of the bottles while I'm gone." Unfortunately, that only seemed to rouse Mabel's interest, and she peered over the side of the counter to eye up the array of alcohol bottles.

"Mabel, we're not twenty-one," he said upon noticing her intrigue, her focus on the strictly-forbidden beverages that both the law and Bill said not to touch. "It's also closed for the night. While you and Stan were in the kitchen, Bill was cleaning everything and pushing the last of the patrons out, so I, uh... I think it's safe to say we shouldn't be thinking about taking anything." Logically, that was. Not many angles were in their favor.

"He told me not to," Mabel agreed. "That doesn't mean I can't want to. I wasn't going to take one, loosen up." She punched his shoulder lightly, and he gave an over-reactive groan, muttering something about being too old for that sort of roughness. He wasn't, but his body liked to think he was with how it dripped with fatigue and aches.

Raising his head to glance around the dead bar area, he said, "I almost forgot to tell you. Some drunk guy decided it'd be hilarious if he started hitting on me in front of his buddy while you were in the kitchen with Stan. I'm glad Bill kicked those two out, they were obnoxious and basically wasted."

"Overly-loud drunk people are... bleh." A sentiment Dipper agreed with, but then Mabel frowned. "It's good that Bill gave them the boot, but are you beginning to warm up to him?" she asked, and he shook his head, then shrugged. It wasn't a matter of warming up to him, it was being able to tolerate the guy since they'd be spending a lot of time together in the future. "After he flipped out over the silly-string and forced you to do his dirty work? He might've kicked those guys out, but what if he wants something in return?"

"I guess he'll have to hold that thought then, because I'm sort of in the middle of the last favor he asked me to do," he replied dryly, the smallest of smiles on his face to indicate the joke. His "debt" to Bill was being paid off in the form of grading, and they were set to meet to begin working on that. More seriously, he added, "I don't think he'll want anything since it sounds like he has to intervene frequently, so it's not unusual or anything."

"If you're sure," she said, finishing the last bites of her salad. "I don't want him to use you, Dipper." There was a familiar booming laugh after she spoke, and the forms of Stan and Bill appeared from the kitchen.

"Kids," Stan acknowledged them, despite the very obvious lack of an extensive age gap. Calling them 'kids' was a bit of a stretch, but it was Stan. "Are ya ready to go?"

After shooting a quick look at Mabel for confirmation, Dipper nodded and said, "Yeah, I think we're ready."

"Toss that damn plate," Stan barked to Mabel as they rose from their bar stools and started toward the doors. "I dunno why you didn't use somethin' disposable, but I ain't goin' back there 'cause you had the munchies."

"Disposable plates are bad for the environment," Dipper pointed out, "so... hey, Mabel, instead of throwing it away, can we keep that? We could wash it and store it in our room for when we have to eat in." The dining hall's hours were inconvenient as it was, and now they could have a plate.

"Sure," Mabel said gleefully. "We can load up on dishes if we visit this place often." Likely wouldn't happen considering they had little reason to be at a bar, but he guessed there was a possibility of visiting the comedy club part of the venue.
"I don't care if it's bad for the environment," Stan growled. "Why do ya care, anyway? The environment doesn't do shit for ya, kid."

"Sometimes, I have no idea how we're related."

"Our grandparents fucked each other, had some sons, and they fucked their wives and had sons. Is that a good enough explanation, kid?" Stan was already holding the door open, Mabel close behind with the plate in hand.

"Yeah, I really didn't want to hear that," he muttered as he passed Stan, scratching the back of his neck while the warmth of night air spilled over his skin. The parking lot was as listless as the comedy club-bar, only two cars remaining: one the familiar golden vehicle, the other Stan's ridiculously old sports car. A classic, he called it.

Stan headed over to his vehicle, puffing his chest proudly as he scanned over the machine. "Ain't she a beaut?" His question was directed at no one specific, but he was probably expecting an agreement.

"Which?" Bill asked. "They both're pretty cute, though I'm partial to the shorter one." Dipper looked between the cars and assumed it was in reference to his own golden monstrosity, since the frame was lower, but he didn't bother questioning it as he approached Stan's.

"Leave 'em alone," Stan grumbled. "Last thing the kids need is some professor's pet eyein' them up."

Dipper paused in his reach for the door handle and cast a weary glance at Bill. "Were you actually talking about us? Because that's pretty messed up, dude. You have a girlfriend, and we've known each other for about… two hours, ten minutes in Mabel's case." Speaking in terms of total interaction time, it was hardly any, and most had been veering on the uncomfortable side. Despite the absence of sincerity, it seemed ridiculous to Dipper even if he knew Bill simply had a tendency toward flirtatious, charismatic remarks.

Bill waved a dismissive hand, heading to his own car. "My girlfriend and I have an arrangement regarding flirting, kid. Neither of us care since it's not serious, we just can't fuck anyone else. I don't, at least."

"Wow," Dipper huffed sarcastically, "you got my hopes up and everything. I'm so disappointed." Fuck that. His potential-soulmate wasn't deserving of his company, much less his intimate attention.

Stan grumbled something, getting in his car with the others in tow. The click of seatbelts filled the quiet, and he sunk against the cushioned seat, eyelids drooping. "There aren't any more stops, right? That was it?" Dipper asked, though it wasn't so much a question as it was a desperate grasp at ensuring he wouldn't be ambushed, forced to stay out later. To Mabel, he admitted, "When I get back to our dorm, I think I'm going to crash."

Mabel smiled back at him from the passenger seat as the car pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. "I'll crash with you. I think I could sleep for a week."

"We don't have any other stops," Stan said. "I'll take ya home. Are ya still hatin' on our show, kid?"

"This pit stop didn't change my opinion about it, nor did it change the lame writing," Dipper said with a small, breathless chuckle, "but I'm mostly tired." Too tired to be whining about a soap opera when all he wished to do was flop into bed and fall asleep before classes ruined his peaceful rest.
The remainder of the drive wasn't long with the comedy club only a mile or two outside of campus. Stan was kind enough to drop them off outside the dormitory, leaving the two to move like lumbering shadows through the vast hallways until they reached their room and collapsed into the doorway.

A swap to pajamas and several minutes of tooth-brushing completed the pre-sleep ritual before he was curled up in bed. Mabel joined him and he scooted to allot her space while she climbed over and snuggled close with an arm wrapped around him. "Dipper," she murmured, "you've been weirdly agitated tonight, are you okay?"

"Hm?" he hummed in thought, then heaved slowly, frame deflating into the cheap foam mattress. "Yeah, kind of. I think you know long drives don't... work that well for me." The sentence was finished with a gentle cough, and he positioned on his side to burrow into her. "It'll probably hurt tomorrow, and having therapy doesn't help." If only he could cancel, but he knew one cancellation would snowball into cancelling every appointment.

Occasionally, he wondered if that mattered. Results were 'long-term', minimal. He hadn't seen spikes of improvement for years.

Letting his eyes close, the wave of exhaustion wasn't far behind, and he murmured, "How are you doing? I thought you were tired...?" Her drawn out tone suggested that she was, and he was suddenly flattered, a smile coming to his face as he was reminded she had to care for him deeply if she was placing her needs aside to check on his health.

Mabel nuzzled into him, sighing. "I'm okay, tired, but it's cool. Do you want anything? I think we have Advil somewhere, it might help with the pain."

"Probably shouldn't," he said. "I haven't eaten anything in a while, and I don't know if it'll be strong enough." Mild inflammation was significantly different than moderate-to-severe nerve pain from bodily complications. Pressing closer, he added, "Thanks. Hey, did you have a good time tonight? I know you've been putting in a lot of hours, so... I don't know, I guess I wanted to make sure you enjoyed it, seeing the live taping."

"I did! It was fun, I wish we could do it more often." She almost sounded sad. "I guess I'll have to wait until the new episode airs."

"If there's ever anything you want to do..." he trailed off with suggestion but didn't complete the thought, assuming Mabel knew where it'd been headed. "And Bill gave you the information for the Drama Club meetings, it might be fun to stop into those. Sounds like they do productions too."

"I'll try checking it out sometime," her voice had dropped in volume, growing sleepier. "I still don't think I like him, though. Not until he shows me he's not just another rich snob."

Bill could be overbearing and entitled, but Dipper didn't know him well enough beyond that to draw any other conclusions. For now, he was in agreement with Mabel since their interactions hadn't been particularly pleasant. With a yawn, he simply said, "Yeah."

It was all he could manage when the exhaustion was weighing him down, making his mind foggier with every passing moment as he sunk deeper into the blankets and mattress. Nothing had ever felt so soft and more like home, but he dreaded the morning classes that would inevitably come too soon.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the wait, but thank you for being patient!! Hope you enjoyed this chapter & as usual, we appreciate comments. <3
Chapter 5

Sitting at his desk, Dipper leaned forward on his elbows, hands clasped over his ears with eyes trained contemptuously on the pages of unfinished physics homework. His focus was nonexistent with the additional people in their dorm, Mabel's friends Candy and Grenda, considering it was cramped enough with just him and Mabel in the ridiculously tiny space. Although her companions were polite enough to leave him to his studies after a brief session of asking about his courses and the resulting workload of maximized credits, the excited squeals and girl-talk were distracting. All he'd been able to do was create a repeating, artistic pattern of triangles onto the mock test Bill had supplied for him.

Did Bill actually expect he would do it? Hopefully not. Dipper felt like he was being crushed under the weight of his normal homework, and he didn't need to heighten the pressure with some unnecessary extracurricular assignment given by Bill to prove his already-apparent knowledge.

That reminded him, they had their first grading session lined up for the evening after exchanging a few scheduling texts earlier. Initially, he'd thought it would be an inconvenience, but maybe hauling his things to Bill's apartment would allow him more peace than he was receiving here.

"Hey, Mabel," he addressed his sister over the sound of her and her friends' chatter, "it's almost five, so I think I'm going to head over to Bill's place. I'll see you in a bit."

"Okay," Mabel agreed. "I'll see you soon, Dipper! We're all getting pretty hungry and might be heading to a dining center soon, do you want us to…?"

He waved a dismissive hand and shook his head. "Don’t wait around for me. I don't know how long it'll take us, and we can always go together later."

Once his papers were neatly slid into a folder and packed in his bag, Dipper scurried from the dorm room and was partway down the hallway, breathing a sigh of relief at the instant quiet. There were still faint traces of laughing and voices as he walked, likely coming from the other rooms, but he didn't slow his pace to explore the theory.

The trek across the street and parking lot ended in a brief pause as he wondered what the proper social protocol for this was, unsure if he should scrape up the courage needed to knock on Bill's door, ask to meet him at the entrance of the complex, send him a text to let him know… He didn't want to do it wrong during their first real meeting.

Deciding to knock since Bill should be aware he was coming, Dipper plodded through the even-quieter hallways of the campus apartment building, so silent that a pin dropping could've been heard. It was eerie, almost, and he wracked his mind to remember which one was Bill's. As he extended a hand to rap lightly on the wooden door looming before him, he hoped it was the right choice.

Diminishing seconds of worry and fretting, the door swung open, and Bill grinned down at him. Again, he was dressed in his overly-formal, fancy black-yellow attire. “Mason Jar! I’m glad to see you. Are you ready to get to work? Better be, because we’re going to.”

An eyebrow lifted, and Dipper said, "Not if you're going to call me that." If he hadn't been preoccupied with holding his backpack, perhaps he would've folded his arms over his chest to drive home the opposition, the sheer dislike of his dumb nickname.
“Get inside,” Bill told him, the queasy grin remaining plastered to his face. “I’ll call you whatever the hell I want to call you.”

Yeah, no, they'd have to work on that. "Can you at least make it something nice? Calling me a 'jar' doesn't get my adrenaline pumping," he said sarcastically but stepped inside the apartment to kick off his shoes while he surveyed the surroundings. A few items were shifted since the previous visit, but overall it was about the same as he remembered. Messier, maybe, but only a touch, and their conversation at the bar had made posters of theatrical performances more notable.

The door closing snapped him from his daze, and Dipper watched Bill move past him toward the couch while he collected a couple papers and a textbook in the process. “Shall I call you ‘Mason Bottle’ then?” he asked, gesturing. “Consider it a promotion from ‘jar.’” Dipper shook his head to veto the name.

Striding further into the living room, Dipper slowed to a stop as he contemplated where to sit, if Bill was going to invite him anywhere specific. "I'd say 'Dipper' is fine, but I think we already established that was for the non-douchebags in my life." The email still made him internally cringe, but Bill had seemed to take it well.

Bill patted the seat beside him. “Dipper. With a name like that, it’s a wonder you deem me the douchebag when it should be whoever gave you that nickname.”

"The nickname's fine, the origin kind of sucks." With a shrug, he complied and sat down on the other side of the sofa, though he mentally noted he would prefer to be at a desk if they were going to begin the grading soon.

"The origin?" Bill raised his eyebrow at him. “What, were you Daddy’s Little Dipper?” he teased. That earned him a long, disapproving stare that spanned several uncomfortable seconds of silence. Until Dipper finally spoke. "Honestly, I don't know what that means. I don't think I want to know what that means either." His expression was flat, head tilting to a side as he tried to make sense of the strange inquiry, and it didn't seem like Bill was any closer to clarifying what he'd intended by it.

“Then why are you looking like you want to kill me?”

"I'm pretty sure that's my default around you." Soulmate or not.

Bill seemed to ignore his response. “Seriously, Mason Bottle, what’s the origin?”

He could've protested the name but considering where this was headed, Dipper let out an embarrassed cough and averted his gaze, a hand rubbing the back of his neck while he tried to conjure an excuse. "I… it's not important anymore, but the nickname stuck. It was dumb, I barely remember anymore." In an attempt to avoid delving into the subject, Dipper swapped it, "So, uh, hey, I'm here to grade your students' homework. Can we get going on that?"

Bill examined him through a critical gaze. “I want to know what’s up with your nickname, Mason Jar. If you insist on getting to work, it’s on the desk over there.” He nodded over to it, and upon relocating to Bill's desk, one of the first things he noticed beyond the stack of papers awaiting his attention was the photo of Wendy turned away, facing the wall.

"Don't want anyone to see her and get jealous?” Dipper joked lamely in regards to the photograph, reaching to turn the frame around so it was correctly situated again, then sifting through the homework as he tried to determine where to begin with this. Everything looked familiar, problems
he could easily solve and equally simple questions from a lower level physics course. Maybe this wouldn't take as long as he originally believed.

Bill’s response pulled him from his thoughts. “Why’d you do that?” he demanded through a bark, and the sound of footsteps padded by carpet grew louder as Bill approached and turned the photo away once more. “I don’t want to see it.” A confused noise was on the tip of Dipper's tongue, unsure of why he wouldn't want to see his own girlfriend...

Raising his hands with mock surrender, he said, "I didn't know— oh, did you guys break up? I'm really sorry, man. If you want, I could—"

“We didn’t break up,” he said. “We got into an argument, but I don’t want to talk about it. None of your business, not important.”

The words hushed him, leaving Dipper to flick his gaze from the turned-away photo frame to Bill, then to the sprawled papers on the desk. A small part of him wanted to question it especially because it ‘wasn't his business', but Bill had already made it clear the topic was not to be discussed, and… despite his curiosity, he could be accepting of that. It wasn't his relationship drama, thank god, even if it did involve his potential soulmate.

Reminded, Dipper instinctively looked to Bill's arm but was disappointed when he noticed the usual full sleeves of a dress shirt covering where the marking would be. No luck. But... he supposed he could ask Wendy, she would likely know it, but the mere thought of doing so had his stomach in knots. If he knew, that'd remove any deniability.

"That's fine," he replied when he remembered he hadn't spoken yet, and paused to fish a pen from the bowl of writing supplies. "I'll get to grading, and then you can have the rest of your night to do whatever you want."

“I'll probably just get drunk,” he muttered as he turned away, the notion of drinking alarming to Dipper. “There’s no rush on grading, do what you want. I’m not going to kick you out.”

"Uh… I'm not going to report you or anything, but doesn't that kind of go against university housing policy?” And then, it occurred to him that it wouldn't matter for Bill, who was giving him a stare to reinforce his idiocy. "Yeah, never mind." Having a parental figure in a position of power would probably allot him greater leeway than the average student, particularly when he was of age to drink legally. His eyebrows knitted as he added, "But seriously, it's the middle of the week." Getting drunk could wait until the weekend, unless Bill was fostering an unhealthy habit of alcoholism.

Bill began to walk toward his kitchen without looking back. “Why do you care, kid? You don’t have to hang around once the grading for today’s done.” Alternatively, he could let Bill drink himself into an early grave and see if his own soulmark faded from black to gray. He guessed that was an option to determine if they were truly soulmates, albeit a morbid method.

"I don't know," he called, raising his head in the direction of the kitchen with a shrug. "If you're not kicking me out, I might stay if it isn't too late because my sister… she has her friends over in our dorm, and I can't study there. It's loud and distracting." Another distraction was this conversation, though he'd already started to read through the assignment and tentatively flag incorrect answers. "Hey, do you have a key for this, or should I make one?"

“There’s a key beside the pile,” Bill said, voice raising so Dipper could hear him above the clinking of glass. Almost immediately, he found the key and propped it up, checking his work with what Bill wrote—no mistakes so far—and continued marking the assignments. A few moments
later, he could hear Bill re-enter the room, collapsing behind him on the sofa.

The musical murmur of a television in the background was still less disruptive than the outbursts from Mabel and her friends, and he was able to work in an atmosphere of soothing tranquility for a while. Grading was quick when he had an answer key and knowledge of the subject at his disposal — if this carried on for the rest of the semester, it was an easy way to prevent having to pay for his apparent vandalizing of Bill's car.

When he was approximately halfway through, he was disturbed by Bill talking to him again. “Hey, kid?”

Swiveling in the chair, Dipper faced Bill and saw he was relaxed into the sofa; a glass in hand, textbook open on his lap, Bill's appearance was slightly ruffled with his bowtie undone and the ends hanging down, vest unbuttoned. "Yeah?" he asked, trying to stifle a laugh at his tousled hair that stuck out every-which-way.

Bill’s eyes narrowed as he watched him. “What made you go into physics as your major?” The question struck discomfort into Dipper since it was a major he couldn't be less interested in, couldn't be more resentful of, but he felt trapped in it. Not exactly something he'd willingly share with a near-stranger in hopes of keeping Bill at an arm's length, and he didn't want word of his unhappiness with his future somehow getting to his family.

Though he would've given a real answer otherwise, this time it was out of the question. "It's a prosperous field. How else would I meet a significant other to pay for everything so I don't have to work a day in my life?” Dipper bitterly said, a reply that would preferably deflect since this wasn't a topic he thought he should venture into with Bill. Maybe he was a little sour over how people like him and Ford actually did enjoy this subject, and he wished he could as well.

“Isn’t that what bars are for?” Bill teased, taking a sip from his glass. “You could go gold-digging if you suck up to some of those drunk, horny old men.”

Dipper wrinkled his nose at the idea of frequenting bars. "Why go to a bar for that? I mean, I have one right in front of me." The sharp retort was out before he could stop it, but a second later, he was sputtering, "I, uh… I'm so sorry, dude. I— I didn't mean that." Even if he had flirted with him a few times before, it was a jump to equate him to a horny old man.

Bill scoffed. “I’m not Stan.”

Internally, he breathed a sigh of relief, glad he didn't seem offended by it. "I know. Maybe you would be if you didn't dress as nicely, were twenty pounds heavier, and a few inches shorter." At Bill's lingering look, he shifted under its intensity and coughed, clarifying awkwardly, "I swear I am not flirting with you." And he wasn't! Complimenting Bill on his attire wasn't far-fetched when he basically wore a suit even in casual situations.

“Whatever you said, kid.” He smirked at him, then took another sip of his drink. “I always knew you wanted me.” There was a joking tone to his words, but he maintained a serious expression, and Dipper merely hrnmphed his disapproval.

"I'm going back to grading." Bill lifted his eyebrow, but Dipper didn't care to see anything more, shifting in the chair to return to checking students' work, indicating incorrect answers and calculating totals for the assignment. It was up to Bill to decide if participation was the passing factor, but he figured it would be useful for his students to know their scores.

“You’re quick to jump back to work,” he commented. “So eager to leave me, huh?”
Distractedly, he responded, "...Thought you'd be eager to get me out so you can carry on with your night." It wasn't a matter of wishing to leave quickly, it was a practical choice to breeze through the work. "Besides, I didn't realize my company was worth keeping." The latter statement was with mild, self-defeating amusement, painfully aware he wasn't the best partner in social situations. That was Mabel's strong suit.

"Eh, I don't mind company! It's always really quiet, a bit lonely. I don't get many guests anymore." Although he was tempted to joke about how this 'payment' was the product of Bill wanting someone around, he didn't dare voice his thoughts when it could spiral into another lecture on how serious vandalism was. The hold would be back onto his account before midnight.

"Instead of downing your loneliness in… whatever you're drinking," he presumed it was alcohol, "why don't you let me finish this grading, and then we can chat as I try to do my own homework? I'll probably have questions about it." Upper level physics was an enigma, a mind-bending trip through the deepest depths of Hell, but Bill's status as a graduate student studying astrophysics gave him hope there would be a light at the end of the you're-going-to-flunk-this-semester tunnel.

Bill defensively huffed, and he could imagine him drawing his glass of alcohol closer, likely unwilling to give up the beverage. "Why can't we do both?"

Dipper made an appalled face and sighed, wishing he wouldn't do that. "Drunk people make me uncomfortable, but look, it's your place so do what you want in it. If you get wasted, I'm probably not going to stick around longer than I have to." A groan escaped Bill, accompanied by noises that suggested he was repositioning on the couch.

"It's good for comforting," he mumbled sadly. "I can't believe you have an issue with it, it's relaxing. Makes me kinda sleepy sometimes." It wasn't a problem with alcohol, it was specifically an issue with irresponsible drinking and drunken people since they were unpredictable and often more socially inappropriate than he was, but he didn't bother correcting Bill.

In silence once again, Dipper gradually graded the remaining papers and finished them within a reasonable amount of time, frowning as he circled the score atop the last one. It was a near-failing mark. Concerning. "Hey, I'm done, but uh… do you know who Pa…" he trailed off, squinting at the name written in squiggly letters, "I think that says 'Pacifica'? Who is she?"

"Pacifica?" Bill's voice tensed. "She's.. just a student. Why?"

"She got almost half of the questions wrong. Did she take the prerequisites to the course?" It was almost as if she was floundering through the motions of the assignment, completely botching most of the answers in a way that made it seem like they were all guesswork and some were luckier than others.

"By 'prerequisites', do you mean high school? She did attend high school, I don't know how she could've gotten in without that."

"Well, yeah, obviously she graduated from high school. I got that." Otherwise, being accepted into an upscale college with high-achieving standards wouldn't have happened. "But for the course, or — wait, do you teach the general education version? Like, this is basic physics, 100-level stuff that non-majors take?" Looking over the assignment, it did seem more introductory than in-depth, but he hadn't registered it before that this was a requirement of the college instead of an elective.

Bill sighed. "I'm a graduate student, not a professor. I'm only allowed to teach the general education version."
"Oh." There was a pause and noisy shuffling of papers as he stacked them into a neat pile for Bill to collect later. "About Pacifica… I guess it's not super important. Maybe she was having a bad night, I don't know." But Dipper sympathized with her if she was missing the integral foundations of physics, a problem he was running into himself now that he'd gone further into the program. Rather than addressing it, it was better to give this Pacifica the benefit of the doubt and assume she was an uninterested-in-the-topic freshman trying to find her place on campus. There'd be time to improve her grade as the semester went on.

A scoff escaped Bill. “Can I be honest with you, kid?”

Dipper's eyebrows drew upward. "Wait, are you implying you've been dishonest until this point?"

"She’s not worth your concern. Students like her, they’re not in it because they want to be here. They're not physics majors, they need the general education credit from this class, and their marks will be disappointing. You should get used to it.” Wow, that was one way to think of his classes, and it was unfortunate. Bill probably did care about them, hoped they would succeed, but there was the crushing weight of the knowledge that they didn't care hindering his efforts.

"Okay…” he moved on by clearing his throat. "I'm going to go ahead and see about doing my own homework, since I'm guessing Mabel's friends are still over.” As he began to dig in his backpack, Dipper asked, "Do you have the textbook— oh! I brought that test you gave me during our first meeting.” His tone was guilty while he retrieved it, then stood to hand the mock assessment to Bill. "Like I said, it was hard to focus with her friends hovering."

Bill took the assessment, glancing at the paper. “Are you sure you don’t want to be a geometry major? This has a bunch of nice-looking triangles on it.”

A spark of amusement lit within Dipper, a misplaced feeling of pride over his triangle-assessment. "Geometry major? If I had insomnia to cure, I'd probably go with that, but… I’ll pass." Physics worked fine as it was.

“Yeah, you’ll pass your geometry class,” Bill said, setting the paper back down. “This says nothing about your ability as a physics grader.”

"What did you think you'd get from a vandalizing felon like me?" Dipper asked dryly while he strolled over to Bill's bookshelf and lingered there, searching the rows of thick textbooks for the one he was looking for. "You're recruiting the lowest of the low to grade for you," he went on, "so I don't think it's fair to set the bar too high. It's not like I'm an overqualified third-year physics student."

“Please,” he told him. “If I hired the lowest of the low, I’d have hired a fucking five year old.” It was hard to avoid wincing at the thought. "What’re you looking for, kid?"

"A book that covers research methods in physics. I figured you'd have one of those..?" It didn't have to be specifically the course textbook, but if he did his undergraduate program here, he assumed it would be. A few more seconds of searching, and he was pulling the book from the shelf. "Oh, never mind. Found it." In that second, there was a hum behind him, and Dipper whirled around only to be face-to-face with Bill.

“You better return that. Those books aren’t cheap, and if it’s damaged, you’re paying for a new one.”

"Jesus Christ," he said through an exhale. Bill broke into laughter, grinning at him and probably pleased with his ability to be as stealthy as a spider. "You don't need to sneak up on me like that,
man, and I'm not going to take your book anywhere. Like I said, I'm doing homework since I can't do it at my place."

Bill stepped away, giving space to allow him to relocate to the other end of the sofa and settle in with his homework and the book. "Surprised you didn’t bring your own book. What if I didn’t have what you needed?"

He said simply, "The book's heavy. I try to travel light, and yours has the amended notes." It wasn't a long walk from his dormitory building to Bill's apartment complex as they were a street apart and both on university property, but added weight tended to shorten the time between comfortable walking and pained hobble. "If you hadn't had it, I guess I would question why you're missing those texts, since you're in the physics program." Even if Bill wasn't enrolled in courses that required them, he assumed they were nevertheless useful.

"I'm not obligated to have text books, you know. Most of this is a quick Google search away, it’s not as hard as you seem to think it is."

"Wow, I wish you would've told me that two weeks ago when I was studying my ass off," he said heatedly, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Answers to the questions were a Google search away, but understanding the concept required reading, studying, truly comprehending the material. "But seriously, not all of us have the curse of knowledge on this subject. It's a real struggle, okay?" Bill shook his head at him, frowning, but Dipper looked away to begin working on the assignment.

"I don't understand how it could be a struggle, kid. Physics is easy, but you need to understand the laws and follow formulas."

Maybe it would be less painful if he cared about the subject, if he could get through a chapter of it without wanting to drive a pipe through his head, if he knew half of the terms by heart and immersed himself in the experience. It was a wreck, being enrolled in collegiate level courses without the knowledge to support him through learning more; nothing made sense, and he didn't know how to scrape a passing grade together. Rather than explaining himself, he said, "This assignment is about research methods in the field, not about the equations."

Bill scoffed. "If you don’t know our research methods by now, you might want to consider a major change. No offense, Mason Jar."

"What do you mean 'by now'?" Dipper huffed. "Credit-wise, I'm a third-year undergraduate student following the curriculum track, and I'm actually ahead of schedule." Technically, he was a freshman, as this was his first year in college. But opportunities in high school had opened the door to score reduced-cost college credits, and they'd sped the rate of his advancement. "Taking eighteen credits per semester is a heavy workload, so lay off, dude."

"Eighteen credits?" Bill inquired. "What, you don’t have a job?" He tensed, biting at the inside of his cheek but tried to simply focus on the work in front of him. "Do mommy and daddy pay for your needs?"

Scathingly, he remarked, "My daddy is the President of the University, so I don't have to worry about any financial strain or behavioral repercussions." Oh wait, no. That was Bill.

"I always knew my father slept with whores."

So, apparently his mother was a whore, and Bill's father was a cheater. Nice to know. "Did… we just get kamikazed by words?"
“I was stating historical facts.”

Brushing it off and returning to his homework, he wasn't sure if he wanted to provide him with a genuine answer or let the subject fade. Telling Bill that Mabel was taking care of the financials while he was busy flopping through school and hoping he was going to pass wasn't ideal when he was concerned it'd only invite questions about why he wasn't physically qualified for most part-time positions.

“Hey, you never answered my question.” There was a finger lightly jabbing his shoulder, and he wondered when Bill managed to get so close again because he'd left him plenty of room on the other side of the sofa.

Leaning further away from him, he glanced back, unamused. "Why are you so interested in my financial situation? I don't see how that's related to coming in and grading your papers every week." With a sigh, Dipper shifted to lay on his back and drape his feet over Bill's legs; if he was going to sit that closely, he would have to deal. "Look, if my parents paid for my endeavors, I wouldn't even be here. You'd have your six grand, and you'd be sitting on this couch, lonely and getting drunk."

Bill’s gaze darkened, and he muttered, “It was eight grand. And I wouldn’t be lonely, I’d be hitting the bars, chatting it up with some barkeeps.”

"Oh, I guess that makes me your nagging wife then," he joked with an awkward cough trailing after the statement upon realizing that may have been a dumb thing to say, especially to his potential soulmate. Social ineptitude would be the death of him if physics didn't do it first. "Because I'm, y'know, the reason you can't go out and be with your friends tonight or whatever."

“It’s cool,” Bill said. “As my nagging wife, we can attempt to soothe your womanly needs by knocking you up.” Dipper blinked at him, unsure if he'd heard him right, pondering the likelihood of Bill actually saying that. Well, someone was more socially clueless than he was. It made him feel less like a failure, at least, and it shed light on a possible reason why Wendy and Bill's relationship was rocky.

"Wow, uh… just wow. I don't know what to say to that," he replied, fiddling idly with the textbook's pages. "Um. Yeah. This… this is uncomfortable." He didn't know where to go from here or how to pretend that specific, misogynic interaction had never happened, but maybe he would text Ford later to find out if Bill had a warped sense of humor.

“If you were my wife, we’d be obligated to produce heirs because I'm an only child, and my family has a fuck ton of money to pass along. I don’t know what you were expecting, kid." More reason to hope they weren't soulmates; he was pursuing a childfree life, and raising tiny humans for the sake of financial heirs didn't appeal to him.

"A little less creepiness, for one thing," he mumbled under his breath. "First, your family sounds super old-fashioned if you're being serious right now, and second, can we not talk about this hypothetical marriage and its messed up sex life? With results that are biologically impossible, by the way."

Bill shrugged. “My folks would insist we use a surrogate, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.” Dipper froze, suddenly worried. Wondering. Squinting as he tried to figure out if Bill knew, if he was aware of the possibility they were bound by the universe— pushed together to solidify their place as soulmates. Was that why he was overly comfortable with him and oversharing?

There was a tug at his collar, a twitch of his fingers, a shift of his weight. He felt trapped under Bill's gaze. "Hypothetically, what if somewhere down the line your soulmate found you and
wanted to be with you instead?” he asked, afraid of Bill's answer. A confirmation that Bill knew would be the end of their forming acquaintanceship as far as he was concerned. Quickly, he amended, "If you have a viable soulmark, I mean. I know not everyone does, and some are faded or something."

“I don’t know,” he said. “It could depend on the person, if I’m with someone else, you know? I’m not quick to drop what I’m doing for a stranger.”

Relief crashed over Dipper, this alone determining that Bill hadn't caught onto the fact they were possibly soulmates. If he had, he wasn't interested in it. "Yeah, that makes sense. I know a lot of more… traditional people think that soulmarks should dictate relationships, but a soulmate is pretty much a stranger even if they are supposedly the right person." It didn't make a lot of sense to him, why soulmarks were accompanied by societal pressure to be romantically involved with the other individual. Logically, it seemed easier to find someone compatible to settle with.

In the corner of his vision, he saw Bill shake his head. “I always thought the soulmate thing was a load of bullshit. There are too many people who don’t have one, or they don’t meet them, and it’s fucking stupid.” Last remnants of anxiety over Bill perhaps being his soulmate dripped away at the sentiment, one he could share in this case if they truly were being bound together by fate. If Bill kept to that statement, they weren't going to have an issue.

"Are you talking about blanks?” he mused as he continued to devote most of his attention toward his homework. "I don't think that detracts from the soulmate, uh, experience. They… don't have a fate-chosen soulmate, that's all." Alternatively, the soulmate hadn't been born yet, so no mark would've appeared. If one formed on Stan or Ford one day, Dipper figured they'd shit bricks— a twenty-five year age gap. "Also, there's that whole legend about meeting once during a lifetime," it was said a bit suggestively, wondering if Bill would offer a personal anecdote to hopefully deny he'd met his. "...I'm not defending soulmates, I think it's dumb too, but just saying."

“I’m pretty sure,” Bill said, almost angrily, “if you’re a blank, you don’t get a soulmate experience. You’re alone if you’re not with another blank, because if you get with someone with a live mark, people fucking hate you.”

"Most people are alone in this world anyway. What's the difference?” Oops, there was his cynicism coming to play. Dipper tried to erase the thought by running a hand through his hair, exhaling loudly. "What's the big deal about having a soulmate experience?” To him, it kind of sucked, probably tied to this boisterous, self-indulging asshole that hardly let him focus for ten seconds so he could finish his homework.

Bill ran his fingers across Dipper’s leg, and the sensation of his touch over the jean fabric was shiver-inducing, but he shot Bill a look. This wasn't helping finish his assignment, but thankfully, he had only a few painstaking responses to go before it was done. “I imagine it gives people a sense of belonging.” He paused as his phone buzzed, and quickly checked his notifications. “Fordsy is coming over.”

"Oh," he paused, "do you need me to leave? Ford isn't the type to make social calls, so I'm guessing this is for a project." The library was always available if Mabel's friends were still over and he needed a quiet place, or he could—

“No, you can stay.” Bill set his phone down, resuming the brushing of his leg, and Dipper's quizzical expression returned.

"Are you at least going to let me do my homework?”
The touching didn’t stop, and Dipper conceded that it wasn't bad, but it was distracting when he was trying to focus on the research methods in physics. “I am letting you do your homework.” Sure, but that was between talking and touching.

With a dismissive shake of his head, Dipper simply resumed reading and scribbling down answers, trying to ignore the blatant fact that he could barely understand the language of the textbook and of the subject.

The sole interaction for the past fifteen minutes had been Dipper asking the occasional question and Bill giving an answer, until Bill decided to break that unspoken agreement. He was finishing up the last problem when he said, “I’m still wondering why you went with physics, kid.”

"Yeah?" he said as he rose from the couch to put the textbook away. "Me too." The responses were dodgy and skirted giving an actual answer, the one Bill was probing for. Having to admit he was enrolled in a program that he couldn't be less interested in and more incompetent wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to, but the blow was minimally cushioned by a better grade in his film studies course. Trying to switch topics, he asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to leave? I don't really have a reason to stick around now that the grading's done, and my homework's good to go for tomorrow."

“You’re welcomed to stay,” he told him. “If I wanted you gone, you’d be gone by now. Do you want something to eat?”

In retrospect, deciding to meet at five in the evening had been an oversight since it undoubtedly would bleed into dinner time. "Maybe, last time I ate was at lunch, which wasn't much because the dining hall food kind of sucks." Dipper walked under the archway that led into the kitchen and started scanning over the counter tops, then rummaging through the cabinets. When he got to the sink, he frowned and looked over his shoulder at Bill, "That's a… a pileup. I figured this would be an easy problem to throw your money at. Can't you pay someone to do them for you?"

Bill gave him a blank look. “Why would I pay someone when I can get free labor?”

"Free labor? Wait, do you mean—?" Dipper's lips pulled downward into a legendary frown, his arms crossed over his chest in the next moment in a display of defiance. "I was going to be nice and do these for you, but I'm sure you can easily get someone else to." Cleaning was relaxing, he enjoyed it, but not if Bill was going to be an ass.

“I was joking,” Bill said, breaking out into a grin. “Relax, kid. Would you mind doing them? I don’t have much time with my graduate work.”

"Apparently not, I know you were pretty busy watching television and drinking booze," he said, half-joking as he started to fill the water on one side of the sink. Nevertheless, he didn't mind cleaning Bill's dishes; he was in a better mood after the stressor of homework was lifted, and cleaning preoccupied his mind, kept the anxious thoughts away.

"Hey, I was doing homework too for a while." Bill chuckled. “But that sounds like an average afternoon for me, kid. Thanks for doing them." He bent down to sift through the contents of the refrigerator. "While you're doing that, I can get you something small to eat if you're going to be here a bit.”

"Not too much longer. Probably just these dishes, and I'll say hi to Ford." Dipper's voice rose above the water filling in, the clunking of plates and silverware as he relocated them into the soapy water. "I think I'm going to get going afterward. So, don't worry about feeding me." Besides, he wasn't sure they were close enough for him to feel comfortable with stealing his food despite Bill's offer,
and he'd prefer going to a dining center with Mabel's company instead of Bill's.

Although Dipper hadn't been watching too carefully, he was pretty sure Bill grabbed an apple for himself from the refrigerator and sat at the table behind him to eat it, mindless conversation passing between the two about other classes and the university itself. It didn't span too long of a timeframe, maybe ten minutes.

The discussion was ended by the sound of precise knocking on the door, and Bill got up to answer it. Moments later, he heard him greet, “Fordsy! Are you ready to get to work?”

"Please, control your enthusiasm, Cipher," came Ford's familiar gruffness, and Dipper heard the door close, the two of them crossing the room. Over the half-wall, Dipper could see Ford setting his items upon the barren spare desk. "We have… approximately six hours to prepare these findings then present them tomorrow morning, so I hope you're— ah, Dipper." Ford was staring at him now, and he paused in his dish-washing to smile sheepishly. "I didn't expect you'd be visiting."

"Yeah, I, uh… was doing some work for Bill. I'm still doing work for Bill, I guess." The dish-washing was more of a mutually-beneficial favor, however.

"He volunteered to work for me," Bill explained. "How could I resist?"

Ford scoffed. "It's hardly 'volunteering' if you threaten financial repercussions."

Although Dipper had been about to clarify that this was the one activity Bill hadn't coerced him into, Bill beat him to replying, “Shush, your input isn’t appreciated in my Christian household.” And he forgot all about correcting Ford because he was too busy holding back a chortle.

"Ah, yes, your Christian household. How could I forget?" Ford said blandly, suggesting this was an argument Bill relied on often, and Dipper could picture his eyes rolling behind his square glasses. "If you're going to begin on a tangent about that, spare me from the discussion. I don't want to wake up again to you having planned our entire married life together."

"Wait, he does that to everyone?"

"Yes," Ford said, "it's unbelievably frustrating when you have a project to complete, and Bill is trying to think up names for our nonexistent spawn."

Bill sounded defensive. “There’s nothing wrong with being ready for Plan C. Besides, the kids would love you! Caleum and Maia would be happy to hear you geek out.”

"Cipher," Ford sharply addressed him, "this discussion couldn't be further from what we're supposed to be working on right now, which is sorting and analyzing data. I suggest you halt your domestic fantasies in favor of helping me."

“Whatever you say, darling.” He put emphasis on the term of endearment, and Dipper could hear the smirk in his voice. It was usually annoying, but this time invited gratitude because it suggested Bill's flirting wasn't solely aimed at him. It truly didn't mean anything, to his relief.

The scrape of a chair moving and papers crinkling proceeded as the two claimed spots at the desks, and Dipper decided the following was his cue to tune out: “Alright. Where did you want to start?”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Things are super busy, but an additional thanks to Piqued Penguin, Moonglisten, Acewolf, Frost2098, zeo_nulla, MamMothFerre, and Arashis for being patient. I'll get around to replying to all your amazing comments soon. <3

"I don't even know why this one is wrong!" Dipper said through a strained huff. It was his tenth circle around the main room of Stan and Ford's apartment, pacing, a returned test in his clenched grip. It was hardly recognizable as a test with short red markings littered everywhere over his messy work, varying sizes of inkblots bled into the paper from a pen chewed during the exam. "It doesn't make sense. I swear she went over that exact example in class, and I took so many notes, I studied for like ten hours, and I went to her office to review!" Other questions such as, 'Why is this so confusing?' and 'What else does she want from me?' were exhaled with a sigh.

His hair was humorously tousled from the amount of times he'd brushed his hand through its reddish brown mop, but that only gave him reason to do it again; it couldn't get any worse, nothing could be worse than this grade after the effort he'd poured into it. "I just— how could I get a C? I double checked my answers. I mean, I know some of them were more like… estimates, but I thought I'd be close, and—" as he neared the end of his spiel, his voice quieted, frustration dwindling to a mere waver of emotion, "...and she didn't give partial credit because my handwriting is too 'illegible', but it's not my handwriting! It's just a pen I chewed up because I was freaking out and she doesn't want us using fidget toys. Jesus."

So much time down the drain over a grade that was barely passing. This major sucked, or maybe he sucked. He didn't know anymore when it seemed his classmates were excelling and understanding the material, but he couldn't be more clueless.

"Estimations aren't concrete answers, Dipper," Ford said from his spot at his desk. He was leaned over a thick textbook, turning a page occasionally while he scribbled in his notebook, and Dipper miserably wondered if he was comprehending the sole subject he couldn't grasp. "I realize it's aggravating for you, but the equations exist for a reason. Use them on the exams."

Dipper frowned at the 'advice' and defensively said, "I did! What did you think I would do, guesswork and hope it's correct or something?" The equations were confusing and lengthy, leaving plenty of room for error, and he'd been running short on time to check his answers on the mathematical portion.

Ford coughed as Dipper passed him in an additional lap of pacing their living room. "You did say estimates."

"Why do ya care so much, kid?" Stan questioned and reclined on the sofa cushions, propping his feet onto the coffee table. "At least ya passed."

"Yeah, I know I passed," he said, frown deepening, "but do you really think that's good enough? Sure, this is only one exam, but it sets up the rest of the semester and if I don't do better, it'll lower my overall GPA." Before Stan could get a word in, he went on, "Then if things still don't get better, I'll be barely scraping by or kicked out of college entirely. Neither will get me a job in the field."
The snowball effect was the primary issue, but there were other complications: his own perfectionism and need for validation regarding his academic prowess, his parents' opinions on him plummeting if he didn't manage to get this right, the crushing weight of being a failure.

"He's right, Stanley. Perhaps if your attitude was similar, you would be pursuing your own future in higher education. As it is, you'll likely face a cap on your potential earnings."

Stan rolled his eyes. "Put a sock in it, Ford. I don't need ya harassin’ me over this, I ain’t botherin’ with that bullshit college. It’s hard enough payin’ off your debt."

"Paying my debt won't be necessary when I'm finished with my program and into a stable career. I'll be out-earning you instantly," Ford replied huffily. "Before you start in on the job market, West Coast Tech is a very prestigious university, and employers will be fawning over me after they see my publication record." Listening to this reminded him of the painful truth; Dipper didn't understand why his parents thought he could live up to Stanford Pines, the guy was a genius, and oh-

Oh right, he happened to enjoy this.

Although he wanted to continue pacing if only to try to pace-away the new burst of envy, his body had other plans since it was beginning to ache from the waist downward. A few steps later, and he gave in, knowing his wasn't going to work. Continuing would merely result in abundant pain and soreness, so he defeatedly flopped onto the sofa next to Stan, who grumbled.

"I can’t believe the nerve of that one, kid. I’ll show ‘im how unnecessary paying off his debt is when he can’t register for more classes." Dipper glanced to Ford to judge his reaction, but it seemed he was too involved in his reading to pay attention to their side conversation.

Fatigued, he said, "Pay for my classes instead if you're not paying for Ford's. So I can... y'know, flunk out eventually, I guess." Where else was he headed when he couldn't get more than a C on an exam he'd been ruthlessly preparing for? In hopes it'd lighten his own mood, he added to the joke, "We can have minimum wage, entry-level jobs together." Except it fell flat when he remembered he probably couldn't do that either, not with his back and legs as they were.

A scowl formed on Stan’s face, and Dipper stifled a chuckle at the depth of the contours scrunching his face.

"I’m not minimum wage!" He argued, annoyed. “I’ve never been minimum wage, there’s no way in hell I could’ve supported Ford if I were."

Not in this state. It was amazing Stan and Ford managed the cost of Ford's education and their own rent, but looking around, it wasn't such a mystery. Unlike the university apartments, this was just off campus and had fewer amenities, but it made up for it with shoddy lighting and plentiful cracks in the ceiling and walls. Dingy furniture decorated the interior, items likely salvaged from discount stores while nothing matched except in its used status.

"Having two full-time jobs is still impressive," Dipper said, and although he didn't know why other than the simple relation to Stan's profession, his curiosity drifted to Bill. "I'm guessing Bill is working tonight? Is that why you're here?" Mindlessly, his fingers ghosted over where his soulmark was hidden by a plaid sleeve, a cold stone settling in his stomach at the reminder of unresolved questions and tensions.

"Nah, there are other people workin’ tonight." Dipper must have been late to react because Stan laughed and ruffled his hair, then the rippling of cloth marked when he'd settled into his spot once
more, returning his attention to the television. "Thought we were the only bartenders? It’s not just us. Bill’s off tryna get action."

"Oh, gross," he made a face, but Stan seemed too transfixed by the TV screen to notice it, "I didn't need to know that." It was uncomfortable since he was personally acquainted with both people involved in Stan's obscene comment, assuming it was actually referring to Wendy, but he had minimal reason to doubt that after Bill had articulated displeasure in the possibility of an affair to the point of paranoidly accusing him of being involved.

With Ford busy studying and Stan preferring to interact with a screen, Dipper was on his own, and his eyes slid traitorously to the paper on the coffee table. The sight of his catastrophic exam reawoke the headache-inducing stress, and he internally groaned, desperate to get his thoughts from the dangerous spiral of self-hatred again.

Dragging his phone from his pocket, Dipper mumbled, "Hope he's not in the middle of anything."

(10:43 PM) So everything's good between you and Wendy again?

Unless Stan meant he was trying to get it on with a stranger in her absence. In which case, he would go throw himself off a cliff. He'd been about to pocket his device when it went off, a surprise since he'd assumed it would be several minutes, more realistically hours, before he could expect a response.

(10:43 PM) good enough to make it through dinner

(10:43 PM) and get lucky

(10:43 PM) that’s not saying much

(10:44 PM) Yeah, didn't need the sex life details.

(10:44 PM) why’d you text me then

(10:44 PM) I heard you and Wendy were doing better, so I was glad for you guys?

(10:45 PM) It doesn't mean I wanted to know about what you were doing.

(10:45 PM) Do people seriously text you for information about your intimacy? That's pretty disgusting.

(10:46 PM) stan loves it

"Stan, why are you such a pervert according to Bill?" Dipper asked with a mild-mannered laugh. Once Stan’s head jolted up and he’d captured his attention, Dipper tossed his phone over to him. He caught it, narrowing his eyes at the screen, then almost instantly he began to type. "Hey, text him from your own phone."

“Nah.” The typing didn’t stop, and Stan muttered under his breath. “I’m gonna show him who ‘loves it.'” Yeah, that didn't sound good. They needed to have a talk about appropriate intonation.

"I don't know what childishness you two are entertaining yourselves with, but be responsible," Ford warned him his desk, only peering up to give them a leveling stare before turning to his studies once more. "Quite frankly, I'm uninterested in receiving a visit from the complex manager this evening."
Once Stan was done composing his magnum opus, Dipper took advantage of his distraction and snatched his phone away, wondering what they could have possibly exchanged while Stan was in control of his texting. His eyes scanned their conversation:

(10:46 PM) wtf did ya say about me ya bitch?

(10:46 PM) hey, i didn’t say anything that wasn’t true :)

(10:46 PM) i’m going to kick your ass bill

(10:47 PM) then how would you get off? carla won’t be servicing you

(10:47 PM) fuck you

What a wonderfully productive conversation to have on his phone's messaging history.

(10:49 PM) I can't believe you brought up Carla, I don't think Stan has seen her in almost ten years.

(10:49 PM) he brought her up first when he was drunk

(10:49 PM) that’s how i found out

(10:50 PM) That's just sad. I'm not sure he's dated anyone since.

(10:50 PM) he doesn’t want any commitment, it’s probably why he hits the strip when he’s wasted

(10:50 PM) Does he?

Dipper regretted sending that the instant he tapped the button, fully aware gossiping about Stan wasn't on his agenda tonight, or any night. He didn't need to hear about what his cousin did or said while he was completely trashed. Stan's memory was faulty as it was, and his behavior was questionable at best, so it was a bad combination that wasn't enticing to journey into.

(10:50 PM) Actually, it doesn't matter. Maybe it's because he doesn't have a soulmark, at least not yet.

Encouraging Bill against the path they'd been headed on with no intention of determining whether he frequented strip clubs seemed to have no effect on Bill's reply:

(10:51 PM) he doesn’t really, he did it once then cried about carla

(10:51 PM) he leads a pathetic life

(10:51 PM) hey, texting's boring, do you want to meet up? i have a bottle of vodka if you want some

(10:51 PM) ignore red, she’s just sleeping on the couch

Dipper nearly wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the invitation if Bill still had Wendy over. He may have considered it, measured the feasibility, if his girlfriend hadn't been around, but he wasn't going to be interrupting that. Awkwardness plagued him on the daily, he didn't need to start taking lessons from Nick Carraway on being a third wheel.
Look, I appreciate the offer, but I don't know if I should just drop by during what I assume is your date night or something?

Besides, it's late, and I'm just chilling with Stan and Ford. Ford's been busy reading, but Stan and I are binging on Netflix.

Now that he couldn't pace anymore, they were.

**uh huh, hey, how'd that exam go, by the way?**

He wasn't going to include the bit about how he'd restlessly trekked for approximately thirty minutes prior to collapsing onto the couch in an exhausted, pained heap, but talking to the others had momentarily diverted him from the stress of doing poorly on an assessment. Unfortunately, it was back on his mind, so he didn't think he'd be able to actually enjoy the Netflix-binge anytime soon.

**Ughhhh.**

**The results of that exam are the reason the squirt gun emoji and the dead emoji face exist.**

Not that he used them. Excessive smileys were Mabel's texting preference, and it was why she'd customized his contact name to be 'Dip-Dop' with a crowd of vibrant emojis trailing after.

**so you can have water gun fights with dead people?**

**It's a C, so the equivalent of someone telling me I basically have no future in this major if I can't get it together.**

And how to do that, he didn't know. He'd thought more studying was the answer, but that had fallen through. Getting help from professors, from Bill and Ford, none of it seemed to sink in enough so he could apply the knowledge. It felt like every week, he was submerging himself deeper into coursework that he wasn't sure how to complete and had no idea what the outcome would be.

**i C you should've taken the assessment i gave you instead of filling the paper with triangles**

Something told him first-year physics coursework wasn't going to come to his rescue, which brought the grand total of graduate students trying to assist but offering no concrete advice to two: Bill and Ford, strangely fitting that they shared an office and an abundance of ongoing projects. With a loud *hmmph*, Dipper threw his head back onto the sofa cushion and surveyed the wall on the opposite side of the room, trying to mentally gauge if it'd shatter his phone if he chucked it in the general direction. Any other day, it was a gamble whether or not he'd appreciate a pun, but today it compounded his stress and restarted the headache.

At Stan's questioning look, Dipper supplied, "Bill is a jerk." Stan smirked a little and seemingly understood, returning his attention to Netflix while Dipper devoted his to the career-crisis that'd overtaken him. His phone continued to buzz, indicating Bill was probably texting him further.

After minutes of more buzzing and silencing, and drowning in his existential sadness, he finally looked at the string of texts from Bill:

**mason jar?**
Confused, Dipper peered to Ford but saw nothing out of the ordinary since he was engrossed in his studies as he leaned in close, jotted meticulous notes, muttered under his breath. If Ford had agreed to Bill coming over, he hadn't seen the messaging exchange, but it was possible Ford had been too preoccupied by reading to realize what he was being asked and had accepted without thinking about it.

If not for Stan's invitation to save him from a lonely dorm room as Mabel worked late, he would have assumed the same occurred with him.

Oh well. If Bill was walking over to Stan and Ford's apartment, it would take him a while to scale the mile between campus and their place, which gave him some time to relax before he had to deal with Bill in the flesh. Returning to an earlier position with his head resting against the cushions of the couch, Dipper closed his eyes and tried to block out the noises of the television in the background.

A sudden, persistent knocking startled him from his thoughts, and he opened his eyes to see both brothers look questioningly toward the door. If that wasn't enough to suggest they weren't expecting Bill's company, Stan's mutter of 'what the hell?' and Ford's 'who could that be?' coming together in a chorus of bewilderment gave plenty of evidence. Although he knew who it was, he didn't have time to explain what happened because Ford was halfway to the door, peeking through the hole before sighing exaggeratedly, opening it to reveal Bill in his golden-black formal attire.

"Alright, Cipher, what is it?" Ford asked, exasperated.

It was worthy of note how quickly Bill had managed to get here. He wondered if he'd sprinted the whole distance, or if he'd actually driven.

"Forsy," Bill exclaimed, pushing past him to enter the apartment. "Don't sound so glum, Six Fingers. You’ve been expecting me, remember?"

"I… I don't believe I have," Ford said, the words falling somewhere on the spectrum between perplexed and stiff with annoyance. "Did we arrange a meeting for eleven in the evening that I've forgotten about, which I must say is unlikely because I attend to my appointments with precision, or are you here to visit with Stanley?"

Bill shook his head, looking at him in what Dipper perceived as mock hurt. Theater people, they were an odd bunch. "You really don’t remember? You told me I could come over tonight and hang with you and Stan."

"Why’d ya talk to Ford about this and not me?" Stan's grouchy complaint had slipped in alongside dejectedness, and Dipper couldn't believe he didn't see through the charade. "Ya know I’d be down to sit around'n shoot the shit anytime."

"He didn't talk to me about this at all," Ford huffed, closing the door behind Bill and locking it again, sauntering toward his desk. "Stay if you must, but I have work to do and plan to sleep at a reasonable hour."

Dipper said, "So it looks like I'm the only one he mentioned this visit to, huh? Ford, he said you told him he could show up." Ford emitted a dissenting, offended noise while he made a point of
glaring at Bill. "Why did you decide to come here anyway? I already told you that we're not doing anything really interesting, just sort of waiting around." Studying in Ford's case, watching television in Stan's, and Dipper… well, he'd be pacing if he could, still distraught over the grade.

The amusement on Bill’s face died, and he glanced at Dipper as he moved to join them on the couch. “Are you seeing this?” he demanded. “These guys are accusing me of not being invited when they most definitely did. I’m being blamed for their own forgetfulness.”

"Jeez, you can give it a rest, Leonardo DiCaprio," he said through an amused exhale. "Nobody invited you, but you're here and it's not a big deal." It was late, so it wouldn't be long until he and Bill had to return to their own places of residence—

Wait.

Wendy hadn't accompanied Bill here, and Dipper's eyes went wide. "Holy shit, did you just—! Is your girlfriend— what the heck, man? Is Wendy just asleep on your couch? And you left her?"

While he spoke, his voice rose an octave in strain and panic, gawking at Bill.

Confusion struck Bill, relayed through his perplexed stare. “Yeah, she has a key? I don’t know what your issue is, kid.”

"Why would you ditch your girlfriend and leave her alone? It's— aren't you guys even having some sort of date night?" He grimaced, fingers twitching against the tails of his shirt. "That's pretty messed up, dude." No wonder their relationship was rocky if Bill considered that a non-issue, simply walking out on somebody without their knowledge in his own apartment.

“We had dinner and fucked,” Bill said nonchalantly. “That's about it, it wasn’t really a date.” Then Dipper supposed he'd need clarification on what did qualify as a date if that wasn't it. "She doesn’t care if I leave, why do you?"

There was the obligatory voice inside of him, telling Dipper he was as far as could be from making objection to this. He'd never had a long-term relationship, no achievement in that aspect of a normal life to speak of, and none on the horizon despite Mabel's claims that he would find somebody special. Griping about Bill's behavior when he had no ground to stand on, no experience to draw from… it was a dumb endeavor, he wasn't too blind to recognize the flaw in his argument. But nevertheless, it seemed weird.

"What a boyfriend," he mumbled to drop the subject, unsure if he was in the minority or if college relationships were as shallow as everyone had claimed them to be. Companionship didn't seem to actually be a requirement in romance, by Bill's standards.

Bill bristled, and the anger building beneath his features had Dipper on edge, concluding he'd been heard and inadvertently crossed a line. "What would you know about dating, Jar? You're not in a successful relationship.

An interesting point to raise considering his previous reservations, and he hitched an eyebrow. "Neither are you."

Oh. The scathing remark was out before he had a chance to bite it down, and he knew he shouldn't have gone there because he and Bill certainly weren't close enough to exchange that sort of banter. Frankly, he should roll up his sleeve and see the 'What the hell is wrong with you?' fatefully drawn over his skin to drive it into his thick skull that this wasn't how to socialize and win friends, if that could be considered a goal with Bill since staying on good terms until the end of the semester was important. Trying to backpedal, he tapped his knuckles together, cleared his throat, and started,
“Hey, man—”

“I should fucking throw your skinny ass out the window.” That sounded like a threat, and in response to Bill growing louder, Stan turned up the television volume to match his decibel level, drowning it with cheesy soap opera lines.

"Here's a compromise: carry me to the kitchen," he joked dryly, "and we'll talk there because I think we're bothering Stan." Dipper started to rise from the sofa, taking a moment to stretch and acknowledge the ache.

Ford cut in to say, "Your conversation is distracting to me as well. I can usually tune out Stan's mindless rambling or his ridiculous television programs, but Bill is… boisterous."

As Dipper started to walk toward the small kitchen, Bill shared a few colorful curses behind him, the anger across his face yet to fade. “I’ll throw you out of the kitchen window. I don’t know why I bothered coming if all you’re going to do is harass me.” Dipper paused in his tracks and gave Bill a stony stare, unsure if he should address the threat or the nonsensical, embellished statement that followed.

"That… isn't cool, man. We don't have to talk at all." Going to the kitchen had been a courtesy to Stan, under the impression Bill wished to have a discussion with him, and Dipper didn't want it to interfere with Stan's viewing experience. Bill's attitude and verbal threats implied he was happy to spend the night sitting in silence, so Dipper skirted him to return to the sofa.

Putting up with Bill hadn't been a possibility that'd occurred to him, not once. Dipper had come to Stan and Ford's place under the impression it would be a peaceful evening but not quite an isolated one, a significant difference when he'd have to wait in the dorm room for Mabel, but he didn't think Bill's presence would be included. If he'd been aware, he probably wouldn't have bothered because it was terribly draining sometimes, being with him, listening to him, having not a clue how to handle him or where his mood would take the conversation next.

Minutes passed as Dipper tried to enjoy the show, and he could hear Bill shuffling beside him.

“Kid. I… I'm sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

"Yeah," he agreed, "you shouldn't have." A sideways glance at Bill validated his apology, the look of guilt plainly scrawled in a downcast gaze. "Just, uh, maybe don't threaten me like that, it's kind of unnecessary."

“Right,” Bill said, and the corners of his lips moved in a frown-like motion, but he appeared to fight it. “I’m probably just… going to go.”

Shrugging, he said, "I mean, it's up to you if you want to leave." It would perhaps be for the best if he did go, assuming Wendy was still asleep on his sofa. "It's still super weird to leave someone unconscious in your apartment."

“She’s not unconscious, she’s just sleeping. Stop making me look like an awful boyfriend.”

While tempted to point out Bill did that entirely on his own, Dipper snorted, squirming off of the sofa to reposition but decided he may as well take advantage of the already-present discomfort and use it to walk to the kitchen again. A cup of tea would be welcome right now, his first choice off limits because he enjoyed sleeping at night, and coffee wasn't the ideal beverage for relaxation. To Bill, he said, "Being asleep is considered unconsciousness, and I don't know if you're a bad boyfriend or not, okay? I don't want to get involved in your relationship." That web of rumored
fighting and making up was the least of his concerns with his current academic struggles and social ineptitude.

Irritation seeped into Bill's voice. “You seemed to be interested when you commented on how I was ‘some boyfriend’ because I’m not babysitting her.” The wording wasn't exact, but it was close enough to make his main idea clear.

Making tea took precedence over Bill's immature griping, and he elected to work on that rather than reacting to Bill's fight-picking comment. Although he didn't respond, it did worm into his thoughts as he prepared the drink, unsure if he should apologize for it, or if Bill was exaggerating his anger as he often seemed to do.

Especially with him, that was a common theme. Another nail in the ‘we aren't meant to be together, soulmarks can fuck right off’ coffin.

There was the noise of feet scuffing the floor, and Dipper tilted his head to see Bill entering the kitchen, heading over to the refrigerator, and opening it to sift through the contents. Curious about his quest for some item or another, he asked, "Hey, what are you looking for?"

“A bottle of New Hampshire’s finest."

"Okay, I don't know what that means. Is that alcohol?" At Bill's confirmation, he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Do you want tea instead? I'm almost done making it but could get you a cup as well." Better for his liver, and more comfortable for Dipper since he wasn't great with drunk people. "And, uh, I'm not sure if you were sticking to what you said earlier about leaving, but you shouldn't be drinking if you're going to walk home soon."

Bill held their eye contact, then his expression dropped. “I drove here, and a little alcohol never killed anyone.” A pause. Dipper tensed, reminded of the origin of his chronic pain and alcohol's involvement in his life sentenced to discomfort despite the efforts of therapy and familial support. “Actually, it has, but it’s not a loss for me.” It felt like salt in the wound, but he exhaled slowly, telling himself that Bill didn't know, didn't need to know. He wasn't saying that to be minimizing of his physical struggle, but probably would have anyway if he was aware.

Dipper hoped his voice would be even and not betray his mixed feelings. "Oh, I thought you walked or jogged. It's hardly worth the drive, but uh... yeah. You really shouldn't drink and drive, regardless of the distance, so..." he motioned toward the tea. "Want some?"

“I’d rather get wasted on alcohol,” Bill informed him. “You should join me, it’d probably cheer you up.”

"Wow, do I have news for you if you think alcohol would cheer me up. Alcohol’s a depressant." Granted, that meant it was a depressant for the central nervous system, but anything more than small amounts would probably yield the same effect. "Seriously, though, don't drink if you're going to be driving home tonight. Stan and Ford would let you crash here if you need to."

Bill laughed. “I could crash outside, why does it matter? Apparently my girlfriend needs a better boyfriend.” The fact it'd still been on his mind and the sigh afterward made Dipper believe he'd struck a nerve with that, but he couldn't read his face since Bill was turned away as he pulled the bottle from the refrigerator.

"Are you kidding me?" he blandly stated, "I just find it weird that your girlfriend is alone, and you're not spending time with her." Alone and asleep on his couch while he wasn't present. "You're probably an amazing boyfriend, alright? If not, I doubt you'd have a chance with her, and you
wouldn't keep patching it up and getting together after your fights. Can you get over it now? I didn't mean for it to turn into this whole… big thing that you'd get super caught up on."

His dichromatic eyes snapped to his, and for a second it looked like he wanted to argue with him. Dipper braced for it. “Fine,” he grumbled after a moment. “I’ll try the stupid ass tea.” At that, he relaxed, nodded, and retrieved another small cup from the cupboard, then added the boiling water and tea bag.

As he prepared the tea, he said quietly, "Look, I'm sorry for saying that. I didn't know it'd bother you this much, but if I did, I wouldn't have said anything." It was strange how profoundly his words had affected Bill when Bill was aware he was a mere outsider watching through a window, and his sole perceptions of the relationship were ones of the people involved and from the details Bill shared.

Once the tea was finished, Dipper placed it onto a small saucer with a gentle *clink*, shifting to hand it to Bill. "Here's your stupid ass tea." Using his words.

Bill glanced down to the platter in confusion. "Why is it on a plate?"

Pulling out a chair and sitting at the table with his own cup, Dipper explained, "It's called a saucer, and it's for classy rich boys like you. Can't have saucer-less tea like us peasants do, after all."

"This is even stupider," he muttered. "Almost as flamboyant as you are, kid."

There was a tiny, musical clicking as he stirred his tea, blank-faced expression and dull eyes never leaving Bill's while he waited to see if he'd react to the sheer irony of the statement. "I'm flamboyant," Dipper clarified skeptically. "Me." Him, the one with issues processing and showing emotion, a total mess of social awkwardness versus Bill, the animated and loud character of a guy who frequented Drama Club, participated in theater productions, couldn't maintain a stable mood.

Bill’s unwavering gaze met his, challenging him to argue. “Yes. You scream ‘gay,’ kid.”

"Gay… as in the sexual preference, or gay as in happy, or…” Dipper questioned, genuinely uncertain. "I guess I'm pretty neutral on the happiness thing." Although he didn't mention it to Bill, he was verging into unhappiness with his life as it was: attending school for a boring, difficult major, and either failing out or doing it for the rest of his life. It was bleak. After taking a sip of the tea, he continued, "If you're talking about sexuality, I don't know. I'm one of those people who have a soulmark, so it's kind of whatever will be, y'know?"

“You can have a sexual orientation with a soulmark,” Bill said, playing with the cup of tea. “I don’t know why you think it matters.”

"It's not that I don't have a sexual orientation. It's more like... not thinking about it enough to make it count." His attraction extended to men and women, so there wasn't much else to work with beyond accepting he was open to anything. "It's the one part of myself that I don't overthink, and you, uh... seem determined to change that? Do you think about yours a lot?"

“Not a chance, kid.” Bill took a sip of the tea, then winked at him. “I just have a good time with everyone.”

Taste-testing his tea and drinking several swallows, Dipper hummed, unsure why he ventured into the subject if it wasn't of interest to either of them. Bill was a peculiar guy. "I thought you've been exclusively… um, having a good time with Wendy lately.” As per their relationship parameters, Dipper remembered Bill clarifying he could flirt with others, but not have affairs with them.
Bill shook his head. “You don’t know anything about it,” he told him. “You hardly know me, kid.” He took another drink from his tea, and it gave Dipper a moment to do the same while pondering the statement, internally acknowledging that he really didn't know Bill at all, nothing more than what he'd heard from Bill's friends and Bill himself. Not knowing Bill wasn't a problem, though, or rather he didn't see it as one despite the possible soulmate status. It was more incentive to run in the opposite direction and never learn another thing about him. “Red isn’t the only sexual partner I’ve had in my life.”

Previous thoughts still clung to him, and Dipper responded, "Oh." It was short and sweet, plus it didn't invite further elaboration. He didn't need to know Bill. Their relationship was professional and could be kept on that level, then the semester would end and he wouldn't have to worry about it ever again.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps, and Stan poked his head through the doorway. “Hey, the season finale just ended an' before I start the new one, I’m gonna go get some food. Y’all wanna come with?”

"Uh, sure," Dipper said and swallowed the remainder of his tea, then rose from his chair. There was a stab of pain in his lower back, but he ignored it to place the cup near the sink, opting to keep the tea out in case Ford yearned for a calming drink to study with. "I'm not super hungry, but it's a pretty nice night for a drive around the city." If he had to, he could order something small like a soda or dessert, something that wasn't too heavy since his stomach still churned from stress.

Stan laughed. “We’re walkin’, kid, there’s no point in drivin’. It’ll be quick.” Instantly, his expression fell, and disappointment swept through him like a cold splash of ice water. Walking. Of course Stan would want to walk, it was more convenient, it was economic, it was environmentally-friendly, but it wasn't an option he could take after a full day and pacing had taken a toll on him physically.

"Oh, I… I don't know, then," Dipper mumbled, mindlessly twirling his foot against the linoleum. "I probably shouldn't, if we'd be walking. You can go ahead."

“If ya say– oh,” Stan’s expression dropped, looking sheepish. “Walkin’s just a no for ya in general, right?” Dipper could've taken the opportunity to explain it was hit and miss for the most part, but he simply tapped his fingertips on the surface of the table. "Sorry kid, I forgot. We can drive if ya want."

"No, it's fine," he said dismissively, returning to plop down in the chair and hold his head in his hands. "I'm just pretty tired tonight, a few sleepless nights leading up to that bad grade and everything." To complicate his situation, Mabel would be off from work in a few hours, and he'd have to make the walk to the dorm, too proud or maybe too embarrassed to ask Stan or Ford for a lift. A mile was manageable.

Lit with hope, Stan glanced at Bill. “Are ya comin’?”

“No thanks,” Bill answered. “I have some things I gotta do. I’ll see you later.” Stan looked dismayed, but he didn’t argue, disappearing from sight to call out to Ford, and Dipper could hear the exchange as Stan tried to determine if Ford wanted anything to eat, meanwhile Ford wanted to be able to study in peace. Once the door slammed, he heard a ‘good riddance!’ from the other room.

"You have 'things' you have to do?" he asked, a dubious expression settling on his features. "If you had 'things' you had to do, why did you stop by tonight? You know, you didn't have to come." Nobody had invited him, nobody had expected his presence, but here he was with tea in the kitchen.
Bill shrugged. “I mostly didn’t want to go on a fast food trip with Stan, is that so bad? That shit’s greasy, it collects in your stomach for fucking days.” At that graphic description, Dipper felt disgust grip him, a grimace overtaking his face. “Hey, you want to head back into the living room? The couch should be open now.”

"Yeah, we could move,” he shrugged, no preference. "I know Stan's not here anymore, but Ford's still studying, I think." If they talked, it likely wouldn't be loud enough to create a disturbance though, and with that in mind, Dipper collected the remaining plates to stack them neatly by the sink, then made an awkward, slightly uncomfortable shuffle to the sofa while Bill trailed after. Passing him the remote, he said, "Watch whatever you want because it doesn't matter to me— not really, I mean, there are some good shows but it's... hard to know which those are.” Bill took the remote, scrolling through the list of options.

“All of them seem shitty,” he commented. “Is there anything fucking good on here?”

He mumbled a noncommittal "I don't know" and relaxed into the cushions, a quiet crinkle resounding underneath him. Confused, Dipper twisted to locate the source, discovering his C-exam that may as well have been an F considering the effort versus payout. Groan. "Hey, here's the assessment I was talking about earlier," he gave it a brief wave in front of Bill then tucked it into his bag, "if you want to look at precisely how I'm failing as a physics student." Despite the bitterness, he wasn't blind its potential use when it might be helpful if Bill knew where he was struggling, but he couldn't muster the courage to actually show him the red markings crossed with ink splotches.

“Ah, that must be your infamous exam you botched." He nodded. "How the hell did you manage that? This shit’s easy.”

Through a frustrated exhale, he dragged his hand through his hair. "I know, man." He should know that material, he'd studied it for many hours on end, forcing himself to memorize, to synthesize, everything. It was slippery and slid away from him during key moments, the knowledge inaccessible and the anxiety only making it worse. "I guess I'll try to set up an appointment with the professor for next week." 

"You're welcome to visit the grad office during our office hours for additional help as well," Ford said distractedly, not looking up from his textbook. "None of our students make use of office hours as it is. In fact, I believe you'd be the first visitor this year."

Bill chuckled. “Fordsy’s just eager to show his true nerdiness. Since not many students show up, he’ll probably talk your ear off about equations and formulas.”

"I, uh… thanks. I appreciate the offer." It wasn't a proposition he thought he'd end up accepting, experience telling him that Ford wasn't an especially wonderful tutor in subjects he had a vast knowledge of… which, by now, were most of them. Shooting the smallest of smiles in Bill's direction, he said, "I think it's easier for everyone if I pile those questions on Bill while I'm grading for him, though."

"Oh, certainly," Ford muttered, "I suppose that's the least he can extend to you in return for your free labor, doing his work for him."

“Free labor?” Bill demanded, suddenly bristly. “I’ll have you know, Fordsy, he’s working to pay off his debt to me.”

"My sincerest apologies. Would you prefer the term 'extortion'?"
Dipper's eyebrows lifted. "Whoa, wait up. I actually volunteered to do the grading," considering it was a better offer than housekeeping, "so it's not like he's forcing me to do it or anything. Honestly, if I truly didn't want to, I don't think—"

“Oh,” Bill challenged Ford, who scoffed at him, “and you mooching off Stan is any better? The guy works his ass off to reduce your debt, and all you do is bitch and moan at him about how you’re too busy to give him attention half the damn time.”

"Stanley is not a child, he's not my responsibility," Ford heatedly replied, "I'm not his personal source of entertainment. He's a fully capable adult, though I admit he tends to avoid acting like it at times or chooses to play the victim card. I'm 'working my ass off' so I can secure a high-paying career with my degrees, but I don't believe you'd understand financial strain, would you?"

"Okay, maybe… maybe we shouldn't be, y'know, fighting about this." Before he could keep speaking, his phone was vibrating incessantly, signaling a string of texts. Although he could hear Ford and Bill resume their petty arguing, his attention was on his phone as he read the messages:

(11:44 PM) Ayoooo!

(11:45 PM) Getting off work, so I should be home in about fifteen!

(11:45 PM) I can’t wait to see you, it’s been a long day like OMG

(11:46 PM) Oh cool, you're off early?

(11:46 PM) Remember to drive safe, and I'll see you soon!

(11:47 PM) Yeah!! I hope your test went well. You can tell me how awesome you did when I get back

Well, he was never going home again, but… he knew he had to. Cutting into the bickering-in-progress, Dipper said, "Guys, I'm… I think I'm going to head back to the dorms. Mabel's getting off from work early, and I should get started if I want to meet her there, so uh, yeah. Tell Stan I said goodnight, okay?" He collected his backpack containing the exam-of-impending-failure, wincing from the added weight but trying to push onward. Mabel's early leave had put a kink in his plan; he'd thought he would have time to rest and prepare for the walk, but it seemed fate had other ideas.

To his astonishment, the curveballs didn't stop there. “I’ll drive you,” Bill said, glaring at Ford. “I’m going to leave too, and it’s not out of my way.”

"You're… going to drive me? Oh," he laughed a little, "I forgot you actually drove here. Wow." Inwardly evaluating the offer, he eventually caved with a quiet "okay" and waited until they were in the hallway of the complex to ask, "Why do you want to drive me? It seems like your goal has pretty much been to make my life more complicated. Wouldn't you rather… I don't know, drive slowly alongside me and taunt me as I walked?" he mumbled, though could admit that was cruel for Bill's standards. He was weird, but aside from the silly string incident, he hadn't done anything to antagonize him.

Bill kept his gaze ahead, his jaw set. “I’m not Stan or Ford,” he muttered. “I wouldn’t do that. Probably.” He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, does it? You’ll be home soon enough.”

"Mm-hmm. I do appreciate how you're being a, uh, gentleman," the word made him snicker softly, "toward me, but doing the same for your girlfriend is out of the question.” Basic courtesy had been
tossed to spend almost an hour with him and the brothers. Bill’s expression fell into displeasure, becoming borderline angry.

“I don’t have to give you a ride,” he reminded him as they descended the stairwell and departed from the building. “I could leave you out here to walk if I wanted to.” By now, they had arrived by his car, but Bill made no move to unlock it.

Lingering near the passenger door as he waited for Bill, he was smiling lopsidedly, subtly. "Yeah, I know." All signs pointed toward Bill actually desiring his company after most interactions suggested he craved the social stimulus. If he didn't, he wouldn't have come tonight. Gently, he echoed, "If you wanted to."

“I do.” His voice was determined, but the doors were unlocked, and he beckoned him to get inside. “I don’t know why I bother with you,” Bill muttered as he got in, and the words sounded familiar. “I’d be better off getting food with Stan right now.” The car roared to life, and Bill threw the gear shift into reverse.

"Fancy," he commented, looking over the electronic dash, enhancements catching his eye, though he wouldn't have any clue how to use them. "I don't think I've ever been in a vehicle that's worth more than I am or will ever be." ...Or maybe he had, he wasn't sure, but the thoughts of lowered self-worth were sneaking in again, coiling around his fragile confidence. "Seriously? I still don't know why you bother with me either.” Since the last time Bill had made the same statement, no new discoveries had been made in that department.

The car pulled out of the lot, and Bill sighed. “I don’t usually mind you,” he said. “Just the shit with Red, you acting like you know us. You don’t.” Drifting into silence, Dipper guessed Bill was right, he didn't know either of them beyond a couple meetings and brief chats, and like his earlier decision, he didn't intend on tangling himself within their relationship. Recounting the times he’d brought it up, he remembered being worried about Wendy since she was alone, and he’d mocked Bill's gentleman status over it.

"Do you want me to know you?"

Bill glanced at him. “No.”

Overwhelmingly, he was glad and in any other case, may have felt disappointment or chalked it up to his poor social skills, but they saved him this time. His potential soulmate didn't want to know him. "Okay." They could end the formalities here, quit trying to play around with small talk, and he’d finish the work he had to do for Bill.

“I don’t know why you’d want to,” Bill went on, muttering. It was an excellent point, Bill had been a fifty-fifty combination of pleasant and unpleasant interactions, and when it came to himself... he was a mess—he didn't know why Bill would want to befriend him.

"Same, so…” a shrug, "let's not bother getting to know each other. We'll, uh, keep it strictly professional."

“Will we?” Bill questioned. “Or are you going to make a huge deal out of my girlfriend being alone?”

"Unless Wendy tells me, I won't know when she's alone," Dipper pointed out, sinking into the seat and the side of the passenger door while he watched the street lamps roll by. "I'm pretty sure we'll only be conversing about the grading I have to do for you." Bill’s eyes narrowed at him distrustfully.
“It better be that,” he finally said, sounding cross. “The nerve of you, insulting my ability to be a boyfriend…” his voice dropped to various grumbles, turning the steering wheel as they took a right.

Hadn't they been over this before? Dipper had reassured he wasn't a bad boyfriend, then said in all likelihood that he was a great one, so he didn't know what more Bill wanted from this but wasn't surprised it was another problem that Bill was blowing out of proportion. Maybe he was bored, maybe he was protecting his ego. If he was so insecure about his abilities, that wasn't something Dipper could fix with a couple coerced compliments. "Remember earlier, when you threatened to throw me out of a window, twice?"

Bill instantly challenged, “What, did that rub you the wrong way, kid?”

"Yeah, I mean, I got kind of upset so you apologized, but then I kept lecturing you over it for the whole night?” Oh, wait no, that wasn't how it went at all, however it was what Bill seemed to be doing with his hang ups over one sarcastic statement.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

"I guess just reminiscing on the good times before we settle into our professional relationship," he replied with a hint of snark in his voice.

“Out.”

Already reaching for the door handle, Dipper wasn't going to disagree. They weren't exactly at the front entrance of the dorm, but the remaining walk was little more than ten feet. "Thanks for the ride.” Once he was out of the car and to the door, he glanced over his shoulder but saw Bill had left, apparently wasting no time in ditching him here.

Minutes later, he was collapsed onto his bed in the dorm room, idly thumbing through interesting articles on his phone when the notification of a text message from Bill popped up:

(12:07 AM) she's not even fucking here anymore

At first, he was puzzled, until he realized he was referring to Wendy and how she must have woke during the time he was gone. And… left him. Against his better judgment, he wondered what Bill was going to do with the rest of his night then, given it wouldn't be in the company of Wendy: go to sleep in a slump? Drink himself to extensive liver damage?

It was kind of sad, how lonely he was and how he shut down attempts at amending that. But a key rustling in the door didn't allow him to dwell on the thought since Mabel's presence joined him a moment later.

"Dip-Dop!” she greeted, lighting up while she strode into the room. "I am ex-hau-sted from work, first there was a problem with the shipments, I had to train this new guy and his fashion sense was totally out of whack, plus he had kind of an attitude problem—if you know what I mean, then I had to…” as she went on, Dipper nodded attentively, asking questions, making little remarks about her day when appropriate. He was content to let her direct the conversation for the moment, dreading the inevitable shift to discussing his exam.

Thoughts of Bill had scattered from his mind, but if he'd still been hanging onto them, perhaps he would simply be grateful that he wasn't the one alone tonight.
Chapter 7

(7:15 AM) Hey, I'm coming over to grade early.

(7:15 AM) I know our talk last night was kind of rough, but I don't think it needs to affect this.

(7:17 AM) We can stick to being professional about it, like we agreed.

The text messages he'd sent over ten minutes ago with no reply from Bill weren't a good indicator that anyone would be answering the door soon. Dipper had thought Bill would be awake and ecstatic to have him visit at this hour—he seemed to like the earliest of mornings, considering their four-in-the-morning meetup—but there'd been no feedback whatsoever. No texts, no movements that he could hear on the other side of the wall.

Knocking again, he waited. Still nothing. "Bill?" Another knock, and another, each getting progressively louder until he was worried it would draw unwanted attention from the residents of the building. Getting kicked out of Bill's apartment complex would be a hell of a way to start the morning, and he doubted he'd be able to explain the mishap to Bill whenever he decided to acknowledge him. How would that conversation even go? 'Hey, I know we left off in a bad place yesterday, but I was hoping I could get this over with early. Grading, I mean. Not talking to you. So do you think you could let me in your apartment? Because also, I got kicked out.' Well, he wasn't safe from social awkwardness in his thoughts either, it seemed.

About to leave, the door abruptly swung open, and the haggard form of Bill stared at him. His hair was a mess, eyes were glassy but bloodshot in some areas, and his clothing was ruffled like he'd thrown it on specifically to come to the door. The blazer was missing, but the rest of the formal ensemble was present. "What're you doing here?" his voice was quiet but demanding, with a hint of sadness that Dipper couldn't pinpoint the source of. "My head is killing me, so if you're here to give me attitude, kindly leave." It took strength to refrain from telling Bill he wasn't going to give him anything but a professional attitude, Bill's demeanor suggesting he was worlds away from being in the mood, and it wasn't as if he was aiming to blatantly antagonize Bill.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he still fiddled with them while rocking from foot to foot to shed some anxious energy. "I'm here to grade because you said your class meets three times each week, and I'm guessing you collected homework a couple days ago. I texted you about it earlier but didn't get a response from you."

"You texted me five minutes ago," Bill reminded him, annoyed, and Dipper coughed sheepishly. "I'm trying to sleep, unlike you—fucking vampire."

"You still knew I'd be coming over today," he pointed out, too concerned about his potential social faux pas to care about being called a vampire, "but... yeah, I guess you thought it'd be in like, three hours or so." Mabel had been called into work early, so Dipper woke up with her and helped get her things together, ready to go for another six-hour shift. With an exasperated sigh as he swept over Bill's worn appearance, Dipper said, "You don't have to stay awake, okay? You look awful, so it'd probably be better for you to sleep." At that, Bill grumbled but side-stepped out of his way to let him in, then headed toward the couch.

"I don't know how I can get back to sleep," he complained while Dipper kicked his shoes off in the entryway. "My skull is throbbing like someone bashed it into a fucking wall." With a mere click, Dipper closed the door behind him, trying to avoid aggravating Bill's headache more than he undoubtedly had with his presence alone.
"What happened? What did you do?" he asked, curiosity grabbed by the intensity of the headache. "Do you always wake up like that?" He supposed it was possible that Bill was a migraine sufferer or had sleep issues from how he was haphazardly dressed with deep bags under his eyes.

Watching him, Bill moved like a ghost to the sofa, near-collapsing on it. "I might've hit a bottle or two, but that’s not the point. I don’t know why you had to show up so damn early." Dipper scrunched his nose at the confession that Bill had drank himself into this sorry state, but he didn't comment aside from his lips pursing in a tight line.

"It's easier to get things done in the morning," he explained, "because that leaves the rest of the day wide open for panicking about not understanding my own homework and having a subsequent career crisis." Yes, had to devote plenty of time to that particular activity, Dipper thought while he sat at Bill's desk, sifting through the papers accumulated. "That's getting a bit far from our, uh, agreement on conversational topics, so I guess I'll just start grading." Bill grunted at him from the couch, and he could hear him shift around.

"Bitch, bitch, bitch. Get over it, let me fucking sleep." Whirling his head around, Dipper stared at him through a cold, unamused gaze. It was uncharacteristically mean for the guy who'd been increasingly open with him until very recently; it'd almost seemed like he'd been trying to cultivate a friendship between them, or at least something beyond the working relationship. This was more like the first time they'd met, a good reminder of why he didn't want to be Bill's soulmate. "What, bitch got your tongue?"

Unwilling to respond to Bill's attempts to provoke him, Dipper returned his attention to the homework awaiting marking, but his mood had been dampened by Bill's rudeness. Bill shuffled again, clearing his throat. "Kid? Hey, look, I just want– kid. You're not looking at me. Kid, pay attention to me, I'm over here. Kid? Hello? Kid. Kiiiid."

Reaching the end of his patience, he snapped, "Leave me alone, you jackass." It was verging on bitter, but Bill had been verbally poking him into retaliating for the past minute with iterations of 'kid' and 'I demand your attention this instant', therefore he thought his request to be unperturbed was fully justified.

"There’s no need to call me a jackass. What crawled up your ass and died? All I wanted to do was fucking talk."

"Thanks, but I'm not interested," Dipper replied and adjusted his position, then removed a pen from the bowl of writing utensils to begin grading. Physics and the repayment were the only subjects that Bill could talk to him about, as per their agreement, but it appeared they were beginning to push the boundaries of that as it was. Bill grumbled again, and there was more shuffling that he tuned out, at least until something soft hit Dipper in his back, and he yelped at the contact even if it hadn't hurt. Craning his neck, he realized Bill had thrown a pillow at him, and he snatched it from the floor to place it under his hips. Although he hadn't cared for that, he was going to make use of it all the same because it'd save him some discomfort depending on how long he was here.

"What the hell, man? Why won't you let me grade in peace?" Eyebrows raising, he mused, "Do I have to anymore? My vandalism may have just been countered by your straight up assault." Since criminal charges tended to be amplified exaggeratedly here, it was fair.

"The only assault is your shitty attitude," Bill said, rolling his eyes. "You’re being the ass here, and I don’t really know why you’re trying to make me out to be the bad guy. You started this shit."

Confusion struck him at the accusation, followed by a twinge of distress, and he dragged a hand through his hair as he wondered how his social ineptitude had disserved him this time. Hungover
Bill wasn't great company, but Dipper had conceded that he probably had done something wrong given that social awkwardness lent itself to actual awkwardness. "Uh, could you explain what I did?"

Bill snorted. "What didn’t you do?" he demanded. "You’re always giving me fucking attitude over stupid shit for no goddamn reason other than you can. It’s fucking tiring."

"I…” His throat felt dry, he wasn't sure he had a good excuse when there wasn't one for being needlessly rude, and turning it around on Bill by citing he'd been the one to prod him into frustration would only make the situation worse. And most of the time, a volatile combination of stress paired with chronic pain coaxed him into a state of oversensitivity and moodiness. "Look, I don't mean to. Why, uh, don't you just get some sleep, and I'll have your grades done by the time you wake up? No dealing with my attitude required."

“We’ll see about that,” he muttered, and he flopped onto the couch. “Don’t wake me up.”

Managing that wouldn't be a problem when they had nothing more to discuss as it was. After checking the key, Dipper hunched over the desk and started going through the assignments, his usual: circling incorrect answers and deducting points, writing totals at the top for Bill to review later and add to the gradebook if he wished.

The process was actually quite enjoyable once he immersed himself in it. With Bill attempting to sleep (or perhaps he was already sleeping), it was quiet and peaceful, no disparaging remarks thrown in his direction, no feeling on-edge about what his potential soulmate might talk to him about next.

Dipper's thoughts roamed as he graded, thinking about nothing in particular and merely letting his mind wander. This activity was similar to cleaning; it was idle work that kept him minimally physically active so he wasn't fidgeting or ripping apart a pen with his teeth, but it allowed his brain to focus on other things, more relaxing things. Grading for Bill was less of a chore than he'd originally thought it'd be, it was actually somewhat relaxing, cathartic, turning his mood around for the better.

It was until Bill spoke, anyway.

“Stars,” he heard Bill groan behind him, and he jumped from the close proximity. “I don’t suppose you have some pain relievers on you?” Although his heart still raced from the sudden interruption, he tensed at the question and considered why Bill thought he would have painkillers. His medical situation had made him overly-paranoid, looking for meanings in that when it was possible the question was innocent, not an allusion to his condition.

Stiffly, Dipper asked, "Why would I have pain relievers on me?" Straying from his intentions, it almost came out as confrontational, like he was daring Bill to say it was because of his physical difficulties.

“I don’t know,” his voice was tired. “Maybe you get headaches too or some bullshit. I just want something for my damn head.”

Oh, so… so it wasn't because of that. Good. He wasn't sure how he would've handled it otherwise, as that topic wasn't open for conversation. "No, not really," he responded, "but it might help that I'm not reliant on alcohol." It was a bolder statement, but he thought it was rooted in truth when his last few visits with Bill had involved him either drinking, expressing the desire to drink, or being hungover.
"I'm not reliant on alcohol, it just makes things better for a bit. Like everything's not so shitty."

He didn't know if Bill's sob story had gotten to him, or if he just wanted him to stop whining about it, but Dipper let out an exasperated sigh and crossed the room to approach one of the three closed doors. "Is this your bathroom?" he asked as he paused in front of it. "I don't want to walk into a bedroom, that..." Just no. That seemed too personal, regardless of whether it was the master or guest bedroom. The will to stay separated from Bill on a personal level remained; they weren't friends, they were possibly soulmates, but he didn't hope to explore that element of the relationship. They were... business acquaintances, and Bill happened to often border on unprofessional, oversharing and encouraging him to do the same.

His attention drifted to the present when he replied, "Oh, probably. It's somewhere over there." Alright, well... that was a one-in-three chance. Wonderful.

"Thanks," he muttered sarcastically, "I'm glad you weren't vague about it." Biting the bullet, Dipper twisted the knob and peered inside, relieved to find his guessing had been correct: it was a bathroom. Searching through Bill's medicine cabinet wasn't exactly something he thought he'd be doing today—or wished to do at all—but he looked over the bottles and packages until he found ibuprofen.

Stashing it in his pocket, he returned to the living room but didn't stop there, ducking into the kitchen instead to fill a glass of water and start the preparation for coffee. If he was going to do this, he was doing it right lest Bill find a new aspect of his life to complain about. Once he'd given a quick glance around Bill's supply of food, he brought the water and ibuprofen to Bill, who still looked pretty terrible. Nothing shocking there.

Handing him the pill bottle and glass, he said, "For pain relief. Also, it'll probably help to drink as much as you can—the water," this clarification was accompanied by a pointed look as he lowered himself to perch on the coffee table, "I mean. I have coffee started, if you want any."

Bill accepted the bottle and water, but he glanced at the liquid carefully. "You didn't put rat poison in it, did you?" He opened the bottle, dumping a couple of pills into his mouth.

"Why does that matter?" Dipper asked, intrigued, his expression turning playfully quizzical, but he pulled his lips into a grimace to avoid smiling. Bill didn't need the satisfaction of knowing he hadn't minded this. "You're not a rat, are you? No? Then you should be fine." That may not have been how it worked, but he didn't care to hear Bill's inevitable protest. "So hey, I'm making you food so you run out of things to annoy me about. Do you want..." he tried to remember what he saw available, "banana oatmeal or cereal?"

Both were high in carbohydrates and would help alleviate the pain of the hangover.

"Oatmeal," Bill almost instantly responded. "Can't go wrong with bananas, they're gold." He took a sip of the water. "Thanks, by the way. You're... being nice, it's kinda weird." Dipper's nose wrinkled at the... compliment, possibly. That was debatable.

"Yeah. Usually I'm just nice to the people I actually like." Bill smirked, Dipper was merely glad the joke hadn't been lost on him, "but I guess it's relaxing. This kind of stuff." It was hard to explain why he found cleaning to be soothing, why cooking was another opportunity to settle his nerves. It was as if those were gateways into letting his overactive imagination take a break for a while, removing him from the other stressors in his life, and allowing him to procrastinate on doing his physics studies. Anything but that.

"Should replace Red with you," Bill tried a joke of his own, yet Dipper's stomach churned
uneasily, and he scratched the back of his neck as if that would alleviate the uncertainty of how to reply to that. “She doesn’t like being domestic, too focused on fucking trees.”

"You know, I think you're doing something wrong if a tree is a better lay than you,” he teased, leaning back on his hands and watching Bill through an amused gaze. Sure, he knew Wendy wasn’t literally fucking trees… probably. Most of the Environment Club had an interest in trees - not being sexual with them, but conservation efforts and a desire for knowledge, that was the point of the club, and the leader would be spearheading that.

When he glanced at Bill, he was bristling, looking defensive. “I’m a hundred times better of a lay than a fucking tree. She’s just obsessed with the environment.”

Dipper hummed in contemplation, getting up from his spot on the coffee table then brushing himself off. "Same here. I'm going to get you coffee and breakfast, try not to be a jerk while I'm gone." It was Bill, so that was unlikely. He was already walking away when he heard Bill mutter angrily, cut off by a slurp as he took another sip from his water.

Food preparation was easy and fast since Bill had the instant oatmeal on hand, and slicing a banana for the sake of banana oatmeal wasn't difficult either. The coffee had finished brewing, and because he didn't see anything beyond sugar and milk, he assumed Bill didn't flavor his. If this was going to become a regular occurrence, Dipper wondered if he'd have to supply his own creamer since he liked to drown his in sugars and creams.

It was a while before he returned to Bill, this time with two cups of coffee placed on the coffee table—one for each of them—and banana oatmeal as well. "Here," he said, distributing a bowl, "that might help with your hangover. Give it like, an hour or something."

Bill took the bowl, and he breathed in the scent of the oatmeal. “Smells good.” He began to dig in, ravaging the bowl and scraping up what little remained. “Bananas make everything better.”

"Mm, I'm going to guess you think it's good then?" he asked with a shrug but didn't wait for an answer. "I should probably get back to grading. Are you going to try sleeping again once you're done?"

“Excellent,” he said as he licked his lips. “It’s been a while since anyone’s made anything for me, Red sure as hell doesn’t.” Dipper blinked at him, noting the reminder of an earlier topic, but then frowning as Bill reached to take another drink of water. “Maybe once I’m done with the water, I think I want to wait until the head settles.”

"Look, man. I don't know if you should be… talking about your relationship with Wendy to me. Didn't you have a problem with that yesterday?" It was why they'd had a small dispute over where they stood with one another, so as far as he knew, it wasn't a topic they should be digging into.

“I had an issue with you calling me a terrible partner,” he commented. “That was my main problem. I don’t remember much else, I got pretty sloshed soon after.”

"Jesus Christ," he muttered and pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn't sure he needed to hear anything more, beginning to return to the desk to resume grading so he could leave at a decent time.

Unfortunately, his unending quest for information overrode that, and curiosity never failed to bite him in the ass, so he questioned, "I don't get it. Why do you care what I think? You even told me that I didn't 'know' you.” Bill had been upfront about how he didn't want him to know him either, and Dipper was perfectly okay with that under the circumstances.
Bill huffed. “Why do you feel the need to question my relationship, kid? Things were fine. Are fine.”

"Great, so you don't have to tell me about how bad she is," Dipper concluded simply. That was a dodgy response at best, but he'd given Bill plenty of those especially in regards to his 'interest' in physics, so he didn't feel the need to pry for more when there was work to be done. Trying to determine where he'd left off, he quickly jumped back into the process of grading, checking, writing scores, and repeating the process.

Beside him, his coffee sat untouched after an initial sip that proved it to be too bitter for his liking. Perhaps since Bill didn't have an issue with sharing cups with him, he could hijack it if he wanted another round of coffee.

Bill sighed, and there was the sound of a cup hitting the coffee table. It startled him and caused him to involuntarily jolt, pen making a crude mark across one of the students' assignments. Dipper groaned, and Bill asked, “What, is my mere presence too unprofessional now?”

With a sigh, he said, "No, it's… it's just— never mind." He didn't need to know about that, not when Dipper could make the shaky line into a crude drawing of an atom. Completely intentional and relevant to the course. There were more sipping noises behind him.

“Thanks again, kid.”

"It's not a problem. You don't have to thank me." None of what he'd done for Bill was time-consuming, but he was glad it'd seemingly made a difference to him, and perhaps it would prevent future disruptions from him. "Do you need anything else, or...?" If it was the latter, he'd be good to continue grading efficiently.

There was a clink as a glass was set back down, and Dipper wished he could picture him on the sofa: was he contentedly splayed out with an empty bowl and nearly-finished coffee? Hopefully, he was ready to sleep. “Should be good. I don’t know why you’re being nice, it’s the nicest anyone’s been for me.” It was tempting to say something about the 'squeaky wheel', but he refrained because it was so sad, the notion that nobody had extended basic kindness to him before.

"Seriously?" he asked, skeptical. "If that's actually true, I think you need better people in your life. Maybe some recruitment is in order, have you considered making threats about academic status?" Namely, putting a hold on their account until they agreed to be Bill's companion.

To his surprise, Bill understood his dry humor and let out a huff of laughter. “Seems to have worked with you. But if you want to know, yes, I was serious. No one else would get me coffee or water, or even think about food.” Despite Bill's gratitude, he still saw it as a simple favor, a detour during grading that gave him a small break and ensured Bill wouldn't be bothering him while he tried to finish the rest.

"Yeah, no,” he said, "and I'm still confused over what you want from me after what we talked about last night." It was as if Bill couldn't make up his mind on that, caught between thinking he didn't want Dipper to get to know him, didn't want their discussions to branch out too far from business, but everything he'd done suggested the desire for camaraderie. Dipper didn't know what to believe.

“You’re asking like I know what I want. I don’t.” The tone was almost envious. “I never do.”

"So why did you tell me—?" A frustrated noise escaped Dipper. "It'd probably be easier to stick with this professionalism thing anyway, unless you really hate it." It was a little hypocritical to say
that and then neither of them bound themselves to it, but it was the principle of the matter now. They shouldn't get to know each other, that would only lead to issues.

Bill’s voice had grown quieter. “Kind of? It sucks, wanting to just talk and for you to ignore me.”

"I'm not ignoring you," he protested, "but I am here to do this— grading for you." It didn't take that much concentration, but this was his second time marking papers for Bill, which meant he was wary of accidentally doing something incorrectly. The atom-drawing was exactly the type of issue he was worried about. "And besides, I don't know what's going to upset you, so I thought it'd be better if we didn't try to turn a working relationship into a personal one." Maybe it was fine with Bill's connections to Stan and Ford, but Bill was still an enigmatic entity to him, always shifting and never predictable.

“How are you not ignoring me?” he inquired, shrugging. “You spent the first few minutes blowing me off. Not up for the challenge of figuring out what gets me pissy, what pushes my buttons?” Dipper assumed this was in reference to his comment about an establishment of a relationship beyond what they had, but he just sighed and placed his head in his hands.

Tiredly, he muttered, "Silly string, so I guess that means we're incompatible." Everything else that pissed Bill off beyond that, he didn't need to find out but could list a couple things solely from their interactions. "Also, I was ignoring you because you were kind of being a dickwad to me." Bill argued, “Silly string itself doesn’t piss me off, you just jizzed it all over my fucking car.” While Dipper frustratedly raised his head from his hands and tried to return to grading, he heard Bill huffing it up behind him and taking a sip of some drink before he continued. “I’m not a dickwad.”

He had to remind himself not to shred the poor students' homework with how much pressure he was placing on the page. "Okay, so how about this one? My disinterest in you." It was clear at this point that it rubbed Bill the wrong way, the fact he didn't care about him, but…

But he didn't know if it was entirely true, though he was miles from outright admitting it to himself. Bill was agonizing to deal with sometimes, a trainwreck of a human, and he didn't know how to interact with him to avoid explosive arguments, but he couldn't say he was completely removed from the intrigue that Bill instilled.

“Why are you not interested in me, anyway? I’m a totally interesting person. Pay attention to me.”

"No, we agreed we didn't want to know each other." The other piece of the statement was unspoken, but he'd said it earlier: leave me alone. Dipper didn't want this to turn into a friendship; showing a bit of compassion to help Bill recover from a hangover had been a nice gesture, but it wasn't a sign of desiring more from their acquaintanceship.

“I don’t care, give me attention.”

"Can't. I'm too busy doing the last thing you ordered me to do," he snapped, leaning further toward the desk and the papers.

There was a sudden crash, the shattering of glass on the floor, and Dipper jumped from the chair to assess what'd happened with wide, startled eyes. Bill had stood up, the near-empty glass of water in tiny bits a couple feet away. He met his gaze, the palpable anger in the glare and his deep scowl, then Bill stalked off into one of the closed rooms, what he assumed was the master bedroom, the door slamming behind him.
It took Dipper a few long seconds to truly process what'd happened, but when he did, he didn't know if he should feel irritated by this outburst, afraid of Bill, or… or, what. Ignore it? He had no idea, this wasn't how well-adjusted adults behaved, but he wasn't going to indulge Bill like the other people in his life probably did.

Skirting the pile of glass, Dipper paused near the door and took in a deep breath, hands clutched behind him to attempt to look and feel more confident. Even if he wasn't in Bill's line of sight, it was a habit. "Just so you know," he started, raising his voice to ensure it would carry through the door, "I'm leaving. I'll come back and grade some other time, but this clearly isn't working."

Bill could throw another fit for all he cared, he could place the hold on his account again. Next time, he wouldn't be so compliant and could recruit the help of his parents in dealing with this overgrown, snobby child since it'd already gone sour once.

Dipper didn't need to wait for a response, didn't require his permission to leave, so he grabbed his backpack to sling it over his shoulder and left the apartment. Grading would have to wait because he wasn't going to indulge immature behavior like that when he'd already bent-over backwards for Bill's comfort today.

Deciding to give himself a quick rest before he walked to his dormitory, Dipper plopped down outside of the complex and leaned against the brick wall, surveying the parking lot. Of course Bill's golden status symbol was front and center in the best possible spot, but other than that, his surroundings weren't notable. A few squirrels scampering around the dried grass and trees, the occasional student or group walking by on the sidewalk.

Any further details of his environment were shattered by a redirect of his attention, his phone buzzing.

(8:03 AM) mason

(8:03 AM) talk to me

(8:03 AM) you left so quickly i couldn't even say goodbye

(8:04 AM) i don't know why you did, i thought you'd stay

The confrontation was forcing him to second guess what'd happened and his response to it, trying to evaluate if what he'd did had been the correct course of action. Staying would've been undeniably awkward with Bill not even present in the room and upset with him, plus he wasn't sure how he felt about personal safety after Bill had demonstrated mild issues with keeping his emotions in check.

(8:05 AM) I was uncomfortable.

(8:05 AM) I thought it was pretty obvious that things weren't going well anymore, so it didn't make sense to stay.

(8:06 AM) From now on, maybe it'd be best if we met up in the library or a coffee shop.

(8:06 AM) don't be so rash

(8:07 AM) things were fine, i'm just tired, come back

(8:08 AM) Seriously, things are not fine.
You broke a glass.

The fit of anger had Dipper withdrawing further from Bill, seeing no upside to a closer relationship than the ambiguous distance as acquaintances because he didn't know how to act around him. He wasn't sure what would set him off and felt no particular incentive to find out when this would be over after the semester. Grading and homework questions didn't require a friendship, and he didn't plan to build one.

The door to the building swung open, and he hardly had time to react when a familiar figure tripped over his extended legs, the impact sending a wave of pain through his lower half and causing him to let out a shrill squeak as he tucked them inward. Bill—of course it had to be Bill—had caught himself from tumbling to the ground with his hands outstretched, steadying himself with the wall. “What the fuck.”

"Sorry," he muttered, "I was just resting out here before I walked back to my dorm." And that rest was effectively ruined because the brutal collision had sparked aches throughout his nerves, rousing them into producing the familiar discomfort. "Are you okay?"

Bill straightened himself out as he looked at his hands in horror. “Look at this,” he whined to Dipper, and he noticed small red lines where the grooves of the wall had sunk into his flesh. "My hands are fucked up, you should doctor them. Use your Mason Jar magic on them."

"What? No, man. Get actual medical help if you need it." Dipper didn't know what to do but if Bill was injured, he wouldn't be of assistance. Honestly, if his personal experience was any indication, the real medical staff wouldn't be either. "I… I don't—" understand how to be around you, but he didn't say that, didn't know how to express it to Bill who didn't seem to care about the last ten minutes of their lives. It was as if he wanted to be friendly with him again, and he couldn't keep up with any of it because he was still processing the last blowout.

“I don’t want some stupid EMT,” Bill responded. “I want you to, I don’t know, throw some peroxide on it. We can go inside and figure it out?” That didn't sound like a two-man job, and his expression shifted into one of unamused skepticism.

"You have two fully functional hands, so I think you can handle putting peroxide on your own cuts." If Bill was expecting him to dote because he'd gotten his medicine and breakfast together, he was sadly mistaken, or perhaps woefully entitled. "I'm going home, okay? We can meet up tomorrow or in a couple days, whenever you're free."

“...Can I go with you?”

"To my dorm? Uh…"

Bill glanced away from him, hands dropping to his sides and snaking into his pockets. “I don’t want to be alone.”

"I, uh... don't know," he mumbled indecisively. "There's this whole thing about bringing guests over— I signed a roommate agreement that says I need to work it out with my roommate first, and she's at work, so she probably wouldn't get back to me on time.” Truthfully, their roommate agreement didn't say that but he knew it wasn't unlikely to claim it did. He and Mabel were fine with any guests within reason, they trusted one another's judgment.

But after the display in his apartment, Dipper wasn't feeling comfortable enough to let Bill accompany him in his place of residence.
“Oh, so they’re letting you live with your girlfriend but not me?” Dipper cringed at the mere thought, and he thought he’d talked about how he lived with his sister, but perhaps Bill hadn’t gotten the memo. "That’s such bullshit, I should call my fucking father. Bet if I lived with Red, our relationship wouldn't be such relationshit.”

"Whoa, uh… no. That— that isn't even close. My roommate is my sister, Mabel, and we were allowed to live together because we're close." Loosely, that was a true version of events. Along with being best friends and relying on the other for emotional support, his medical issues including the burden of therapy had pleaded a decent case not to separate them. "I don't think she'd be okay with you… being there." Bill’s expression dropped, becoming borderline angry.

“Why not? Does she have a problem with me?”

Rocking a bit, he tried to think of how to delicately phrase this since it seemed Bill was already upset with the turn of events. Sighing, he explained, "I don't think she dislikes you, but… she kind of thinks you're a jerk."

His expression grew stony, and he narrowed his eyes. “I see.” That was a significantly different reaction than the times he'd gone further, calling him a jackass and dickwad, but he guessed Bill had perceived their relationship as closer than it was so he hadn't taken offense. That was a haunting thought.

Taking a step away from him, he moved toward the door. Although he would've rose to his feet as well to start walking to the dorm, he didn't want to in front of Bill on the slim chance his legs wouldn't cooperate fully, forcing him to do it while whining in pain. That wasn't a sight Bill should be an audience to, and Dipper didn't need to be mortified. “I guess I’ll leave you be.”

"Look, don’t… don’t take it personally. She doesn't really know you, she just knows you've enlisted me to help with grading after ‘vandalizing’ your car and… yeah, you can probably guess how she feels about that.” He and Mabel shared the opinion that it was ridiculous, but Dipper had thought it would be a learning opportunity, which strengthened the disheartened feeling over today's experience.

“I’ll see you sometime,” Bill replied, without acknowledging the discussion of Mabel. “If you ever want to come back here. Not the biggest fan of public settings when I have a hangover but if you’d rather do that, we can arrange something later.”

Frowning, he suggested, "Stop drinking so much and getting hungover.” If he wasn't battling a hangover, they probably wouldn't need to be in a public setting, and they could revisit the private sessions anyway.

“IT’s the only thing that makes me feel okay.”

"Wow, thanks," he muttered, sarcasm edging into the words, but he guessed he didn't expect anything more. Helping Bill today hardly made a difference at all in the grand scheme of things.

“You made me feel alright, but I kinda fucked that up, so there’s that.”

"It was nice, sort of, before that happened," he admitted. "I just— you… you understand why it's weird, right? I hardly know you, and here you are breaking stuff, then shutting yourself in your room. I don't know what to expect with you, and so that's why I thought it'd be better to meet on campus somewhere.”

Bill sighed. “I don’t know if it matters anymore, kid. It’s pretty clear you don’t want to be alone
with me, there’s no reason to justify it.”

"We'll see how it goes, but yeah. It'd be a good idea to do it somewhere public for a while." If that happened to be the rest of the semester, then so be it, but he wasn't going to put himself at risk being in Bill's apartment. A public setting wouldn't be as intimate, reinforcing the decision that they weren't going to be anything more than acquaintances who worked together for academic reasons.

“Fine. See you, Pine Tree.”

Beginning the long process of hauling himself from his spot on the concrete, Dipper said, "See you later."

A study session within his dorm room was interrupted by his phone lighting up and vibrating non-stop to signal a call was coming through. Waiting until the contact name appeared on the screen and discovering it was Stan, Dipper answered the call with a distracted, "Hi, what's up?"

With anyone else, he'd be concerned about the medium since calling was a rarity, texting was more efficient and casual. But Stan…

Stan was different and seemed to be an old soul, trapped in older days; as such, he preferred calling if he was going to initiate the conversation. He said it was because his thumbs were fat, yet Dipper wondered if he secretly just enjoyed hearing his friends and family.

“Kid,” Stan’s gruff voice greeted him. “I'm hungry, an' I got'n hour for lunch.” He paused, a rumbling sigh rolling from him. "Ah, look– I know I forgot about that thing last night, but do ya wanna hit the diner with me? I’ll drive, there won’t be no walking.”

Dipper's eyebrows raised at the offer despite his inclination toward aversion when it came to fast food covered in grease. However, no walking plus a quality meal that wasn't dining center food was appetizing, and it came with the added bonus of seeing Mabel since she'd be working for the next few hours at least. "Wait, so you want to go to the diner? Like, the nearby one that Mabel works at?" he asked in clarification. "Didn't you just have that food last night?"

“It’s fuckin’ delicious! An’ yeah, the one she works at. Are ya down or not?”

"Yeah, I'm down. When are you going to be here?"

“In a few minutes, I’ll see ya soon, kid.” A click, and the call was over.

Although he zeroed in on homework again while battling thoughts of helplessness that eventually gave way to musing about what he'd order at the diner, it didn’t take more than ten minutes for Dipper’s phone to vibrate, this time with a text.

(11:45 AM) better be ready to go

(11:45 AM) waitin for ya

Dipper stashed his phone in his back pocket and left the dorm room, locking it on his way out. It wasn't a long trek to the lower floor, out the double doors, and he saw Stan's car idling in a shady spot within the parking lot. The passenger seat was always more cramped than he remembered it being, he didn't know how that was possible, but it was.

"Hey," Dipper said, getting his seatbelt clipped and inhaling, the scent of sweat and gasoline and
sickly-sweet air freshener hitting him. In the background, the radio was a low hum, playing a 70s tune he didn't recognize. "So, the diner? Ford's not coming with us?" In all fairness, Stan hadn't said anything to indicate he would be, but it was uncommon to see them apart during an activity Ford would've usually partaken in. The diner wasn't Ford's favorite, he complained of the grease and atmosphere, but he had a soft spot for the fries.

Stan shook his head. "The nerd was too focused on his dumb project to come with, said something about how his hunger 'was a biological urge he needn’t satisfy just yet.'" He'd tried to hold back, but the effort was for naught when Dipper couldn't contain his laughter at the poor attempt at mimicking Ford, the satirical take on his mannerisms and pretentious speech patterns accurate. "Fuckin’ stupid, he don’t know shit about urges, kid." Stan threw the car in reverse, backing out of the parking lot.

"I don't know if that's sad or impressive, using his time for lunch to keep working on his academic projects." Dipper wished he could be that focused. Every opportunity extended to procrastinate on physics work, he embraced with open arms, part of why he was with Stan right now. It wasn't that he didn't take his schoolwork seriously enough, but it also wasn't as if blankly staring at the textbooks and homework was going to absorb the knowledge into his brain when it already didn't compute.

Shaking the thought away, Dipper mused about the last bit of what Stan said. He questioned, "Urges?"

"Urges," he confirmed. "Ford doesn’t understand ‘em, but he thinks he does."

Still perplexed by the explanation, his nose scrunched. "Uh, is this like your theory that Ford is secretly an alien, and he's trying to take over the universe with the power of knowledge?" If memory served, Ford had been regretful that it wasn't the case.

Stan peered at him, eyes slimming. "Are you sure he ain’t, kid? That guy ain’t human, ya know? No one can be that nerdy, it’s unnatural."

"I'd be that nerdy if I could," Dipper said, stretching his legs out in front of him and ignoring the dull ache, "but it's not my fault that physics is super boring and complicated. Maybe I can write about Ford for the film studies midterm, it's supposed to be a short screenplay." The genre was the choice of the student, and Dipper had been toying with the idea of writing sci-fi...

"The Adventures of Fordsy the Alien," Stan said with a chuckle. "I can just see it, the nerd would have a stroke."

Dipper mused, "Sounds like a good comic book to me, but I'll keep that in mind. I have no idea what else I'd write about, the professor said to 'draw on our experiences and interests', so..." He shrugged, then said teasingly, "I guess that means you'd be writing about a fifty-year-old classic car full of topless ladies, if you were doing this assignment." Stan's previous chuckle escalated to a roar of laughter, his body shaking.

"I would be," he agreed heartily. "Those broads would be naked though, can’t pass that up, kid! I like my ladies undressed."

"Whoa, dude," Dipper said, a hand running through his hair as he nervously exhaled a laugh. "That's... uh, that's..." Stan could have at least tried to keep his fantasies somewhat appropriate, but he guessed that level of crudeness was expected from the guy with a literal stack of pornographic magazines in his bedroom, a product of his technophobia.
The car rolled to a stop at a sign, approximately only a mile from the diner now, and Stan didn’t bother using a signal as he made a right turn. “Hey, ya should enjoy the naked ladies too. It’s only natural, kid.”

Awkwardly, he mumbled, "It's not that I don't enjoy them because yeah, ladies can be really pretty, it's that— this is a kind of weird conversation to be having with you, and objectifying women isn't, uh..."

“I ain’t callin’ them objects, don’t be a goddamn hippie. I’m just sayin’ I admire ‘em in their natural form, don’t you? Or are you a… ‘ladies should be concealed with clothing’ sort? That’s sexist, kid.”

"Don't turn this around on me," he said, lightly nudging Stan from across the console. "I'm all for people feeling comfortable with whatever they're wearing, or… not wearing. I just think it's creepy and self-centered to think that decision is for my viewing pleasure, ugh." He shuddered at his own wording. "That's gross."

Stan waved him away, shaking his head. “You’re no fun, kid. You’re as much of a stickler as Ford is on a good day.” But Ford was plenty of fun, always trying to teach him about advanced concepts in the theory of the universe and other interesting aspects of the unknown.

When the diner pulled into view in the distance, Dipper checked the time on Stan's car and asked, "How long do you have for lunch? It can get pretty busy around noon, lots of West Coast Tech students go over there since it's cheap." Mostly delicious, but Dipper could only stomach so many greasy foods before he couldn't handle any more. Stan didn't seem to share that limit.

“I still have about an hour,” Stan said. “Or somethin’ like that, I don’t really care if I’m late gettin’ back. My boss won’t give a rat’s ass as long as I get back to work soon as I’m there.”

"What an outstanding work ethic," Dipper said. "At least it's not as busy as I thought it'd be, judging by the vehicles parked in front." Granted, that didn't mean a lot since it was reachable by foot from campus, and the walk was barely twenty minutes. Probably intentional to keep health-conscious students interested, a way to work off the excess calories from the food. Clever, considering it was Californian college city.

“Just in time!” Stan threw the car in park, and he began to climb out of his vehicle as Dipper did the same. “C’mon kid, I’m starvin’.”

Like he’d predicted from the state of the diner's partially-empty parking lot, the inside was equally quiet. There were a few patrons situated at the counter and a handful in the booths, but it wasn't overloaded with hungry guests and waitstaff struggling to keep up with the demand, so he figured it'd been a good day and time to come, especially if it'd allot them a few minutes of conversation with Mabel.

Seating was immediate. They were shown to a booth, and Dipper shifted his weight on the worn, fake-leather (plastic-covered) seats while he brushed a thumb over the laminated menu of bright food options. "Do you think they put the pictures on here so drunk people can still order?" he asked no one in particular, surveying the choices of American cuisine.

At first, he wasn't sure Stan heard him since he was preoccupied with perusing the menu, but his reply suggested differently. “I don’t need pictures to order when I’m drunk! I know this menu by heart, kid.”

"I don't know if that's something to be proud of, man." Stan puffed his chest up, and Dipper
snickered at the outlandish demonstration of glory in his achievement, if it could be called that.

“It totally is, kid! At this rate, I’ll be given a ‘diner member for life’ card!”

"They probably give those out to all the regulars because if you keep eating here, you won't have much of a life left with the amount of grease they slip into this stuff,” he said with a motion toward the menu, pictures of fries and burgers and deep-fried foods plastered on every inch.

Stan huffed, setting his menu down. “Grease just makes it taste better, kid. I thought ya knew that, bein’ Mr. Smarty Pants over there.”

Brushing the thought away, he snarkily said, "Brave words, coming from Mr. 'My-Pants-Won't-Fit-In-a-Month.'" Dipper grinned, trying to ignore the stab of self-consciousness at the Mr. Smarty Pants name since he couldn't be anywhere in the ballpark of 'smart' if he could barely manage his classes this semester.

There was movement beside them, and Stan perked up with interest as they were approached by the waitress. “Hey sweetcheeks, what does a guy like me gotta do to get a taste of your delicious grub? I know what’s on the menu tonight, me-n-u.”

Hotly blushing at the inappropriate introduction, Dipper squawked, "Stan!"

Although the waitress looked a little flustered by it, her reaction didn't hold a candle to his when Dipper wanted to bury his face in his arms and never hear another word out of Stanley Pines' mouth. Clearing her throat, she greeted them and seemingly ignored the awful pick-up lines to recite the day's specials, then ask if they were ready to place an order.

Dipper barely made it through relaying his choice, sputtering and stammering and offering apologies while rubbing his neck and casting wary glances toward Stan, who confidently went into how he wanted a triple bacon stacked burger with extra… everything, a large order of fries, and a large coke. At least he didn't try to land another flirtatious comment, but he did wink.

"Wow, I don't think I'm ever going to this diner with you again," he said dryly, folding his menu and sliding it aside along with Stan's. "Actually, I don't think I'm ever going out in public with you again."

"Puh-lease," Stan scoffed with a glance at him, having been "covertly" watching the waitress’ ass as she walked away, and Dipper waved his hand in front of his face to regain his attention. "Y’know ya wanna go out with your favorite cousin again." Although Dipper was tempted to say his favorite cousin couldn't be here because he'd been immersing himself in his studies, apparently working on a project today, he didn't dare touch that subject. Stan brought the tough guy act, but he wasn't truly stone-hearted, his armor had cracks and gave way to a soft interior that longed for approval. A disagreement, saying Ford was probably his preferred cousin, would've been a huge blow to his ego. "Don’t be such a wimp, kid. You’ll never get ass if ya don’t bring out the charm."

"I don't know how they do it in Jersey, but in California that doesn't get you ass— that gets you sued for sexual harassment."

“Sued...?” Stan waved his hand dismissively and made a 'psh' noise. “Kid, there’s no way in hell they’re suin’ me for harassment, not when she should feel flattered. That lass had a fine rear, didja see it? I bet she’s a nice gal, not one that’d leave ya for some hippie bastard.” Although Dipper was tempted to ask if that meant he still had a chance on the dating scene if women were into 'hippie bastards', Stan leaned over the table to peer at him, but reared back when he heard a familiar voice.
“Dipper! Stan!”

Dipper looked over his shoulder and brightened instantly at Mabel, who was approaching in her faux-fifties-reminiscent waitress attire. Waving, he scooted over to allow her room in the booth beside him. "Hey, Mabel," he greeted, "what's up? How's your shift been?"

Mabel beamed at him as she took the seat beside him. “It’s been going good. Some creeps hit on me during the morning shift, but other than that it’s been uneventful.”

"Some creeps?" he repeated, eyebrows hitching while his eyes slid to Stan. "Yeah, I think I might know one of them. James Dean here was trying out his cheesy pickup lines on the waitress before you came over, maybe she'll spit in his food." That'd be about the amount of action he saw from the ladies during any given week.

“She won’t be touching his food,” Mabel said. “She’ll just hold the platter, maybe we’ll get a cook to do it for her. Some of them get real sick of customers abusing us.”

Stan scoffed, muttering to himself. “I was admirin’ her, not abusin’ her. Christ, it’s like y’all don’t know how to treat a lady.”

"The word you're looking for is 'ogling', and I feel like your mouth had a bigger part in admiring her than it needed to.”

“The ladies say my tongue’s a legend, kid. They love my oral expertise.” The squeal that burst from Dipper was absolutely humiliating as his face reddened with embarrassment, and he crumpled in on himself, holding his head in his hands. Mabel collapsed against his side, shaking in laughter, and he merely sunk further into his palms.

Into his hands, he mumbled, "Pretty sure Ford just became my favorite cousin." Honestly, he likely had been before the comment, but this may as well have been the perfect opportunity to voice that, and Stan let out a noise of protest.

“Why is he your favorite when I cause pleasure? The ladies love me.”

"Not better," he said flatly, finally peeking through the slits of his fingers to greet Stan with a displeased glare.

“Don't listen to him, I love you,” Mabel reassured, laughing harder. “Platonically. Even if we weren't related, you're not my type, Stan.”

Playfully, he asked, "Not into bruiser-meets-bad-hygiene?" Stan’s expression dropped, kicking Dipper’s foot beneath the table, and he retracted it with exaggerated huffiness. "What was that for? Maybe I am into it." He could hardly get through that without succumbing to giggles, and it seemed to have humored Stan as well from his booming laugh and table slap. Being cousins solidified it as off-limits regardless, though he guaranteed being unable to date Stan didn't rouse negative reactions in either him or Mabel. "Hey, how are things going with that one guy in your introduction to acting class?" Specifically, the one she'd noted interest in seeing shirtless.

Mabel gave him a thoughtful look. “He’s super nice. I don’t think we’re at the ‘making out’ stage but I like to think I’m getting there.”

"Yeah? I'm glad that things are going good," he commented then stole a sideways glance at Stan, "and you didn't have to resort to corny pickup lines to get closer to him."

“Hey, those are damn great pickup lines!” Stan objected. “Stop hatin’ ‘cause you can’t pull ‘em
"I can, it's just—" he sighed in frustration, pinching the bridge of his nose, "just... pretty girls make me nervous, okay? I blank. So I could, in theory, but it's not like I'd ever do that anyway." Interaction with the end means of scoring a date required thorough lists of potential conversational topics and a general outline of where he should guide the discussion for the most favorable outcome—

God, he needed help. An overthinking, restless mind would be the death of him and the social life that was already on its last legs.

Stan grinned at him. "Ya sound like Ford, all nerdy with no girly."

"Oh! I gotta scram, guys. There are some tables I need to do, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Okay, be back soon," he called after her while Mabel scooted from the booth and smoothed down her skirt, then scampered in the direction of tables awaiting service. To Stan, he couldn't help but inquire, "Is that a compliment?" Because it barely sounded like one, if so; Ford was amazing, even if he didn't have any romantic endeavors, since he had so many successful academic pursuits. Him, on the other hand... "Never mind, don't answer that."

He did. "If I were complimentin' ya, I wouldn't have compared ya to Ford. Just be glad you ain't him."

"Why?" Was Ford having daily anxiety over the upcoming pressure of midterms in a few weeks? Was Ford lacking sleep, trying to study but being unable to focus, wishing he could just give in to the weight of expectations begging to crush him? That was about where Dipper was at, plus the recent developments with Bill weren't easing his mind. Trying to shake the thoughts away, he mumbled, "Is it just because he doesn't have a significant other?" If so, that was the least of his own concerns because the opposite problem was more of a pressing matter: his possible soulmark-dictated significant other wasn't someone to make room for in his life.

"What, do you want to waste your life away on stupid science missions—" Stan broke off, trying to correct himself, "—projects, an' ya don't even acknowledge your brother every now and then."

As someone rooted in logic and fact, Dipper didn't mind science as a concept, it was the specific division of physics that he was struggling with. Science projects, or 'missions' as Stan called them, wouldn't be a waste of his life when it could potentially benefit everybody if he made a new discovery, or invented something...

This particular track, however, filled him with a hopeless dread and the worry of never amounting to anything, provided he could squeeze by enough to pass at all.

"Aw, come on," Dipper said and shrugged, "don't be so harsh on Ford. He's probably dealing with a lot, maybe he's fretting about his future, or... or concerned he won't pass this semester, afraid of how his parents will take the news or his sibling that's supporting him, might be facing debilitating anxiety that he doesn't know how to cope with and just wants to sort of... hide from everything, and he's stressing about his soulmark— uh, the lack of one, I mean. I don't know, just some ideas."

"Uh... do you have somethin' ya wanna get off your smoothass chest, kid?"

"Uh, ha," Dipper forced a nervous laugh, tucking his hair behind his ear as his shoulders tensed up, "that'd be a no. Nothing going on here. Just.. normal life stuff, it's pretty mundane and boring and I wouldn't want to bore you so— oh look! The food's here."
The waitress set their food down at the table, and Stan winked at her again. “Thanks, sweetheart.” He moved to grab his burger, pausing at the sight of a slip of paper. “What’s this?”

Sliding his plate of fries over, Dipper said, "Please let it be a note that says she spit in your food, and you're not welcomed back at this Greasy's." Stan opened the folded piece of paper, and his face broke into a grin as he laughed.

“Even better, it’s ‘er number! I told ya it’d work, ladies love it when ya flirt with them.” He slid the paper across the table. “See?”

"Wow," he muttered, "it's probably the number to her lawyer's office."

“I’m gonna call ‘er tonight,” Stan continued excitedly, bringing the paper back. “Get some of that sweet ass-ction.” Sure, get a jumpstart on the sexual harassment lawsuit, that sounded fun.

So maybe he was a little jealous— not of this particular exchange since he didn't know enough about the waitress to truly be envious of her impending interaction with Stan, but the fact that it came so easily to the guy, and people were receptive to his positive energy, his charming allure.

"That's great, man." Although he'd tried to sound supportive, it merely came across as flippant even to his own ears, and Dipper hummed in thought as he scrambled for something else to say. "I'm... sure you two will have a good time." Well, now that just made him sound lonely and sad. He was done trying to make this better.

Unaffected by the half-hearted sentiment, Stan puffed his chest up. "We will, I'll take good care of 'er. C'mon kid, let's chow down. You're seemin' a bit.. jealous."

At the notion, Dipper fabricated a laugh that turned into a ragged cough, then he trained his attention on his food. "Yeah, I'm just green with envy," he said sarcastically. "Man, I wish I could date someone on the Greasy's waitstaff."

“You want to go on a date?” Mabel asked as she returned to their table, plopping beside Dipper, and at first, he was too stunned to shake his head in disagreement. “I can set you up. Give me like, two hours, and you'll have their number and a date night arranged.”

When his tongue caught up again, he said, "Oh! N-no, I was kidding about that since Stan somehow scored a date with our waitress, that's all. I don't want to go on a date, but thanks anyway." It was a lot of added pressure, specifically unnecessary pressure, and romance had become a complicated endeavor with his possible soulmate being an unpredictable mess who said he wanted nothing to do with him but demonstrated the exact opposite at every chance.

Mabel shook her head at him, a smirk growing on her face. "I have the perfect someone in mind, Dipper. Just you wait, I'll get that waitress off your mind in no time." It wasn't the waitress, it was how Stan seemed to fluidly navigate complicated social situations. Flirting. He couldn't dream of getting through the interaction without a hitch, much less receiving a date from it.

Stan cleared his throat, having been working on his burger. It was no wonder he hadn’t spoken, his mouth was full of greasy meat and bread. “Kid, get to eatin’. I gotta go back soon.”

"Right." With the talk of dates and anxious thoughts, he'd nearly forgotten about the food in front of his face but peered to the fries on his plate. "I'll catch up with you tonight," he said, raising his head to Mabel with an affectionate smile, aware she likely would have to return to waiting tables. "After you're done with work and classes for the day. Oh hey, also, if someone is hitting on you and you don't like it, just give them Stan's number." The joke elicited a short laugh from both
twins, meanwhile Stan raised his head, confused and asking what he'd missed.

After reassuring that it wasn't important, Mabel leaned over, throwing her arm around him in a sideways hug before she moved to get up again. “I'll see you later, Dipper.”

After she'd departed, Dipper glanced to his fries again and felt his stomach do a strange motion—not quite a gurgle, maybe more like a flip of lingering discomfort with the prospect of dating and soulmates or worries over his miserable social skills, maybe his impending academic failure. There was plenty to stress over.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Stan chowing down as if there was no tomorrow, but with his stomach in knots, Dipper couldn't be less hungry.
“Dipper,” Mabel greeted as she stepped into the dorm room, and Dipper raised his head from his homework in time to see Mabel throwing her backpack onto her bunk accompanied by the bed spring's squeaky protests. “I’m back. I can’t believe how bor- ing that class can get, it’s like all they want to do is talk, talk, talk,” she made a ‘talking’ motion with her hand, "and not act.”

"Are you guys still going through the basics?” he asked, recalling Mabel's details of previous class sessions and her frustration over not doing anything, the book-learning taking precedence over the practical application while they covered the fundamentals.

Mabel nodded, frowning. “I wanna act, I don’t care about the history of Shakespeare, or how the Greeks used to act, or whatever. Sometimes, I find myself spacing out, and that's such a 'you' thing. I never do that! But it's hard, paying attention to it,” she admitted. “It’s really uninteresting.”

"History can be pretty cool,” he pointed out, idly thumbing the chewed pen in his grip, "but I guess it'd be kind of lame if you're hoping to do something hands-on. Do you know when you get to do that?” Dipper was envious, admittedly. Not that he wanted boring courses, but boring and easy to understand would be manageable, unlike boring and completely beyond his level of expertise.

“I think it starts next week,” Mabel said. “It feels so far away though, like we’re wasting time on dumb old stuff when we could be having fun and learning the important, useful material.” She plopped on her bed, sighing, and another round the bed springs' chorus restarted.

"Did you ever take that offer to go to a Drama Club meeting? I bet they'd play more games and socialize than what you can do in class, so maybe that'd be worth checking out," he suggested and shrugged, unsure how she felt about it since Bill had introduced her to the idea.

“Oh, shoot. I've been so busy I forgot about that meeting. I need to check it out, it'll probably get these stupid lessons out of my head.”

"You can catch the one next week, if you don't have to work that evening. Your hours at the diner have been sort of intense. Aren't you working tonight too?” Mabel was already switching out shoes, collecting her uniform, so he assumed she was preparing to leave.

“Yeah, we’ve been pretty short-handed lately so they scheduled me for more hours. The money’s nice, I just wish I had more time to relax.” Swallowing down the guilty sigh, Dipper watched as she shook her head and packed her uniform in a bag. “How’s it been going here?”

"I got back from class… maybe an hour or two ago? And it hasn't been going well." His new strategy was to attempt assignments directly following the class period in hopes something would stick, but it was stressing him, and he still didn't remember pertinent information. Notes and review helped minimally, but everything felt complex, nonsensical. "I'm trying," he promised, "and I'll… I
Mabel hummed in thought. “Just don’t work yourself too hard, Dippy. It won’t help either of us if you get overwhelmed, okay?”

Dipper nodded somberly, continuing to spin the pen between his fingers, until it slid from his grasp and rolled down his desk. "I'll be okay." It wasn't the most reassuring response but it was his obligation to force himself through passing this, getting a degree, being able to support Mabel's way through college courses after what she'd done for him. Although the escaped pen was precariously close to being chewed again, his phone lighting up with a notification saved it. "Stan's texting me?" Swiping the screen, he mumbled, "It better not be about his date with that waitress."

(1:03 PM) hey, do ya got a stretch book i can borrow?

(1:03 PM) What is a stretch book?

(1:03 PM) one without much words, i don’t like em, i like pictures

(1:04 PM) the thing that helped stretch your back

(1:05 PM) Like an actual book of stretch exercises?

(1:05 PM) I have one, but why do you need it?

(1:05 PM) i fucked up while lifting @ work

(1:06 PM) can hardly move

"It sounds like Stan was hurt on the job," he reported to Mabel with a slight frown. "He's looking for my book on stretch exercises… We still have that, right? It should be in my closet over there, probably under the pile of physics books." It was rarely used when he knew the stretches by heart, the ones that provided momentary relief forever ingrained as second nature, a remedy for pain days.

“Tell him I hope he gets better soon.” As she spoke, Dipper heard her rummaging through his closet with a 'hmm', then she presented a book with a mat and exercise ball on the cover. “Is this it?”

"Yeah, that's the one."

(1:06 PM) Mabel has to be at work by 1:30. She can give me a lift over, and I could drop it off for you?

(1:06 PM) And also she hopes you get better soon.

(1:07 PM) would ya mind staying over for a bit? ford couldn't come home early

(1:07 PM) I don't mind, but I still have classes and everything this week.

(1:07 PM) So I can be there, just not all the time.

(1:07 PM) no problem and we’ll figure out transportation for ya, kid
The drive to the complex was short, and when Mabel parked near the front door, Dipper gathered his things: the book, his backpack, and a bag to stay over a few nights or however long Stan wanted him to be there to help out. Digilent packing had elicited playful remarks from Mabel, she said he didn't have to be ultra meticulous since they lived about five minutes away, and she vowed to get anything he'd need.

"I guess I'll see you later?" he half-asked while his hand hovered near the door latch. Tentatively, he went on, "You know, after your shift ends tonight... if you don't have anything else going on, maybe you could grab your things and come stay with us too. It sounds like Stan could use the help. The dorm kind of gets lonely, and... and uh, I don't know, it'd just be— it'd be nice to have your company." The comfort and familiarity of having his twin around was never unwelcome, and uneasiness clutched him at the possibility of Mabel being alone.

"I will," Mabel told him with a smile, to his relief. "I’ll see you later, Dipper. It might be a bit after I get off work, I gotta grab my stuff from the dorm."

"If you're feeling extra generous, you could always get us something from the diner before they close up the kitchen for the evening. Stan will basically eat anything as long as it's deep fried and coated in grease, and a free snack would probably improve his mood."

"We'll see. One of my managers— you know, Lady McBitchface?" Dipper nodded, aware. Several horror stories had acquainted him with her antics. "She gets pissy when I take food, but if she’s not working I can try."

"Don't get in trouble over it," he warned, "because it's not worth that." Squeezing the handle, he gave a final wave and scooted out of the vehicle with his items in hand, entering the complex, enduring the long stairwell. One floor was plenty to stir up an ache in the deep muscles of his legs, but he powered on until he was in front of Stan and Ford's apartment, knocking on the door.

"Come in!" Stan’s familiar voice barked out from behind the wall. "Is it you, kid? Ford ain't good at knocking, he barges in with his nose in some textbook and scurries into his science lab– I mean, room."

"Yeah, it's me," he said as he let himself inside, and brushing through the doorway with his backpack and bag must have been quite a sight because Stan chuckled at him, and Dipper muttered a good-natured 'shut up, man' at him. "Did you want the book?" he asked once he'd kicked off his shoes and set his belongings down, heading toward Stan with the book extended in an offer. "I don't know how much it'll help you if you put your back out."

Stan shrugged, looking at him from where he laid on the couch, legs splayed out as he played with the TV remote in his hands. "It won't hurt to try, I’m tired of layin’ around. I wanna do stuff again." He took the book, flipping through the pages. "Ah, fuck. Words. What’s it say, kid?"

Dipper knew better than to believe Stan was illiterate, though there was conclusive evidence that he had a terrible case of the reading lazies.

Leaning over Stan's shoulder, his eyebrows raised in amusement while he scanned the page of illustrated instructions, and he answered, "It literally says 'step one', 'step two', 'step three'— see, see what I'm doing here?"

"Oh,” Stan said, closing the book, and Dipper collected it from him to skim, staying alert for
exercises that would potentially ease some of Stan's discomfort. “I ain’t good at this, kid. I’ve never done this before. The stretchin’, I’ve probably fucked up my back a few good times before.”

"Where does it hurt?" he inquired idly, attention flicking between the book and Stan. Stan grimaced, shifting to his side but stopping abruptly.

“All fuckin’ over. I can’t believe this horseshit, kid. My back’s broke.”

It was overdramatic, but he guessed he could work with Stan's "all over" back pain. "Look, man, it'll be alright," he said and handed the book to Stan now that it was open to the page he had in mind.

"Try this exercise to start out? It might help relax everything. Put your legs in front of you, and your arms like this," he demonstrated by taking Stan's significantly larger hands and raising them to the recommended height, "then slowly stretch to the side."

“This is stupid, kid. When do we get to the shit that’ll help me?”

"This will help. Maybe. Everyone's different, and besides, I'm not really the person to go to if you're looking for successful treatments." The most recent years of his life had been changed drastically with the introduction of chronic pain, and it hadn't disappeared even with supportive therapy and stretching, so to think he had a guaranteed solution...

It would be an understatement to say the idea was far-fetched.

Grumbling about how it might not help, Stan begrudgingly followed his instructions, but he paused to hiss in pain. “This fucking hurts.”

"Yeah, that happens."

As for helping Stan, once they were done trying various stretches to see which Stan's bulky form could handle, he figured he would snoop around in his medicine cabinet for something that would cut down the discomfort then see if he could con Stan into taking a shower. Theoretically, it would loosen the tensed muscles, and as a bonus, Stan wouldn't smell like sweat and grease anymore, at least for a while.

Beyond that, he wasn't sure what staying with Stan and Ford would entail. Helping Stan around, doing chores, Dipper knew he could manage that with ease. Cooking, cleaning, both were relaxing pastimes that he otherwise saw very little of in a dorm room, and he found himself looking forward to this temporary adjustment.

(6:23 AM) hey, got some papers for you

The message would have to wait because Dipper was already operating under the pressure of Ford's passive-aggressive comments and fretting over arriving belatedly.

"Are you almost ready?"

"Dipper, we haven't much time."

"I realize breakfast is an essential meal, but it's not that essential."

Mabel was staying with Stan (well, sleeping in) while he and Ford had to attend morning classes and be at the graduate student office respectively, so he was trying to load his backpack, shake the
remaining tiredness from his system, and mentally prepare himself for a mile walk since Ford refused to drive them in case Stan required the car or Mabel was called into work.

With Ford packing his textbooks and paperwork, a half-minute of peace scraped up enough time to respond.

(6:28 AM) One, how do you already have more?

(6:28 AM) I graded them for you a few days ago.

A shudder passed through him at how that visit had ended. It'd been a mess, but afterward, he'd decided they could modify the arrangement with a simple amendment: having somebody else there, like Ford or Wendy, maybe Stan or Mabel. It was more comfortable than meeting in a public place, but it wouldn't open itself to disaster.

(6:28 AM) And two, I can't right now. Long story. It'll have to wait until later.

Within the minute, his phone was buzzing in his back pocket, and at Ford's questioning glance, he said, "It's probably Bill. He was texting me, saying he had more work—" The stress of running late suspended over Ford, his impatience was clear, so Dipper cut the explanation prematurely. "It's not important, I'll see what he wants."

"We don't have all morning," Ford tersely reminded him. "Walking can be a time-consuming endeavor, depending on how busy the sidewalks are and with morning classes beginning soon... then factoring in the possibility of, ah, 'walking buddies' and the added difficulty of overtaking them without performing a side-step in the grass—"

As Ford rambled about the problematic nature of walking to class, Dipper answered the call and raised the phone to his ear as he resumed tying his shoes. "Hey, what's up?"

"You didn't finish grading last time, and I'll be collecting assignments today, so that's how I have more." Dipper started to speak, but was railroaded by Bill's continuation, "Water under the bridge! I want to hear about this 'long story' and why you can't grade now."

"Can you hear Ford in the background?" he asked with a quiet laugh, referring to the ongoing oral essay on sidewalks and potential hangups that'd cause them to be even later. "That's part of it. See, Stan hurt his back a few days ago, and Mabel and I have been staying with him in their apartment. Assisting Stan extended to listening to him yell at his superiors over the phone for worker's compensation each day so far, and as expected, doing the general chores that required mobility with the bonus task of keeping him company while he watched his television shows.

Dipper thought the apartment was a tiny space already, but it became much smaller once two additional people were thrown into the fray. They'd been sentenced to the couch for sleeping — uncomfortable, but not enough to prevent rest, and Stan had been 'kind' enough to make the table into their personal desk for homework.

With a quick glance at the sofa where Mabel was currently asleep, he went on, "Mabel's been able to take me and Ford to campus, but she had a late shift and is sleeping in, so we have to leave early to walk. That's why I can't grade."

“I’ll pick you up. Also, tell Fordsy to shut his yap, I can hear him and he’s worse than those ankle biters that won’t shut up. And— Stan’s hurt, huh?"

"Yeah," he laughed as he filed out the door, "it's kind of crazy how much he has to say about—"
wait, you're picking us up? Uh…” Dipper nervously scuttled to catch up to Ford and give him a wide-eyed glance, trying to gesture to the phone but only receiving perplexed looks.

“No homo.”

Rolling his eyes, Dipper put the phone on mute mode. "So, Ford, um— Bill called, and… he offered us a ride? Like, he said he was going to pick us up?"

"Has he now?" Ford muttered, arms folding over his dress shirt. "Go ahead and let him, I suppose. He's never offered that before, and quite frankly, I feel we should be concerned about a sudden act of compassion from someone like him." It was a shame he'd muted their call, Dipper would've enjoyed hearing Bill's reaction to that.

To Bill, he unmuted the line and said, "Sure, we'll be outside the front doors if you want to stop by. Why do you want to drive us anyway? Is it on your way or something?"

“Don’t worry about why, Mason Jar. I’ll be there soon.” Despite his protests and further questions, there was a click to denote the call's end, yet he was still juggling more questions than answers.

Ford cleared his throat and paused in the entryway of the complex, raising an eyebrow at him as his eyes scanned, and Dipper shrunk down, feeling small under the scrutinizing gaze. "Well, what now?"

"I guess we wait? I don't think it'll take very long if he's going to drive here."

Sitting on the paved, concrete slab of a step, Dipper drew his backpack in and kept an eye on the surrounding roads, forced to squint because the sun was hardly over the horizon. Although his visit had been an overall positive experience, he could do without waking up at six in the morning to be ushered out the door in hopes that he and Ford would be able to scale the distance between the apartment complex and the physics building with time to spare before their daily obligations commenced. Ugh, he was even starting to sound like Ford internally, could hear his rough voice muttering about his various meetings, how it would reflect badly upon him if he were to be late, and how he had a class to teach later.

Dipper suppressed a groan at the thought of class, that was another thing he wasn't looking forward to, but at least he didn't have to worry about walking.

Several minutes later, Bill’s arrival was marked by the screech of a familiar car braking, the fancy vehicle pulling up to the curb. “Mason Jar, Fordsy!” His voice rang over the whir of the engine. “Get in, I bet Fordsy’s anxious to go.”

"Come along, Dipper," Ford said and rose from the spot beside him, brushing himself off from the specks of nonexistent dust, heading toward the vehicle with his bag in tow. Dipper was quick to follow after while giving his phone a brief check to see the time—not bad, only seven minutes for Bill to drive over—and Ford was about to open the passenger door when he said, "Good morning, Cipher. I trust you'll get us there safely and avoid your usual recklessness."

Bill raised his hand, stopping Ford. “You’re not sitting here, Fordsy. Today, the short one’s riding in front with me.”

Stupefied, confounded for the first time in his life, Ford cleared his throat again with a relenting ‘fine’. Dipper was on the way to switch when motioned to do so, and he peered quizzically to Bill once seated. "What the heck, man? I don't see why you needed me up here, I'm not grading in the ten minutes it takes to get to the physics building and find a parking spot."
“What, is it illegal for me to want you up here? No? Then relax, doll. I’m not making you grade in my car.” And he’d thought he was the weird one, clearly Bill was determined to claim that spot.

"I guess not, but it's still..." he trailed off, not wanting to outright state he was odd as hell in every regard. "Also, 'doll'? I get that you can flirt with other people but seriously, man, it's six thirty in the morning, and I have no idea how you have the energy for any of this."

"Are you traveling?" Ford asked suddenly from the backseat, and Dipper craned his neck to see what he was looking at. "Taking a road trip?"

“Don’t worry about that, Fordsy. I’m preparing to make myself comfortable.”

"What do you have?" Dipper asked Bill, frowning in thought. "Like a map, or food, or..." Puzzling, considering Bill didn't look like he was going anywhere, didn't look any different than he usually did with his formal attire. He and Ford were quite the pair, both opting for slacks and dress shirts with ties (a bowtie for Bill), but Ford didn't have the yellow-black-white color scheme like Bill did, his apparel was neutrals like gray, browns, and faded green.

"A packed bag," Ford clarified for him, "and I haven't a clue what he intends to do with it from that vague response." Uneasily, Bill shifted to glimpse behind him.

“I said don’t worry about it.” His voice grew defensive, and that struck him as strange because Bill was happy to overshare irrelevant details. “It’s none of your concern, Fordsy, Mason Jar.”

"It's really not," he agreed with a shrug, then stole a glance in the rear view mirror to catch Ford's hmmm but when he didn't protest, he perceived that as conceding. Dipper understood, curious too and interested in knowing more, but they weren't entitled to that, as much as Ford probably wished he was given he had to deal with Bill for most of the day, being the only grad students in their department.

“So Mason Bottle,” he said. “You said Stan got hurt? Tell me about that. How much pain is he in?” A weird subject, but that wasn't a surprise coming from Bill, and it meant that after a perplexing interaction, things had reverted to normal.

About to respond, Ford asked, "You told him about Stanley's injury?" With how close Bill was to Stan and Ford, it was kind of intriguing that it hadn't come up in discussion yet.

"I mean... yeah, when he called earlier. I was telling him about how I was staying with you guys for a while," he said, "and uh, I don't know? Why don't you ask Stan later? I think he's getting better, but he's had a few days off from both of his jobs to relax. Mabel and I have been helping him with everything."

Bill nodded. “I see. You’ve been with him for a couple days, correct? Is he able to get around easily, or has he been mostly bedridden?”

Dipper laughed, a skeptical expression settling on his face. "What is your obsession with this? Is Stan being in pain your kink, or what?" Elaborating on the joke, he sarcastically continued, "Stan is in so much pain, probably the worst pain of his life. He walks— no, hobbies around, and he makes these moaning, grunting noises as he does it, like he can barely manage to go more than a few feet at a time. He can hardly do anything except stay on the couch for most of the day, then shuffle back to bed at night."

“Interesting.”

He rolled his eyes. "Seriously? I was kidding, dude. Stan's a lot better, and he's been getting around
without too many issues. Sorry, I'm sure that's not nearly as arousing for you as Stan being in pain is."

Bill's head cocked. “Do you honestly believe this discussion is going to my dick, Pine Tree?”

flushing lightly at the blunt question, it seemed Ford didn't take it any better but was still listening to their conversation with his strangled noise from the backseat. "Um, n-not really," he sputtered, "I was just— you were super into Stan being hurt, and I still have no idea why you want to know about that."

“I was innocently asking about it,” Bill argued, the car turning abruptly to the right, and Dipper had to grasp the console to steady himself. “It’s nothing sexual. I don’t want to fuck Stan.”

"Mm, I think he'd pass anyway. He has a lady friend from the diner calling him up every evening." The same one that had passed her number to him after some extremely facepalm-worthy pickup lines. "They can't text like normal people because Stan's stuck in the dark ages, so I hear them flirting on the phone."

Bill raised his eyebrow at him. “Listen in often?”

"I don't have a lot of choice? You've been in their apartment, it's... there's not much room to, y'know, not hear anything." From the back, there was a displeased grunt, and Dipper sheepishly kicked his legs against the bottom of the passenger seat, expecting a protest to come any second.

"I've arrived at the conclusion," Ford said, "that seats in this car were assigned based on socioeconomic standing." Bill burst into laughter, unable to contain it, and Dipper bit his lip as well to prevent doing the same while fully aware Ford wouldn't appreciate his amusement.

“Stars,” he heaved out. “That’s fucking hilarious.”

Dipper watched as Ford adjusted his glasses and spoke with pretension, "Be that as it may, it's true. The Cipher family has plenty of excess funds to toss around, and the Pines— specifically, Dipper and Mabel's parents are politicians. Quite well off compared to me and Stanley, and it happens to reflect in our living situations."

The next bit was directed at him: "You're from that side of the family, huh?"

Suddenly self-conscious, he scratched the back of his neck with a quiet, "Yeah, I guess so." To be honest, he'd forgotten he didn't tell Bill about that particular aspect of his family, but it'd never emerged in conversation - then again, why would it? Most of the individuals who heard 'Pines' and connected it to his political-figure parents straight up asked if there was a relation, and he'd automatically assumed Bill knew.

Bill huffed in laughter. “I can’t believe the senator and mayor have family that isn’t.. well, look at the other twins.” With Bill entering the parking lot, the car was starting to slow down.

"It's complicated, things with... our family."

Barely audibly, Dipper was pretty sure he heard Ford mutter, "If marrying into wealth and power is complicated, then I'd agree with that statement." It was accurate, and he couldn't blame the other side of the family for resentment over the significant difference in incomes and social standing. Pride barred the road to assistance when they preferred 'old-fashioned' achievement, backed by claims that they didn't need their charity, which was a respectable enough stance because it didn't amount to any real tension in the family.
Bill chuckled. “You wouldn’t understand, Fordsy. Marriage when you have money is a complicated procedure, one you’ll never experience.”

"Are you expecting a marriage will provide you with additional wealth?" Ford scoffed. "Wendy is a fine girl, but she has pursued a future in forestry management, a field not exactly known for its large payouts to employees." Bill bristled, anger crossing his features as he parked the vehicle. In the backseat, it sounded like Ford was halfway out before it even came to a complete stop after grabbing his things.

"I didn't know Wendy was going into forestry management, but I guess that explains why she talks about volunteering with the forest service and her weekend camping trips at Environment Club. That's so cool," he commented, a sort of dopey smile on his face at the thought, wondering if he should start looking into camping. Maybe he and Wendy would have something to talk about one-on-one; she seemed like a very nice individual, and he figured of everyone he'd met so far at West Coast Tech (that wasn't family), she was the most likable.

As Dipper unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the handle, Bill's growl stopped him. “It’s not cool, not when she’s supposed to be my– look. Nothing she’s doing right now is fucking cool. Don’t be tricked.”

"Okay, whatever you say, man." Dipper didn't think he would ever understand their relationship dynamic but knew better than to ask after it'd previously ruffled Bill. "I might see you later. I don't know if you were planning on driving us back, but the plan was to meet Ford in the grad student office after my classes are done for the day."

“I’ll be there.”

And he was, exactly like he'd said he would be.

When Dipper had walked in that afternoon, Bill was stationed at his desk in the corner nearest to the door while Ford had one positioned on the other side of the small room, fit for approximately two or three other students but the desks were empty. 'Budget cuts' was Ford's explanation when he'd asked previously, along with other reasons like a lack of qualified applicants.

Even without other students, for an already-cramped room it was surprisingly packed with physics posters, signs, paperwork, jokes, a bulletin board, and personal items of Bill and Ford's. It was an extension of their residencies, but considering they were pursuing PhDs, he guessed they had no reason not to make themselves at home in here.

While Bill and Ford ended the day with project research, Dipper stole an unoccupied desk and delved into homework since quick questions were answered with ease, and the books on the subject were piled everywhere - in the bookshelf, on each of their desks, in random corners of the room. It was one of his better days for homework, finishing it within the hour Ford insisted they stay because he wanted to be present in case a student required their help. Of course, that hadn't happened, but it allowed Dipper to complete his assignments and start on grading for Bill before Bill had seemingly reached the end of his patience.

About to write a student's score on the top of their assignment, Bill's voice broke his concentration, “How far along are you, darling?” The casual use of 'darling' made his head spin. It wasn't intimate, but he couldn't comprehend the new pet names and hesitated on the possibility that Bill was overstepping a boundary. "It's been a while since you started on those."

Grip tightening on the pen, Dipper focused his attention on that as he tried to determine how to handle Bill and although he wanted to chew on the writing tool, he resisted since it wasn't his pen.
It was Ford's, loaned to him. "Uh," he sighed to release the frustration and flipped through what remained of the stack, "about half done, dear." His term of endearment was a bit vicious in comparison to Bill's with its sickly-sweet tone, but he wondered if he'd comment on it. "I'll do the rest tonight and bring them to you in the morning?"

Before Bill could respond, Ford cleared his throat with obvious intention, overly-loudly, and Dipper glanced over to see his stony stare flicking between him and Bill.

“What’re you looking at, Fordsy? See something you like? Sorry bud, I’m taken.”

Ford snapped harshly, "By Dipper?"

Before he could protest and clarify that he'd been joking, Bill derailed his attempt. “You jealous?” Although Dipper didn't approve of Bill simply rolling with the jab, at least Ford's frown was legendary.

As Ford muttered about how "relationships have no place in a professional environment", Dipper talked him to feebly deflect Ford's new idea of where their relationship stood, "Wait— um, no, we're... we're definitely not together."

"Oh, you're breaking up with me? Such a shame." With a grin plastered on his face, Bill wasn't genuinely disappointed, meanwhile his initial reaction was to huff out a laugh and wonder if Wendy would appreciate this, if it was within the parameters of their flirting agreement. Mentally, Dipper noted to dance around the subject if he had a chance to speak with her in the future.

"I guess you weren't doing it for me," he said plainly with a blasé shrug, casting Bill a sideways glance. "I'll have to find someone else to steal my affection, maybe someone more chivalrous this time."

"I don't like it." The response from Ford had Dipper biting his smile and Bill cracking in laughter, bent over as his hand rested on the desk to keep him steady. "If you two are finished with your... ah, shenanigans," this was said with a pointed look, tipping down his glasses at them, "then I believe we can depart for the day. Cipher, are you driving us to the apartment, or will we be walking?"

“We're driving,” he wheezed. “Stars, Fordsy, are you this desperate to leave because you don’t like ‘it’?”

Ford appeared skeptical, but Dipper reassured him with a dismissive wave and said, "We were just..." joking, playing, ...flirting? No. "Messing around. It didn't mean anything." That elicited a dubious snort before Ford started packing his essentials, and Dipper did the same, returning the stack of homework to Bill, stashing what remained in his backpack.

"Like I said, I'll have the rest done by tomorrow, and if you're taking us to class again— actually, I don't know if you'll have to. Mabel might be able to do it since today was sort of a one-off thing." Either way, it would be in Bill's possession tomorrow, and that was what counted; for once, the extracurricular work felt feasible since he'd managed to complete his normal physics coursework prior to leaving campus.

Bill chuckled, straightening himself up as he looked at Dipper. “I'll take you tomorrow. I’ll be around, so it’s not a bother.”

"Maybe I was wrong about the chivalry thing." Dipper raised an eyebrow but was grateful for the offer. Mabel would be happy to hear it, as that translated to another day of sleeping in, and Ford
wouldn't have to wake up early enough to create ample time to walk and avoid passersby on the sidewalk, or whatever that tangent had been about.

The ride back was peaceful. Ford was in the passenger seat, taking it out of habit, and Bill hadn’t fought him this time, which left Dipper to the backseat.

"The ride's appreciated, Cipher. Will we be seeing you around, let's say, seven tomorrow?" Ford asked Bill but it sounded more like he was talking to himself, working through it like it was an equation, because he didn't give Bill time to reply.

Shifting his gaze to Bill as he fumbled blindly to release his seatbelt, Dipper said, "Yeah, thanks, man. It was nice to be able to avoid walking." Despite uncertainty over his not-quite-friendship with Bill, it was a kind gesture regardless of the person doing it, considering his situation and medical complications that made walking a trying endeavor. It didn't save him from a stressful day of classes, but it was better than a day of stressful classes plus having to walk to them.

Bill hummed in response, glancing at Dipper before he turned to the now-empty passenger seat. “I was planning on hanging around—” but it was too late, the door was slammed in his face. “Guess you’ll have to let me in, sugar.”

"Let you in?" he asked idly and gathered his backpack to leave. "Are… are you coming inside? Stan might like the company, to be honest. You two are pretty good friends, aren't you?" Ford, not so much. It wasn't that they weren't friends, they were on good terms and were academic partners in their projects, but Ford probably had his fill of Bill for one day.

“I am coming inside. Stan’ll love my companionship, he can’t get enough of me.” Bill winked. “Are you ready, Mason Jar? Grab my bag before you leave the back.”

Curiosity piqued, he eyed it suspiciously but was already moving to pick it up in his free hand. "What's in the bag? Also… I can't get the door." An easy solution was to set either the bag or backpack down, then exit, and collect the remaining item, but maybe he could squeeze a favor out of Bill to skirt the inconvenience entirely.

To his appreciation, Bill opened the door for him, and he murmured a quick 'thanks'. “I wouldn’t worry about the bag, just some personal items of mine.”

While they spanned the lot, he inquired, "You brought personal items…? To hang out at Stan and Ford's place for a bit?" He handed the bag to Bill with an inquisitive stare but supposed he wouldn't pry further, Stan and Ford would likely do the honors once they reached the apartment.

“IT’s in a travel bag,” Bill argued, yet Dipper wasn't sure what point he was trying to make. “It’s not unusual.”

"Do you usually bring travel bags to— you didn't last time…?" his eyebrows furrowed in thought, then he peered at Bill, semi-amused, semi-wary. "Are you staying over?" he asked but couldn't keep the incredulosity from his voice, and a laugh followed after. "Oh, man. And they have no idea." He hadn't either and wasn't quite certain what to think of this development, but it wasn't his call.

“I don’t plan on telling them, doll, and you shouldn’t either.” They stepped into the building, and Bill pulled his bag close to him, seemingly choosing to ignore his quizzical expression. “They’ll adore my presence, anyway. They won’t kick me out.”

"Yeah, no. I'm sure Stan will enjoy having you around, but Ford and Mabel are also there,
"y'know?" Last he'd seen, Bill wasn't pleased with where their relationship was, and Mabel had no intention of giving him a chance, which was a position he could respect from her limited experience with him. A little teasingly, he said, "And if it comes down to a vote..."

"I’d vote to stay," Bill determined and trekked up the stairwell while Dipper stayed behind a couple paces. "Also, it’s Stan, Mason Jar. His apartment isn’t a democracy, there’s no voting allowed."

"Yeah," he agreed, "so I guess it's time for a revolution, in which we overthrow Stan and his oppressive regime." Bill’s laughter grew.

“I guess that’d be the end of Fordsy’s college career.”

Smiling, Dipper mumbled playfully, "Good luck finding someone else to be a grad student with you." It was times like these where Bill seemed… tolerable, like he could be a good guy, maybe a friend, and then there were other times that he couldn't believe he was interacting with another adult human being who floundered through life acting like that.

Chuckling, Bill nudged him as they paused outside the apartment door. “I don’t need another one, I’ll be fine with you as my assistant.”

"Your assistant?" He folded his arms at the idea and rolled his eyes, but there was more amiableness in the gesture than he would've liked considering this was Bill. "I'm grading your papers to repay you, not because I want to work with you beyond the scope of our agreement. Look, you're charming, but not that charming." Plus, Dipper liked to believe he had a sort of immunity to Bill's charisma. Unlike the other poor saps in his life, he was clear-headed and saw past the transparency of his allure.

Under his breath, he could hear Bill mutter: “I’ll show you charming when you’re bent over my desk.”

With a startled squeak, Dipper blushed at the suggestion and shot him a mortified glare, unsure how to even take that, too riled to think about the sheer audacity given the state of their relationship or what Wendy would think of him implying that, then to say it aloud—

“What? You’d be grading paperwork, relax. Nothing sinister about that.” To his displeasure, the blush only darkened as he inwardly cursed himself and Bill too because he knew what he was doing, the smug grin on his face said it all. Instead of responding, Dipper shouldered past him to open the door and walk into the apartment, but he closed it behind him before Bill had a chance to enter.

His efforts to actually keep the door closed were minimal, and he felt Bill opening the door from the other side. “Don’t be like that, doll.” Bill pushed the door the rest of the way open, looking at him with his stupid, sickening smirk. “I’m not the one being dirty.”

"You really were." Bill's intentions were anything but subtle.

"Cipher?" Ford asked from the kitchen and ducked out from behind the wall to see both of them in the entryway. "What are you doing here?"

"I have no idea what he's doing," Dipper replied for him and shuffled his shoes off, examining the apartment. The television was on, soap opera playing, two cans of soda were opened on the coffee table, but... no Stan or Mabel. "Where's Mabel?" That was who he was looking forward to seeing today. Well, everyday.
“Dipper!” Mabel emerged with a box of crackers in hand, and he waved a greeting as he walked over to her. From the kitchen, Stan trailed after with a plate of meat and cheese, of which he was partially devouring. “I’m glad you’re back. I missed—” her expression drooped, eyes sliding past him. “He’s here?”

Repeating the answer he gave to Ford, Dipper saw Bill collecting the shoes and stacking them together neatly in the corner. "Still have no idea why, but yeah." However, it wasn't their problem to deal with, instead it was an issue for the tenants of this apartment if he was an unwanted guest in their space. Plopping on the couch between her and Stan, he asked, "So what have you two been doing?" As if he didn't already know from the environmental clues.

"Absolutely nothing," Ford called from the kitchen. "When I walked in a few minutes ago, they were in front of the television."

“We’ve been watching TV,” Mabel explained as she went to town on her crackers. “This is a really good episode, Dippy. You should join us, it’s the one where Mrs. Housewife gets in a fight with her husband because he thinks she’s cheating on him.”

"I can't believe this show has a couple named Mr. and Mrs. Housewife," he said mostly to himself but reclined into the sofa cushions. "I can stay for a bit, sure. I did all of my homework before we left, so my night is pretty open aside from grading."

Bill had saddled up on the couch on the other side of Stan, leaning over to throw his arm around the back. Stan shot him a confused look, his mouth full of a grotesque combination of meat and cheese. Falling into dry commentary, Dipper said, "So, uh. Yeah. There are now officially four people on the sofa, I guess." It was uncomfortable, Bill's arm extending behind both him and Stan. "I thought you were telling me earlier about how you didn't want to get with Stan?" It was a light joke, and he tilted his head back to regard Bill but realized he could see into his sleeve.

Suddenly, he was alert. His eyes scanned, narrowed, did everything they could to try to take in a potential soulmark. It almost seemed as though something was there, but he couldn't tell from its abnormal shape and the shadows cast by the clothing article. Bill seemed to notice him looking, and his arm shifted, the cloth tightening to conceal the mark. “I don’t want to get with Stan, doll.”

He pointed out, "You have your arm behind his shoulders."

“Yeah, and you have your eyes on my arm.”

Scrambling for an excuse that perhaps would benefit him, Dipper threaded his fingers together, claiming, "I was confused because it, uh, looks like there's something on it. That was all." It sounded more jittery, more embarrassed, than what he could've liked. "Do.. you have tattoos or something? Or is that, um.. I don't know, a soulmark?" If it was, he was nervous considering the placement on his right arm. Covering his tracks, he went for a breezy tone, "I can't remember, did you say you had one of those?"

To get his attention, Mabel gently prodded his side and shook her head, grimacing. She was probably right, he knew he shouldn't ask about it because if Bill did say it was a soulmark and then he said what it was… His heart dropped, and he was reminded of why he didn't want to know, in case it matched his.

“It’s nothing,” Bill’s voice had become defensive. “Your eyes are probably playing tricks on you, there’s nothing on my arm.”

Grateful for the out, Dipper nodded, and he returned his focus to the soap opera. "Okay, I bet it was
a shadow or something." The guarded nature of his answer told another story, but he didn't know if it was because he had a soulmark and disliked it, or if he was a blank and disliked that. Either way, it was a touchy subject that he didn't need to delve into, that much was obvious. If Bill was going to live with them, there'd be other opportunities.

Stan grumbled between them, shuffling below Bill’s arm. “This is gettin’ kinda weird,” he huffed, and Dipper wanted to ask if it seriously just now became weird. “Bill, why’re ya on my couch? There ain’t room for ya here, let alone half over me.”

"Before you suggest this is my doing," Ford said as he stepped into the room and took a seat on the recliner after giving the crew on the sofa a hard stare, "I didn't invite him inside. Dipper and I were given a ride to the apartment, and… it appears the parasitic tendencies of this one convinced him to follow us inside."

Bill flashed them a grin. “I wanted to hang out for a bit. This isn’t the first time you’ve had someone half on you anyway, Stan.”

“Oh, that reminds me— how did it go with Susan today, Stan? I know you two were chatting in the kitchen when she stopped by earlier to give you those flowers.” Eager for information, she was partway onto him to have this exchange with Stan. “You should totally go on a date with her. She’s super into you.”

"Susan," Dipper said, racking his brain, trying the name out for himself but at a loss. "Is that… Is she the one who Stan was hitting on at the diner? She gave him a real number?"

Stan grinned wolfishly. “Not everyone gives out fake numbers like you would, if ya had a chance.”

The conversation eventually dwindled as they watched television, had snacks for dinner, and enjoyed a relaxing evening in spite of Bill being there. Many discussions of various topics passed, including a Stan-sponsored overview of the sports season, a breakdown of the soap opera, Dipper polling them on what he should write his film class screenplay about, then Bill and Ford getting into an argument about physics - which was followed by Bill and Stan arguing about physiques, as Stan had misheard the prior topic. To his surprise, Bill and Mabel had even had a fruitful discussion about the art of theater, which left them on slightly better terms and Bill's promise to share some acting techniques with her.

Stan had turned in earlier than usual, citing he was 'old' and 'needed his rest' when his sore back had popped after standing up. Affectionately teasing comments had been thrown at him for that: "yeah, twenty-five is a pretty dangerous age for back problems" and "ah, of course, lumbago is extremely fatal" and "aw Stan, you're perfect the way you are! You don't need a backbone when you have me around!"

And speaking of, Mabel had also gone to sleep about a half hour ago — if crashing on the sofa after an hour of eyelid-drooping and gradually leaning into him could be considered going to sleep.

It left Ford, Bill, and himself as the only ones still awake, but he didn't expect Ford would last much longer with his unsettled pacing, sneaking glances at Bill who was comfortably situated in the armchair. Unlike when any of the Pines sat in it, Bill didn't look like he was drowning in the thing. Meanwhile, Dipper was at Ford's desk, the sole desk in the apartment, as he worked through the last of the assignments, some left over from when he'd been forced to leave Bill's place after the glass-shattering incident.

In the background, he heard a bit of their talk. "You're still here," Ford said and cleared his throat, a variation of the same sentiment he'd been tossing Bill's way for quite some time. The hint was
obvious, and Dipper knew Bill was merely playing dumb, pretending he didn't know Ford was suggesting he take off for the evening.

“Yes.” Bill glanced over at him. “I am here. Are you here?”

“Well, yes,” he responded, “I suppose I'm as here as you are. However, as this is my place of residence, I am not socially expected to depart for the evening.” This part was accompanied by an over-the-top cough, and Dipper could picture the pointed look he was giving Bill while he undoubtedly adjusted his glasses.

“The night’s still young,” Bill shrugged. “Stop getting your panties in a twist, Fordsy.”

"It's past midnight. The night may be 'young' for a twenty-two-year-old fledgling like you, Cipher,” Dipper stifled his snort and tried to stay focused on grading, "but I have to sleep if I'll be waking up at a respectable hour, and I suggest you do the same if you will be our ride to campus."

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway, Fordsy. If you want to go to bed, go for it. No one’s stopping you.”

"Right… I'm aware, fully aware of that.” There was a longer pause, and Dipper heard the thump of Ford's feet on the carpet, meaning another round of pacing had restarted. "In that case, I believe I'll… simply get some rest. Goodnight, Cipher, Dipper." He acknowledged both of them, and Dipper gave a wave to Ford before he disappeared into the bedroom.

Once it seemed all was still in the apartment, he shifted his attention to Bill. "Congrats, Hobo Joe. Looks like you get to stay."

"Where's the 'that was easy' button?"

"You could start by picking up a pen and helping me finish the last of these. Actually, hey, can you come over here? I have a question for you." There were two assignments set aside on the desk, the papers placed away from the rest since he wanted to address the issue of the student they belonged to.

Bill approached, and Dipper could see his frown from the corner of his eye. “If it’s about having me grade shit, that’s your job we agreed on.”

"I mean, we also agreed to a strictly-professional relationship..." Dipper said with a quirked eyebrow, "and now we're having sleepovers."

“Yeah, but my sleepover didn’t damage a vehicle, kid.”

Smiling slightly, he leaned back in the chair to survey Bill in all his grumpiness, feeling rather cheeky about the ordeal. "Come on, you said it yourself, the night is still young." Despite his playful remarks, the reason he'd called Bill over wasn't related to the 'sleepover' or damaging vehicles, it was a concerned inquiry about this... Pacifica, and her performance in the class. Her two assignments, comprising both of the confiscated papers, were borderline failing and that was being generous by only taking partial points off for incorrect procedures instead of incorrect answers.

“What did you want, Mason Bottle? It’d better be important if you’re going to harass me.”

"Oh. I— sorry, I was kidding." He'd thought that went without explicitly saying, but he guessed he couldn't expect to deliver humor when he could barely carry on a standard conversation, and to add to the complexity it was Bill that he was talking to. Yeah, he shouldn't have bothered, and now he
felt embarrassed for trying. Defeatedly, he slid Pacifica's homework toward Bill. "I graded these, maybe you could look over them and tell me what you think."

“What?” Bill narrowed his eyes, scanning over the papers. “Why are you showing me Pacifica’s assignments?”

"Because…” he trailed off, not expecting to have to articulate this to him, "because— don't you see the grades? She basically failed both of these. Does she go to class? I don't know if she's… not trying, she doesn't care, or if she is trying but is getting everything wrong.” Considering there was an actual completed assignment, he was assuming the latter most closely aligned with reality, but it didn't explain how she was doing so poorly at a general education-required physics course.

Bill gave him a long, hard look. “Why do you care?”

"They're our students— your students," he corrected himself helplessly. "They're your students, and I thought you would care that Pacifica is basically on the verge of failing, so I wanted to know what was going on with that."

“I don’t know.” Annoyance seeped into his voice. “Her success in this class isn’t my responsibility.”

"I know it's not, but if she's doing everything she can like… look, she's doing the assignments, is she coming to class?” Dipper couldn't remember if Bill had answered that, but he didn't have to since he figured the response was affirmative. "There's no reason she shouldn't be getting this, especially if she's bothering to put in the work."

“Again, why do you care? This isn’t high school, Mason Jar.”

The question brought about a moment of consideration, because he couldn't place logic to his feelings on the subject, but he had a cold suspicion it was due to his own struggles with physics. If he could help someone else, it would be better than sitting around idly waiting for her to either fail or drop the course. "I… I don't know. I don't want her to have to repeat the course if she's genuinely trying, so maybe… maybe we could help her. Or you could," he quickly amended, realizing he was nothing more than a shadow grader for Bill.

Bill let out a small noise, almost of disgust, and he flinched at the sound that he interpreted as scorn. “If you want to waste your time, go for it. But, Mason Jar?”

"Bill."

“It’s pointless. The Northwests are rich as shit, and this is a general education class. They’ll use their status as top donors for the university to bring her grade to passing.”

The bottom line didn't register, and Dipper blinked dumbly at Bill. "Wait, what?"

“She can use daddy's money to pass her class.”

"Like, cheat? I don't— is that allowed? Can they do that?” he asked, perplexed by this revelation since he hailed from a family with a strict no-financials-for-personal-gain policy, and he didn't know why anyone would want to do that. It wasn't an accomplishment, it was purchasing a ticket to a degree that would be meaningless when she didn't do any of the work, and the lack of expertise wouldn't serve her in the real world. Unless her father could bail her out of that as well. Hm. "Are you being serious, as in… her family can buy her a grade at the end of the semester?"

"Admin likes donors, and whatever admin says, goes.” Bill smirked at him, and given the
circumstances, it felt feral. “Is it that hard to believe people can buy their way out of a failing grade?”

"I guess, kind of. I didn't know they could." It was a little depressing that it was an option, and his hand traced idly over the assignments as he contemplated what to do with them from here. Wait, he supposed, since Bill didn't seem to be inclined to do anything about Pacifica's struggle, but perhaps he would warm to the idea.

“I’m going to be honest: I don’t give a damn what you do with her, just know it’s a waste of your time. You could be doing better things with your life. If you're adamant, maybe you should come sit in for a class session, get an idea of things.”

"I'll think about it." He would have to consider the offer, mull over his approach, and finally ask Bill when a good time to sit in would be.

Bill had turned away from him, heading back over to his armchair. “Is that all, kid? I’m going to go rest, if you need me I’ll be here.”

"You're going to sleep? What happened to being a 'twenty-two-year-old fledgling'?” It was Ford's descriptor, but he'd liked it regardless. And besides, the night was still young, or whatever Bill had said before.

“I never said anything about sleeping. I’m going to sit down and close my eyes for a few minutes.”

Closing his eyes for a few minutes probably wouldn't take long to become sleep, which wasn't a bad thing necessarily, as he had work to do and Bill's presence was a distraction. So it'd be a bonus if he did drift off, and perhaps to antagonize him a bit, he teased, "Okay, sleep well."

“I’m not sleeping.”

"Goodnight," Dipper replied, more definitively.

“Fuck you.”

Somewhat surprised by the harshness but not offended, he said, "And you say I'm the rude one.”

“Must be you rubbing off on me.” Wincing at that, Dipper didn't know what to say but muttered a quiet apology nonetheless because he wasn't going to argue with Bill over a subjective matter, and he wasn't blind to what was evident. Sometimes, he was in pain, and that pain could manifest into irritation if the circumstances aligned. Mostly, that was when Bill was provoking him. “Why are you apologizing?” He sounded confused, his eyebrows furrowing. “You have no reason to.”

Dipper coughed and silently evaluated the situation, unsure of why he wouldn't apologize over the implication. "Not really an expert on social situations, but I'm pretty sure you just called me out for being rude, so uh. Yeah." As far as he knew, that wasn't an admirable trait, not that he was trying to impress Bill of all people even if he had to remain civil.

“And you called me rude. I thought it was fair.”

"Don't worry about it," he said with a sigh. "It sounds like I'm a bad influence on you."

“I wanted to sit down for a moment. Are you the ‘lack of sleep’ police, telling me that there’s no possible way for me to chill without falling asleep?”

"Then chill without falling asleep? I don't care what you do, man." He was merely looking forward
to when Stan or Ford woke up the next morning and found Bill was snoozing on their recliner with his personal items packed into a bag beside him.

Bill huffed, plopping onto the armchair. “I’m not sleeping.”

"Okay. Don't sleep well, then."

“Fine.”

For an interaction that was overall rough around the edges, their exchange had astonishingly little hostility attached.
Ford had been the first to discover Bill hadn't left the previous evening. He wasn't overjoyed, but it'd soothed his annoyance when Bill had coffee ready for him and upheld his promise to be their transportation to and from campus for however long he stayed there. Until Stan got back onto his feet, he claimed, he would be an extra hand around the apartment in a residence that already housed two-too-many people.

Bill's presence certainly livened the atmosphere, but it'd started relatively normal: he'd take them to campus so Bill and Ford could sit in the grad office together during the day with the only interruptions being classes and meetings, meanwhile Dipper attended his courses, then sat in the office with them until it was time to go. After, Bill would drive them to the apartment and never failed to follow inside. Bill and Ford used the late afternoons, directly after coming home, to work on their projects and nearly had an entire whiteboard flooded with equations and theories and physics beyond his comprehension.

Then there were the late nights of Bill and Stan watching television, discovering wrestling as the combined love of: fighting, in Stan's case, and dramatics and acting for Bill. Mabel stayed up with them sometimes, enjoying the acting side of the wrestling tournaments while Bill described what the technical aspects of their performance were, and what he'd learned about them.

To Dipper's astonishment, the two were actually warming up to one another, getting closer than he thought they would considering Mabel's aversion to Bill. She hadn't completely embraced the Bill-life, as Bill called it, but she was seemingly open to the idea.

It'd escalated to Bill seeking out Mabel to practice lines with her and show her what the Drama Club was working on, and how she could get involved. At one point, Dipper walked in on them making uncomfortably exaggerated faces into the mirror to practice their expressions. Simultaneously amusing and disturbing, but that could be said for the entire progression of their almost-friendship.

Mabel's forming bond with Bill must have stirred her curiosity, though, as she'd confessed she also had been trying to catch a glimpse of his soulmark. It'd be useful for plausible deniability, she'd said, if she knew and could pass the results to Dipper.

It was loosely ironic how living with Bill somehow presented less chances to see it. Dipper didn't know if it was his own unconscious mind blotting out the urge whenever a possibility arose, or if it was Bill's tendency to over-dress for every single occasion, even sleeping, citing that he was a visitor and would be a 'gentleman' about it. Whatever was there, whether it was his own handwriting and first words to Bill or someone else's, remained elusive.

The only time things were ever peaceful in the apartment and not descending into total chaos were the nights that Bill was working at the comedy club and bar, Stan resting to ensure his back healed properly, and Mabel at the diner despite everybody's disagreement toward taking more hours to account for Stan's inability to work.

Now, Dipper was curled up on the sofa and jotting down ideas, brainstorming what to write about for his film screenplay project, while idly watching television with Stan as Ford worked at his desk appearing to alternate between writing on the whiteboard and diving nose-first into a textbook.
With Mabel at work and Bill gone, it was one of the quieter moments, a serene time to think before the chaos restarted later.

And it would. Bill's things were still here and seemed to be around to stay, not a shocking revelation, but he'd been absent throughout the evening. The tranquility, although nice, was uninspiring, produced lackluster screenplay ideas. A student struggling with classes? Hit too close to home. A comedy about two brothers vastly different yet painfully similar? Slightly more removed, but dull and incomplete. Zoning as he stared at the whiteboard, he internally speculated a sci-fi adventure in which a Bill and a Ford character conquered the multiverse through the power of physics knowledge.

There was rustling of plastic outside the door, and it swung open as Bill stepped into the apartment, brandishing grocery bags. He may as well have been a coat rack for them. "Don't mind me,” he hummed as he headed toward the kitchen, though it seemed like Stan and Ford couldn't be further from 'minding' him, absorbed in their own tasks. "Just picked up some things for myself.” He returned into the room after a moment, going out and coming in with several more bags. This repeated at least five times, with Dipper increasingly shooting glances around the room to check if anyone else was seeing this while Bill went back and forth between outside the apartment then back into the kitchen.

Once all the bags had been brought inside, Dipper set down his notepad to investigate and wandered into the kitchen, hanging near the entryway as he surveyed the bags lining the counter tops, Bill putting their contents away in cupboards. "If this is how you usually eat,” he started, motioning to the display, "I don't know how you're a healthy weight."

An unremorseful grin crossed Bill’s face, glancing over at Dipper. “I may have gone a little overboard, but this should feed Stan for a day or two.” This felt out of character for Bill, the demonstration of kindness without any prompting other than living here with them, after negative experiences had colored his perception of Bill. Stan and Ford hadn't asked their temporary housemates for anything in exchange, and to decide on his own that he wanted to do something nice for them, it was endearing. It made him feel more human than the rich, snobby asshole that he'd met on day one, and this compassion gave Dipper hope that Bill was a better person than he liked to admit to.

"So this isn't for you," he concluded, advancing into the kitchen to start looking through a bag at what he'd brought: chips, candies, more chips, frozen fries and other meals. Definitely for Stan. The other bags had more variety with items every current resident of the apartment could enjoy, and when he pulled back to look at Bill, his lips were unconsciously curved into a smile. "What, are you hoping they won't notice that you restocked everything in their kitchen?"

“"I was hoping it’d be a nice surprise! And totally anonymous. Who did this?” He let out a laugh, gaze bright. “It wasn’t me.”

"I was going to point out that you announced it was you a few minutes ago, but I don't think Stan or Ford saw you come in. They're…” his eyes swept over the living room from the entryway, "pretty caught up in watching television and studying. But why do you want it to be anonymous? You basically live here, you've stayed with us for the past three days as Stan's been recovering." Jokingly, he said, "I'm surprised you don't pay rent."

Bill’s grin had only grown. “I have my reasons, sugar.”

Dipper's eyebrows furrowed at the term of endearment returning, a habit he'd assumed was for the sake of others' reactions. "Nobody's here. Why are you calling me that?"
“Why not?” Bill’s attention shifted away from him, returning to putting the items away. “Nothing says I can’t.”

"I don't know, just seems weird to flirt with me, if that's what it is. Don't start in on the whole… 'my girlfriend and I have an arrangement' lecture, but I thought you were doing that to get a rise out of the people we hang out with, and I can promise the five bags of corn chips that you bought don't care what you call me."

Saying that aloud brought discomfort as he reflected on the words, spoken as if they ran in the same social circles, like they were friends themselves. Clearing his throat to simultaneously clear the thought, he stayed silent and began to help Bill with the groceries.

Bill glanced at him, his eyebrow raising. “You're looking way too into this.” With some bitterness, Dipper supposed he was right since he’d been overthinking things his entire life, no use in stopping now.

Letting the conversation fade to put away the obscene amount of groceries, he simply responded, "Probably." In the quiet, he pondered a mysterious stranger, perceived as wild and crass, secretly extending aid and wanting no recognition for the act of kindness as another screenplay option.

Behind them, there was the thud of heavy footsteps as Stan entered the room. He grunted a greeting before he rummaged through bags, pulling out a bag of chips and a bottle of whiskey, which was enough to convince Dipper to shoot Bill a displeased stare because additional alcohol wasn't going to do Stan any favors.

When Stan was leaving again, Dipper was about to ask if he'd realized anything was amiss with the surplus of bags on the counter top, but Ford did the work for him when they nearly bumped into one another in the entry. "Stanley?" he asked. "Where did those come from?"

Dipper waved as Ford's attention drifted beyond Stan into the kitchen. "Cipher. Is this your doing?" Much like his father, he didn't sound impressed. "You've resorted to charitable handouts."

"No," Bill said, keeping a straight face as Stan looked up from the chip bag he’d opened. “I had nothing to do with this, Fordsy. Go back to your studying, this is a dream.

"Nonsense," he scoffed and huffed his way past Stan, "I can understand bringing your own groceries, but restocking ours is hardly necessary." From the air of arrogance in his tone, Dipper assumed he was feeling humiliated by their recent financial situation with Stan unable to work, and Bill's attempt at 'charity' had been poorly-received by Ford's ego.

Stan growled, having tossed the chips onto the nearest counter with an obnoxious crinkling, the whiskey getting the same treatment albeit gentler. “Yeah, it’s hardly necessary when we're gettin’ free food while the bread winner of this household is crippled.” Trying to avoid looking like a deer in the headlights at the sudden tension in the room, Dipper busied himself with putting away the last of the items, but he was stopped forcibly by a six-fingered hand and a stern shake of the head.

Ford narrowed his eyes. "Crippled. You believe you're 'crippled', Stanley?" Dipper was relieved Ford waved a dismissive hand because it released his grip on him, and he squirmed away from the brothers seemingly ready to duel it out. "While our financials may be temporarily compromised, we are not stooping to handouts. We have a decently-stocked household, and to accept this welfare, if you will, would be selfish and shameful."

“It’s free, it ain’t welfare and if ya don’t like it, ya can get your own damn job and bring in some more fuckin’ income.” Stan stepped toward Ford, bristling.
Rising to the challenge and stepping closer to Stan, he snapped, "I have a job, you ungrateful slob. I am a teacher, and I'm paid for my work."

"Yeah, eight bucks an hour is really helping out with our rent, ain’t it? It doesn’t cover our groceries for a week."

"It's fourteen dollars per hour," he corrected hotly, "and it certainly helps with rent and groceries. I thought you would be more sensible about this, considering I'm the one actually working and keeping us afloat at this point."

Awkwardly shifting his weight from foot to foot, Dipper muttered, "Hey, uh… I know this isn't my place, but it's not that big of a deal and I don't know if fighting about it is the solution—"

His rambly, shaky sentence was stopped by Ford's glare and Stan’s snap of ‘shut it!’ before Stan turned back to Ford. ‘Keeping us afloat? Are ya fuckin’ jokin’? If it weren’t for this shit, we’d be living off moldy pieces of bread ‘cause you’re too proud for help. The kids are pullin’ more weight than you.” Dipper wasn't sure if that was true, at least the claim he and Mabel were pulling their weight more than Ford was; Mabel perhaps was, but he felt depressingly useless under the circumstances.

"We would not, that's preposterous. I can guarantee that I've carefully calculated our living costs, and while, yes, we have had to cut back on some frivolous purchases, we are nowhere near living on pieces of moldy bread, which is why we don't need to essentially take advantage of our friends' and family's kindness."

“We’re not taking advantage of anythin’,” he snarled. “He already bought this, what do ya want him to do, return it? It’s not that fuckin’ easy. Besides, do ya want all of Mabel’s hard work to go to waste? She’s taken on more hours to help us—"  

"It's not a waste!" Ford talked over Stan, volume rising. "She has earned that income, and she is not obligated to spend it on us."

“It’s what she wants to do, and you’re bein’ a dick about it.” Startling Dipper from the daze that came with watching a trainwreck happen before his eyes, Bill was ushering him out of the room, and the voices were slightly muffled by the wall and distance between them, but he could still hear accusations being thrown around, name-calling, more complaints over the financials, Ford's exasperated yell not to resort to drinking again, and Stanley firing back that he could do what he wanted.

Revisiting the 'Two Brothers, alike but different' screenplay idea, he supposed it could be a drama instead.

“That was amusing,” Bill commented, moving across the living room to flop onto the couch, and Dipper trailed after him with a last weary look at the kitchen. “Mom and Dad are fighting again, doll. What’re we gonna do?” his voice was teasing.

"Uh, let's maybe start by dropping the pet names if we're siblings in this little… play or whatever it is."

“Pet names are the best way to keep it in the family.”

Cringing as he took a seat on the armrest of the sofa, Dipper mumbled satirically, "I feel like you need more of a southern accent if you're going to say stuff like that."

Bill paused. “More of a southern accent?”
"Well, it's kind of subtle, but... I know you're not from California because you actually do have an accent," he explained with a shrug. "I'm guessing you moved here for college, or something? Also a couple days ago, you put on Stan's sunglasses and his hat and said you were living the 'Cali dream', but... we don't say that here. Nobody does. Cali." He put emphasis on the word and scrunched his nose, shuddering at the verbal trap that non-locals tended to fall into. "Besides, you always take your wallet with you even if you're not going to use it." Bill picked it up every morning on his way out, amazing how the little things were more obvious now that they pseudo-lived together.

Severely, Bill narrowed his eyes at him. "You're saying 'Cali' wrong."

Dipper made a face, grimacing. "There is no way to say it right."

"There is! 'Cali,' not 'Cali.' You're putting too much of an emphasis on it."

Although he'd been about to reply protesting the emphasis wasn't the issue in an inherently flawed word, he was cut off by the shouting match escalating from the kitchen. A sigh cut off what would've otherwise been mildly argumentative words, and he instead asked, "So, where are you from? I know you're not a Cali native."

Bill didn't answer, looking toward the kitchen as the voices grew louder. More arguing about money, and then— crash. The sound of something falling, shattering on the tiled floor, and Dipper was on his feet like lightning, bridging the gap between him and the kitchen in record time only to see Stan holding his hand and cursing while Ford inspected the wound.

"Are you okay?" Dipper asked and tried to get a glimpse of the injury himself. "Here— I'll get bandages, hold on."

One trip to the bathroom and medicine cabinet later, he had returned with a handful of band-aids to press over the cut on Stan's hand. It wasn't large and luckily appeared to have no glass in it, that was contained on the floor, which Ford was working to collect. "Why does he get all the attention?" Bill complained as he entered the room. "When I broke a glass, you just left."

Somewhat caught off guard by the inquiry, Dipper stammered, "I- I don't think he did this intentionally, I'm pretty sure you did." The reason being, the plate hadn't been anywhere near where Ford was standing, and there were pieces of crackers on the floor as well.

"He didn't," Ford confirmed with a roll of his eyes, "he was attempting to show me our financials using crackers to demonstrate his weak point about who was contributing what to our funds, then he was picking up the plate to barbarically dump them all into his mouth."

"It's not barbarous, it’s called not bein’ wasteful."

"Barbaric, Stanley."

"Who gives a fuck!" Stan grumbled, his hand pulling away from Dipper. "I’m goin’ to work, at least they appreciate me there."

"Oh, you're going to work? Back suddenly isn't causing you as much pain now that your soap opera has stopped airing for the day?"

“Fuck off, ya textbook slug.” Stan stomped from the room while growling a string of curses to himself, and within moments, the door slammed. It appeared Ford hadn't been expecting that when several seconds of silence followed with him staring blankly at where Stan had departed from, eventually giving in to this adjustment with a stormy exhale and mutters about Stan's temper before
returning to his desk.

Bill nudged Dipper, and he held out a hand. “Oh no, look, my hand is cut. You should doctor it, doll.”

Looking between his perfect fine hand and the excess band-aids, Dipper wasn’t amused but nonetheless, he said, “Yeah, that looks serious. Here—” He snatched the hand to tightly apply bandages at the knuckle of his middle three fingers on both hands, then admired his work with a faint grin. “That should be good.” Bill tried to wiggle his fingers.

“You missed my palm, Pine Tree.” His voice was a whine, a grin across his face.

Playing along, he continued, ”Wow, I did, but I think you could handle it yourself.” A lame, unintentional pun was the cost, but he did want to see Bill attempt to do that. Digging into his pocket, he produced another band-aid, which he held out to Bill expectantly. He didn't take it.

“Have you seen my fingers? They’re a mangled mess, I can’t put the bandages on without your help.”

Since it seemed Bill unfortunately wasn’t going to entertain him with trying to put it on, he placed the band-aid on the counter instead and shook his head, a chuckle escaping. “I guess you’ll have to bleed out. Sorry, man. Welcome to America's health care system, and you owe Stan and Ford for the bandages.”

“What?” Bill’s expression fell. “I can pay you five dollars to do it.”

Teasingly, Dipper commented, ”I'd pay more to see you drop dead.” A month ago, he might have meant it, but now he couldn't say he was as sure. Bill wasn’t… the worst guy, though he liked to claim he was at times; Stan and Ford liked him well enough, both professionally and personally, and Mabel of all people was acting more warmly toward him with their talks of theater and acting.

“Guess I’ll have a nice, hefty fine added to your student account, then.”

"A fine? For what?"

"Murder, you heartless child.”

"Rest in peace, Bill's ego. You will be missed. By nobody but Bill himself."

“I hate you.”

Brushing off the vitriolic sentiment, he sheepishly grinned and scuffed his foot over the linoleum, then dragged his eyes everywhere except onto Bill to distract from an unfamiliar thickness in the air. Whatever it was precluding, Dipper didn’t think it was in their best interest to find out. After feigned fascination with various objects in the kitchen, his searching gaze landed on Ford, who was reading at his desk, unaware, so he switched to the clock that was approaching five-thirty. He could work with that.

Dipper spoke to break the expectant tension, ”I guess it's almost dinner time, so I… should probably make food. That might lure Stan home, if they didn't allow him to work. I mean, if he even went there.” Stan could be driving aimlessly, hitting up bars, engorging himself on diner food while replaying the fight to Mabel, any number of things.

Mildly disappointed by the swap in direction, Bill frowned at him, but he turned away to leave the room. “Have fun with that,” he called over his shoulder, and Dipper let out a breath he hadn't
realized he'd been holding.

Pacing around the grad student office, Dipper's thoughts raced while he kept stealing glances at the clock, then his watch, finally to his phone, and back to the clock. It was already four, already a minute past four, maybe approaching two minutes.

That wasn't good.

Ford had warned him that he'd be in an end-of-the-day meeting with advisors and the rest of the first-year physics committee, he'd said it might go a bit longer than intended, but he'd still promised he'd bring him to physical therapy this evening since Mabel wouldn't be able to. She was his go-to, but working the extra hours had put a wrench in their usual system, so it left the job to Ford.

But Ford wasn't here, and he didn't know what to do about that. Ford said he would stop by as soon as he was out of the meeting, but — oh, another two minutes had passed, Dipper realized with a sickening jolt in the pit of his stomach, and Ford was nowhere to be found. His fingers twitched in their clasped position behind his back, itching to cancel the appointment because it seemed he wouldn't have a lift to the hospital's center after all.

“Mason Jar,” Bill’s voice rang out as he stepped into the small room that felt too confined for his anxious habits. “What crawled up your ass and died? You look tense.”

Whirling around to bring the source of the noise into view, he was certain his eyes had to look wild and frantic because another minute had passed and he—

Ford still wasn't here.

"I'm not tense," he protested weakly, "but I'm, uh, it's… I have an appointment later, and Ford promised he would take me since Mabel can't, but it's like a twenty-five minute drive and I don't know where he is, so if he doesn't show up I think I'll have to call and cancel soon…" The way his semi-panicked thoughts aimlessly drifted made him realize he was more nervous about this than he'd originally believed, and he sighed in frustration.

“I can take you, easy peasy. Fordsy’s busy anyway, he’s stuck in that meeting and it won’t be ending soon.”

At the offer, he immediately shook his head and mumbled something about how he could cancel it, it wasn't a big deal. Maybe they could reschedule for next week or… or, he didn't know, but it was giving him a headache. "Are you sure he won't be done in the next few minutes?" he asked with a frown, already beginning to pull out his phone and search his contacts for the number.

“He won’t be. There’s a professor who speaks at the rate of a moving turtle. It’s frustrating, I’m surprised he hasn’t lost it yet.”

The aggravating twinge of helplessness pricked at him, but he tried to ignore it to focus on what had to be dealt with. "Okay, okay, so uh… I guess I need to cancel, then. Hold on.”

“Why?” Bill stepped toward him. “I can take you.”

Wrought with hesitance, he balanced on the balls of his heels, rocking back and forth as he weighed his options. There weren't many, unfortunately, it was between going to therapy via Bill as transportation or canceling the appointment, hoping they could squeeze a make up session into the near future. "...I don't know, I don't want to inconvenience you or anything. Like I said, it's kind of
a drive, and it's for therapy which takes an hour, so it'll be a lot of waiting around."

Bill grinned at him. “I really don’t mind, I can use my phone if I get bored waiting. Let me take you, it’ll be fun.” He was already crossing the room, collecting his blazer and bag, and Dipper tentatively grabbed his backpack to throw it over his shoulder.

"Okay," he relented, maybe against his better judgment - a thought that occurred to him once his consent had been given, but he didn't retract it. He was doing the furthest thing from that as he followed Bill out of the department offices, then the building, and into the blinding sunlight that glimmered on the pavement of the parking lot, all the while shooting a couple messages to Ford to explain the situation.

At the car, Bill unlocked it and placed his bag in the trunk before he got in. “Where’s the therapy place at, anyway? You never said.”

Comfortable in the passenger seat with his backpack at his feet, Dipper waited until Bill had joined him until he described, “Take the 710, and y’know where it intersects with the 5? Well, take that all the way down, and the hospital is on that end of LA. I don't think we'll have too much of an issue with traffic, but if we do, we can take the—"

“My Stars, just use GPS.”

Dipper's eyebrows raised, and he let out a small laugh. "If you weren't going to use my directions, why didn't you do that in the first place?" But it didn't matter, so he didn't wait for a reply before he leaned forward to start poking at the touch-screen GPS unit in the center console, trial and error guiding him as he slowly inputted the address.

“I was hoping you’d give me the address and look it up like a normal person, not ramble it at me.” Dipper blushed, lengthy rambles were generally his default method of relaying information, a product of overthinking that he couldn't shake. “Are you done?”

"Yeah, I got it." Leaning back to admire his work, he watched as it calculated and then showed the map, conveniently the same route he'd told Bill to take. "I don't see what was so hard about that. You could've just listened to me.” This wasn't said accusingly, but instead with a lingering trace of amusement.

“You weren’t speaking English! It was a slew of words strung together nonsensically.”

Biting back a laugh, Dipper said, "Now you know how I feel about your precious physics." Bill bristled, briefly looking like he was going to get defensive, and Dipper's grin melted into uncertain worry that he'd crossed a line. About to start backtracking, he didn't have time because Bill beat him to it. “My physics make perfect sense, your directions do not.”

Maybe if he was from the area, he'd have a better grasp on the freeways and common landmarks, but he shrugged it off. "Okay, man. If this comes up again, I'll skip the directions and put it in your GPS."

“Good.” Bill huffed, starting his car and backing it out of the spot. He turned, pulling from the lot and onto the street. “So, this therapy— why do you have to go, anyway?”

That... wasn't a question he was going to answer. Not seriously, at least, since he couldn't determine if he was close enough with Bill to divulge the memory that elicited an avalanche of distressed feelings. "It's complicated. For the last month or so, I'm pretty sure I've been having visual hallucinations of this jerk that follows me around and wears a suit? It's kind of weird. He
keeps demanding I do these favors for him after I supposedly vandalized his car."

Or, a horror-thriller screenplay about ghastly hallucinations - that could be added to his list of ideas over the past several days. The concept played on his love for those genres, but Dipper felt anything he wrote of that type would be inadequate, never holding a candle to decent.

The look he received was far from amused, and Dipper gnawed his lip to hold down a smile and kicked his feet, little thuds filling the interior of the car. “This jerk is taking you to your appointment, remember that.”

"Sorry," he said, switching from thumping his feet to tapping his fingers together, "I'll play nice from now on. Honestly, it's been okay, having you around the apartment while Stan's getting back on his feet." It was a watered down statement, but he hoped Bill understood he was trying to convey that he appreciated the small favors he'd been doing like bringing them groceries, helping with the chores, simply being a much more respectful and pleasant housemate than Dipper thought he'd be capable of.

“It’s been okay,” Bill echoed as he took another turn. “I thought I was doing a good job. I don’t know how I’ve been anything other than perfect.”

Dipper stole a glance at his fingers still covered in band-aids, but they were worn and mangled as if he’d attempted to get them off but then had given up because he could force the range of motion required for everyday living. "I could think of a few ways. But seriously, you've been fine. Stan likes having you there, and I'm guessing it's convenient for Ford too."

Bill's gaze slimmed. “And what about you, Mason Jar? What do you think?”

To use Bill's words, he playfully replied, "You're nothing but perfect." There were no complaints on his end since Bill seemed to be trying to contribute to the currently-overstuffed household, and he had been more tolerable than he remembered when they first met. Living with Bill had created a peek into a more compassionate, hidden side, and it humanized Bill in the strangest of ways to watch him interact with the others kindly, see him engage in mundane activities like waking up, eating, researching, chatting, playing Ford's board games.

Bill let out a hum, expression growing thoughtful as his attention returned to the road. “I am perfect.”

Dropping the subject, he focused on enjoying the ride, relaxing before he'd get moved into uncomfortable positions and have his limits tested by the therapy session. It was a necessary evil, but he wasn't looking forward to it, much less the awkward conversation he'd undoubtedly have to endure with the physical therapist.

It was almost concerning that the ride to and from the hospital's therapy center was going to be less of a nuisance than the therapy itself. Of course, he would've preferred Ford over Bill, but this was not half bad, relatively speaking. With some of the interactions they'd had in the past, this could've gone significantly worse, and it was kind of Bill to give a ride in the first place when it was imposing a hindrance on both of their evenings.

As he'd noticed from living with Bill over the last week or so, it was the tiny details continuing to add up that implied he was a better person than he liked to advertise. It was subtle pieces of his everyday life that came together and made him charismatic, not his false and exuberant exterior that seemed to captivate everybody else.

And he was absurdly funny, too. Dipper knew he pushed his luck when he teased Bill, but he'd
never appeared to be terribly upset by jabs fired at him and sometimes returned the banter. Even now, it was entertaining: Dipper had messed with the radio a bit to change it to a station of his preference, then Bill had swapped it back to the 80s music that'd been playing lowly before. Another two attempts at changing their background music yielded the same result before he'd given up.

Although he'd been in the midst of his thoughts, he was startled out of them by a sudden interruption from Bill: “Miami.”

"What?"

“I’m from Miami.”

"Like, the city?" Dipper sighed in frustration with himself. Obviously the city, there was no state called Miami. "You're… from Florida, then? That's cool, I kind of figured it'd be some populated area like that because you don't exactly act like you're from Backwoods Rural County."

Bill’s expression was stoic. “Actually, I’m from Missouri. Miami, Missouri. It’s a small town, just under two hundred people.”

Eek, he wondered how his own foot would taste because it was going straight into his mouth. If it was anything like the rest of him, it'd taste of utter mortification.

"Oh. I… uh, I didn't expect that. I automatically assumed the Florida Miami because that's usually the one people are referring to when they say 'Miami' and just— ugh, my bad. Sorry." It was a scrambling, painfully clear attempt at fixing his mistake, but Dipper merely wanted to bury his head in his hands and never reemerge in this lifetime. To his surprise, Bill had burst into laughter, his body shaking.

“I’m fucking with you, sugar. I’m from Florida.”

Writing from experience, a screenplay about an arrogant asshole that lived to torment him would be appropriate.

"Jesus Christ, Bill." Groaning loudly, Dipper threw his hands onto his lap and flopped against the back of the passenger seat in annoyance. "I've always heard that Miamians are the weirdest people ever, and I think you single-handedly proved that to be true in a record breaking ten seconds." Flushed and flustered, his voice cracked over the question, "Why would you do that?"

“Why wouldn’t I?” Bill’s voice was light, but it didn't improve Dipper's dampened mood. It wasn't as if he was upset with Bill, but it was rubbing a pinch of salt in the old wound of social awkwardness, a reminder of how poor he was at it. “I was having a good time, Mason Jar. I didn’t think you’d believe I was from some hick little town.”

Dipper didn't know what Bill had expected him to do in that situation, if he was supposed to claim he was 'too sophisticated' for that or something similar, as Bill seemed to think he was above rural life. Addressing his prior confusion instead of directly responding, he asked, "Why did you tell me that now, of all times?"

“Right, I almost forgot about that since it was a few days ago now.” It was intriguing that Bill had remembered and then blurted his answer, but it conveyed the message. "I'm from Piedmont but live in the Beverly Hills area, if you were wondering.”
"We have one of our houses there." Dipper's eyebrows raised; if the Ciphers could afford multiple homes and to place one in Beverly Hills, well... no wonder he had wanted that much money for his paint job. He was accustomed to a silver spoon and eating stacks of cash for breakfast.

"The hospital is up this street," he said and motioned to the GPS, "then take a right into the parking lot once you're past the Sunny Day Inn, the therapy center part of the hospital should be right there. I don't mind if you want to drop me off and come back later, or if you want to go in and wait that's okay too."

Bill followed his instructions (for once), taking the turn past the inn. "I'll go inside with you."

Therapy was about as eventful as ever, and that was to say not very. It was an overview of his progress, his therapist reminding him of the scope of their sessions, and then they'd gotten to work with trying to pinpoint the pain areas and documenting them. Then, it'd gone into the hellish exercises, easily his least favorite part of the ordeal since it'd leave him stiff and achy for the next two days.

Although it concluded with a reminder to do his own exercises independently and 'stay strong', the doubtful side of him was already dismissing the information because the supposed breakthroughs that his therapy revealed would ultimately prove useless. Dipper hated that he was trapped in an uncooperative body, but what he could do to change his circumstances was minimal.

Returning to the waiting room to collect Bill and depart from the hospital, Dipper was surprised to hear him long before he saw him — in the hallway, there was an influx of jovial voices with Bill's rising above them all. Within moments, the scene came into view, several people gathered around Bill who was seemingly talking to them all at once and having a grand time.

He'd befriended almost the entire waiting room in his absence, and Dipper didn't know what to think of that. Approaching with caution, he stood a few feet away from the ongoing discussion and could now see Bill had a card deck in hand, performing a card trick, then he cleared his throat to announce his presence. "Hey, sugar! Want to join us?"

"Oh, uh… No, I'm good." Dipper could see the flicker of disenchantment on not just Bill's face, but a couple of his new friends' as well, so he further explained, "I kind of want to get home, make sure Stan and Ford are doing okay, see Mabel in a bit..."

"Are you positive? This is fun, cutie. Take a minute to relax."

"I'm seriously positive. Please, can we go? I'm..."

Dipper was trying to articulate that he was exhausted, physically drained. Hurting from the various positions he'd been forced into, but he couldn't bring himself to say it with his pride, especially not in front of the audience Bill had accrued while he'd been away.

Bill's expression dropped, and he stopped the tricks he was doing with his cards to pocket the deck into his blazer. "Alright."

Once they were in Bill's golden vehicle and on the road to West Coast Tech, Dipper struggled to relax into the seat. Finding a comfortable spot to sit in was a dreadful endeavor when every pose was a drain on what little strength his muscles had left after the therapist's exercises. It was a special kind of torturous discomfort to be trapped in a car, wishing he could stretch out more and try various positions, but being unable to do so because they had a twenty minute drive remaining.

Distraction came in the form of text messages from his father checking in with him and giving
updates of what was happening at home, encouragements about his academics, then finally a heap of pictures of his and Mabel's cockatiels. His father assured their birds missed them, but Dipper didn't see it; they looked well taken care of and as happy as could be on their perches with each other, even in the video of them singing they seemed joyous.

“What the fuck is that ungodly noise?” Bill questioned, glancing over at his phone.

As if it occurred to him for the first time that Bill could also hear the video he was playing, he sheepishly grinned and paused it. "They're— it's… my birds. Mabel and I have these cockatiels, and my dad was sending pictures of them. And a video of their whistling. That's what you were hearing."

“That’s super fucking gay.” Bill returned his eyes to the road, tapping the steering wheel. “Birds are stupid. Everyone knows dogs are the best.”

Too enamored with his cockatiels to care, Dipper continued to scroll through the new pictures of the birds, saving them to his device in a folder specifically for his beloved feathered companions. "Their names are Kiwi, that's the male- he's my cockatiel, and Mabel's is Peaches. She's really sweet, not as talkative as Kiwi though."

Flatly, Bill deduced, "Fruit cockatiels." Nevertheless amused by a joke of his own creation, Dipper laughed through a confirming "yeah", yet Bill merely shook his head at him. “Did you get opposite sexes so they’d bang? That’s what I did with my dogs.”

That startled him from his cockatiel-induced happiness, and he frowned at Bill. "No, we don't want them to breed. Having two is enough."

“You could have so many more though.”

"Yeah, uh, about that. I don't think that'd be a good idea. See, after this school year, Mabel and I are going to try to get an apartment in Stan and Ford's building, and we won't be able to have more than two cockatiels since that's their policy."

“They have a policy for two cockatiels? Is two birds’ tweeting all the complex manager can handle?”

Dipper grinned at the question. "It's not that specific, just two pets under sixty-five pounds.”

While not quite sure, he thought he heard Bill murmur something that sounded like 'interesting' under his breath, but he didn't ask since Bill seemed to dismiss the subject, onto a new one. “Do you mind if we take a bit of a detour? It’ll only be an extra two minutes.”

An extra couple minutes didn't have the allure that it would've if asked before the therapy appointment because his legs were throbbing in dull pain, every second drawing his mind back to the discomfort and how badly he wished he could stretch out. Despite that, he remembered Bill had been nice enough to give him a ride to the appointment, and two minutes wasn't that long, so he agreed, "Yeah, okay. Where are you going?"

Bill flashed him a smirk. “To pick someone up. You’ll like her.”

Questionable, but he reserved judgment for the few minutes following the conversation, focused on maintaining his comfort to the best of his ability. Eyes closed, he heard Bill humming along to the music on the radio, still playing 80s hits, and Dipper couldn't help himself from teasing: “What the heck is that ungodly noise?”
The judgment returned when they were at the gates of a large mansion looming over the rest of the Beverly Hills properties. Once inside, his own status felt at risk in the presence of a never-ending lawn of fresh, green grass and a fountain placed in the center of the driveway circle, all under the towers of a house—no, a castle that sat intimidatingly on the property. With its excessive windows and balconies, its sheer size, Dipper didn't need to tour the interior to know ten people could live there and go weeks without sighting one another among the grand Neoclassical architecture.

"Dude."

"Welcome to paradise, doll." Bill put the car into park. "I'll be back in a moment." Still in awe of the property, Dipper watched him walk up the steps to the manor and disappear.

A couple minutes later, he was back with a pawprinted bag in one hand and a leash in the other and a dog, maybe a Golden Retriever—not that he was a dog expert—at his feet, trotting beside him happily. From the backseat, the car door opened and in came the dog, settling onto the cushions immediately while Bill returned to the driver's side. The dog looked cozy with its fluffy head resting on equally fluffy paws.

"Uh," he cleared his throat, eyes not moving from the rear view mirror, "you brought your dog?" Something wasn't adding up here, he had no idea what they were going to do that required a dog, or maybe this was the detour Bill had planned.

"Isn't she gorgeous?" He sounded proud. "Her name's Marigold."

"Like the flower?"

"She's my golden flower."

Although he didn't know what about that made it click aside from some part of his mind reviewing the conversation that'd preceded this turn, he realized it with a startled inhale, gaze flicking from the dog to Bill and back to the dog but finally remaining on Bill, his stare critical. "Wait, is this because I was talking about having pets in Stan and Ford's apartment building?"

"Look, they'll love her. She's such a little lady." Bill turned, reaching over the console to rub his dog on her back. "A sweetie." Sweetie or not, Dipper couldn't envision how this was about to go over once the brothers realized Bill had welcomed his dog into their home and expected her to be able to stay.

It could be kind of funny, though. Or insanely awkward because Stan loved dogs and Ford wouldn't approve. When it was a tossup between outcomes, Dipper guessed he'd find out in approximately fifteen minutes.

"Wow, if you treated me half as nicely as you do your dog, we might actually be friends." He'd tried, he'd really tried, to sound bitter about that, but it came out more like a feigned attempt at being bitter since he could hardly finish while stifling his laugh. It was endearing, the way Bill fawned over his dog, since he'd never seen anything like it - obviously, people loved their pets and gushed over them, but not Bill. To this point, he'd been a stony, rigid jerkwad with parents' money to throw at his problems and a rare display of vulnerability. This was something else entirely, and it was refreshing to see him interact with another living being like he didn't completely despise it and everything it stood for.

Bill glanced at him sharply. "Maybe if you were half as cute."

With a challengingly playful inflection, he asked, "Are you saying I'm not cute anymore? I'm
dashing, thanks."

"I'm saying you're not as cute as my little girl."

"So," he raised his eyebrows, "you're—you are saying I'm cute." Well, Bill might be the first assuming family didn't count, not that he was willing to attribute any element of seriousness to this banter that was started on faux offense.


"Aw, charming," Dipper said with a snort and was tempted to wink, but he wasn't particularly good at that. It would probably end with Bill asking if his eye was twitching or if he was having a brain aneurysm in his passenger seat, so he elected to go with a hyperbolic fluttering of his eyelashes at Bill for the compliment, if it could be called that. "I guess in that case, you're technically handsome."

"Please," Bill softly laughed as he pulled the car down the drive. "You're technically adorable, but don't tell Marigold I said that." His tone was teasing, and he winked at him, the latter enough to bring heat to his face. He hoped it wasn't visible, but he'd never been good at hiding it when he was blushing, not that he quite comprehended why, of all responses, that was what he physiologically decided to have. Because in the reality of the situation, it wasn't as if Bill was actually calling him cute or adorable, this was just…

Dipper's mind froze for a moment when it hit him like a wall of bricks, and he swallowed thickly to collect his thoughts. Was it…

The thought of their exchange being a flirtatious one had him on edge. In a matter of seconds, he was withdrawn from the conversation, cognitions miles away and swimming with anxiety, trying to review everything that'd brought them to this point, this casual discussion that'd somehow delved into… Dipper shuddered.

No, they couldn't do that— Bill had an arrangement with his girlfriend that allowed for flirting, but returning it was a new level of weird. With anyone who was in a relationship, it wasn't exclusive to Bill, but the fact that it was Bill made the problem so much worse because of the possible soulmate aspect. The single thing he refused to let himself get caught up in, and here he was flirting with him in his car, the two of them.

Exhaling slowly, he resigned himself to new rules of engagement: no flirting, minimal interaction. He could manage that. Maybe. A glance at Bill's grin had his resolve breaking already. "Oh, sugar, did I steal you away with my charisma? You seem speechless."

Scratching the back of his neck, Dipper averted his gaze and replied, "Oh, uh, I'm okay. Just tired after therapy." Tired and sore, that much was true. The dull ache was far more pronounced after an hour of having his legs in awkward positions that rekindled previously-faded pains in the name of progress, and he longed for the sight of the apartment complex because it would mean freedom to stretch out.

"We'll be at the apartment soon. Marigold was who I wanted to pick up on the detour, she's my darling puppy."

"Okay, beware of LA traffic on the way back if you're cutting through. It's going to be bad for the next couple hours." To distract himself and avoid further conversation, he held his phone, beginning to sift through the older pictures of his cockatiels and Meownaise, then of him and
Mabel together. An idea arising from the activity, he fired a quick string of text messages to her:

(6:03 PM) Bill is bringing his dog to live with us.

(6:03 PM) I have no idea how Stan and Ford are going to react.

(6:05 PM) Also, Ford didn't take me to my appointment since he was in a meeting, so Bill did.

That summed up the past two hours of his life, but he was stuck; Mabel wouldn't respond until she had a break or after her shift was over, and he tried to resume busying himself with photos to dodge interaction with Bill.

Dipper internally berated his behavior, mocking that he might as well get started on the screenplay about the stupid, naive college kid that was quickly getting in far over his head with this relationship, never intended to be more than professional to begin with, but they were approaching flirty banter — no, they'd flown past the boundary, no contest. It wasn't an overreaction to assume a friendship was sneaking its way into his life, and while logic told him it was unwanted, that was getting harder to listen to. No better time for self-loathing than now.

"Are you ever going to look up from that thing?"

"Did you need something? I figured you were set. You have your dog, your eighties music, your GPS..." he listed, wondering what Bill could want from him, and if it was his company — a surge of discomfort greeted Dipper at the notion, and it wasn't from his leg.

"I like talking to you." Bill went silent, his mouth a taut line as he focused on the road. Beverly Hills was fading behind them, being replaced by the landscape and the various houses they passed.

"Oh.. Look, that's nice of you," he said tentatively, already beating himself up for such a dumb remark, unsure of how to respond to that. "I guess it's just— I'm pretty exhausted. I don't know if you've had physical therapy, but it really sucks, so I don't know if I'll be that talkative." Besides, he wasn't the most social to begin with, but the pain and—he winced—flirting earlier hadn't inspired him to have a vibrant chat with Bill for the rest of the ride.

"Right." It was all Bill said, his voice a low mumble. "I'll get us there. Go nap, or whatever it is you do."

"Uh, okay," he said with a cough into his plaid sleeve. The air felt heavy with discomfort, though he didn't know if it was imagined or if Bill was aware of it too. "Thanks again for the ride."

But his previous thought had set off a chain of mental reactions. The sarcastic idea meant to ridicule himself wouldn't work; however, a mystery screenplay about an awkward teenager trying to prove his innocence over a misunderstanding-turned-'crime' to a seemingly unstable but ultimately lonely plaintiff might.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! :)
Dipper's recent discoveries had been passed off as innocent, at first. There'd be an extra couple dollars on the coffee table, a stack of change on Ford's desk, some bills on the counter top, coins popping up on the carpeted floor of Stan and Ford's apartment. Then, it had gotten suspicious. Larger bills, tens and twenties, appearing in equally random places whenever one was collected. He'd made a game of it, taking the money, seeing how long it would take for something of equal or bigger value to appear, and Dipper wasn't quite certain if he should inform Stan and Ford that their apartment was literally producing money. Or, the more likely culprit, sharing that Bill was leaving money to be funneled into rescuing their financials. Careful documentation of the appearances confirmed it was likely his doing, not that it could have been anybody else, and he was arranging a confrontation because he would at least have some explanation. And a pocket of Bill's money.

It was clever, playing their housing circumstances: excluding Bill himself, four people currently resided in their apartment, which theoretically meant it'd be unnoticed between that many sets of eyes. With someone picking up money here and there, Dipper's routine collections, and everybody believing the others had simply set extra cash down, it was the ideal environment to slip additional funds. Except that Dipper was around much more than most of the others.

Unlike Mabel, he wasn't working long shifts at the diner, and Ford and Bill were often busy with their graduate studies and students. Stan was taking increasing hours at the bar to substitute for his inability to do construction work. Often, that left Dipper in the apartment focusing on his own studies, but it provided ample time for finding the deposits of stray money as well.

Dipper's exception to loneliness was Marigold. After Bill had introduced her to the others, both Mabel and Stan had been too lovestruck to give Ford a chance to contest her presence, and she was now a regular at the apartment. "A dog?" he remembered Ford scoffing, but Stan and Mabel crowding her with cooing and pats drowned out the argument. Honestly, she really was as cute as Bill had claimed, and downright adorable didn't capture it when she'd cuddle on the sofa after a long day or gently boop her nose to his leg, or with a toy in her mouth, to request play time. It was less adorable when she scattered shoes around the room, leading to mad scavenger hunts in the morning, but she was too sweet to genuinely be mad at.

“Hey, kid. Are ya listening, or did we lose ya to the clouds?”

Blinking, Dipper's attention snapped to Stan. "Hm? What? Sorry, did you ask me something?" Although he had a fuzzy recollection of Stan and Mabel's discussion prior to his tuning out, nothing came to mind. He'd been staring off into space for who knew how long, not exactly lost to the clouds but to his own thoughts while he curled into Marigold, both tangled on the sofa together as Mabel sat on the other end.

A whine and nudge reminded him to restart the mindless stroking of Marigold's soft belly fur, and it jarred the memory of the first time he'd heard that: he'd been at Ford's desk, reading, and Marigold had plopped down beside him. One whine later, she had been eagerly scooting closer and resting her head on his leg while Bill supplied from the armchair, “She wants you to read to her.”
That was how he'd discovered Bill read to his dog on the regular, forming a habit that founded expectations of everyone else obliging her under enough pressure of the puppy-eyes — and they did.

“Goin’ on a date with the broad and ain’t got no cash.”

Too preoccupied with the possibility of allocating Bill's financial support to this, he didn't consider the implication as he suggested, "Maybe you could do something that doesn't cost money?" The question was better suited to his sister since she actually had gone on dates before, but it was touching that Stan pretended he could be of insight while Bill and Ford weren't around. It was early evening and they'd be returning shortly as it was, assuming they weren't immersed in anything important.

“She has expensive tastes, kid. Y’know me, if I could get through life without payin’ for shit I would.” Dipper raised an eyebrow at Stan pointing a finger at him but continued scratching Marigold, moving to her neck. It was hard to find her under the locks of golden fur, but she seemed to be enjoying it regardless.

In thought, Mabel leaned forward, tapping her chin. "You could split the tab and only pay for your meal? Then you can get water and maybe a salad.”

“I’m allergic to salads,” Stan grumbled.

"Yeah, Mabel," he said, grinning lazily, "I thought you'd know by now that if it's healthy, Stan isn't going near it.”

"How about making a romantic, candlelit dinner? I bet she'd dig it, everyone loves a significant other who cooks. Besides, you'd have options since we have plenty of ingredients here, and I can get these guys out of your hair during the date.”

"Stan, cooking? By the time we come back, the entire complex will have burned to the ground—"

His voice tapered off as the front door opened, Marigold's head and ears perked up at the sound, and in barged Ford and Bill heatedly talking among themselves about something to do with physics, about how their advisors were expecting a tangible draft next week and how they had so much research to complete before they could write anything.

“Hey assholes,” Stan roughly greeted them, and he received a curt 'hello, Stan' from Ford, while Bill's was significantly more colorful.

“Dickwad,” Bill acknowledged. “What’d we miss? You’re gathered about like a cult meeting.”

"Oh! We're not having a cult meeting, but I do think we'd make a fantastic cult," Mabel said with a smile and affectionately poked Dipper's side. "We could call it… the Order of the Pines, or the Groovy Pine Grove.”

"Before you came in, we were giving Stan ideas on how to avoid spending money on a date." Ford's expression visibly darkened at his explanation, a turbulent gaze resting on Stan while he crossed the room, the harshness lingering as he unpacked the several stacks of paperwork and books from his bag at his desk. "A date," he repeated. "We don't have money to be spending on that.”

“What, is he broke?” Bill inquired with a cursory sweep around the room, and Dipper's mind floated to the cash littered around the apartment, wondering if Bill was searching for it. “I
Laughing, he didn't realize Bill was serious until, well, a look at his stony face extinguished all cheer. "Wow, man... that's tough?" he said in an attempt to offer a condolence, uncertain. "Hey, if you ever want to treat me to one of your fancy, expensive meals, I'm down. Kind of sick of West Coast Tech's food anyway." As soon as the joke was out, he cringed at it and hoped his intention wouldn't be misconstrued given the context - unlike when Bill was taking Wendy to those places, he hadn't meant to imply it would be a date.

“Shit, if you’re treatin’ people to dinner dates, count me in. I’ll be your bitch for the night.” Dipper stared wide-eyed at Stan before he covered Marigold's fluffy ears to protect her from the specially offensive statement, but the unpleasant combination of lewdness didn't stop there. Stan winked at Bill, who shrank back against the door with a pruny wince, discomposed, and even Ford seemed unprepared for the brazen remark.

“I’ll take Pine Tree, no thanks.”

Mabel let out a laugh, breathy and stilted, eyes on Bill. “Whoa, this is awkward. But hey, I think you and Stan and Wendy would make a cute couple.” It was very Mabel to lighten the mood again after an uncomfortable air had washed over them, and he couldn't help but feel he had a part in creating that.

“Eh,” Stan shrugged. “I was jokin’, you all can unclench.”

Forcing a quiet cough, Dipper shuffled from his spot on the sofa and addressed nobody in particular when he said, "Yeah, uh, I'm taking Marigold out to play since she's going to start getting restless soon." His phrasing was a little clumsy, wording maybe wonky, but at least he had built an escape, and he was internally congratulating himself for his quick thinking.

Calling to Marigold, he started toward the door, collecting a tennis ball while she trotted alongside him happily and her tail thumped over an impending play time. “I'll go with you," Bill announced, abandoning his lean against the door to open it, and Dipper followed him from the apartment. Marigold was leashed between them, the fabric held in a sweaty grasp, but his discomfort was fading with a physical barrier separating him from the gauche predicament.

Tugging at his collar, Dipper asked, "Did you want to get out of there too? After Stan…"

“I don’t want to go on a date with him.”

His fingers clasped the leash tighter, a nervous chuckle escaping. "Right, when I said that… I just meant a normal dinner, not a date-like outing or anything. I know that may not have worked that well since you were talking about how Wendy doesn't like visiting expensive restaurants, but yeah.”

Bill reached to pat Marigold as he strutted, cocky and graceful, without so much as a glance. “We’re going to the fanciest steakhouse,” he informed him. “You’ll love it when I get you the juiciest meat on the menu.” Making a face, he mumbled about the poor cow and how he'd have a salad, food-morals inspired by Mabel's firm decision and subsequent encouragement to promote animal welfare. “Salad? Better be an expensive pile of lettuce, cutie.”

Although he didn't know why other than to suit Bill's personal tastes by treating his company to an expensive meal, Dipper decided not to question it while they journeyed onto campus property with Marigold still happily jogging by their sides, tiny clinks from the leash hitting her collar rising above the brush of jeans and slacks. It was changing from afternoon into evening with shadows
bleeding over the dried grass and the sun fading in the distance, but the warmth of the day hadn't
faded. It hardly ever did.

Perhaps because it was such a nice evening, the campus was alive with activities. The last classes
of the day finished, and students were everywhere, clumped or solo. Most chatted with friends,
some were playing games on the courts or in the grass, others were sitting on the ground in groups.
Ahead, familiar academic buildings loomed, and he wondered if Bill had any destination in mind
since they seemed to be continuing on without urgency through the properties of West Coast Tech,
shoes scraping over the pavement lazily, Marigold's toenails clicking on the sidewalk as her
fanned, feathery tail waved in her gait.

If there was a route mapped, he hoped it wasn't long. When he'd taken Marigold to play, he hadn't
intended on a traditional walk with her. Playing with her toys in the field near the apartment
wouldn't risk jarring his lower half, and this would undoubtedly produce pain if they kept walking.

Stirred from his thoughts by Bill's stare, Dipper peered back expectantly. “I’m glad you’re the one
I’m going with. Stan is... well, I know he’d actually go through the date with the understanding of
‘giving me a good time.’ Sick fuck.”

"That's kind of conceited," he pointed out, always impressed by the size of Bill's ego. "But
seriously? I think Stan meant he'd do whatever you wanted in exchange for covering the tab, and
it's you... so, he probably assumed you'd want sexual favors. I don't know if he meant that
literally.”

"I know you wouldn’t bend over for me because I paid an expensive tab. You're classy,”
Bill developed what he was previously saying, ignoring Dipper's noise of protest at the obscene
wording. “And if you tried, I'd be on board with that, but Stan isn’t my type. At all. I feel violated.”
Somehow, that had gotten worse and worse until Bill stopped talking, and he tried to gather his
thoughts.

"Uh... wait, you— you'd be fine with that? Bill, you have a girlfriend." Having sex after dinner
would be about as far from friendly flirting as they could possibly get, that was a flat out date. "But
you're right," he admitted, shrugging, "I wouldn't sleep with you, so... yeah."

“Then why are your panties in a twist over me saying I’d bone you if you were willing? It won’t be
happening.'"

Grimacing, he shook the thoughts away and paid no heed to the strands of air fluttering at his skin.
"Because that’s— don't you see how messed up that is?” Dipper asked, hands thrown in front of
him, perplexed. "Like, hypothetically. Knowing you would if the option was there, that's... not
really good, dude. Are you and Wendy doing okay?” Their interactions were cyclic, a non-stop
flipping of squabbles and the honeymoon stage, fucking and fighting bundled into one warped
relationship, apparently a relationship that Bill would be fine with dropping if the opportunity
presented itself. That thought struck him with uneasiness, the lack of loyalty, the disregard for their
agreement.

“’You’re assuming I would go through with it even if you offered.” He could make the argument
that Bill had said he would, but he let Bill continue. "Stars, kid. What do you think I am, some kind
of savage? I won’t be doing shit while I have a significant other.”

"Good,” he said rigidly, "I'm glad that you wouldn't be a total douchebag and resort to cheating.
But still, whether or not you have a significant other, I still wouldn't stoop to sleeping with you.”
The last part was more playful but nevertheless true, he wouldn't be doing anything sexual in nature
with Bill for the foreseeable future. Despite their recent developments in being civil with one
another, maybe amicable at times, he was still the guy who strived to get on his nerves and had some jerk tendencies to work out. And romance? That was absolutely off limits, Dipper shuddered at the thought. Opening the can of worms that revolved around their possibly matching soulmarks would tally extra stress, if they were meant to be together.

Bill scoffed. “We’ll see about that, doll. A lamb like you can’t resist me for long, especially once you’re officially rejected.”

Yeah, that was it.

"Is that why you've been so interested in me? Because I rejected you?" he joked, referring to Bill's tendency to make time for him, conjure excuses to be together, live with him (and the others) for the past week. He hadn't formally rejected Bill, except in his early attempts at being friends and repeatedly shutting down any talks of being more, even if they weren't serious.

“You never rejected me!” The objection from Bill was instantaneous and almost startled him from how loud it was. “If anything, I’ve rejected you because of Red. Hah.” Dipper burst into laughter at that but genuinely couldn't tell if Bill was joking or on a quest to save his ego, as ridiculous as that was.

"Sure," he complied, a smile still on his face, "I don't know how you did it, but you resisted all my advances and constant doting over you. Huge blow, man." It wasn't what'd happened at all, but it was funny to daydream about, a neat distraction from the ache spreading throughout his legs while they trudged on.

The students had dispersed slightly, some still outside, but the majority were likely busy with dinner, and he was content to muse about the possibility of their friendship if he had chased after Bill or minimally considered the option - things would be much different. But as it was, Bill could chasse out of his life and it'd be a small disappointment since he proved he was occasionally good company, but it wouldn't be a major loss.

Bill chuckled, patting the head of Marigold as they followed the sidewalk around a corner. “You might have to up your game, cutie. You haven't won me over yet.”

"Can't believe my total lack of social competence failed me," he lamented dryly. "But look, I appreciate you being the honorable one here, staying loyal to Wendy and everything, so with that in mind I think I'll have to move on and find somebody else to seduce." It was intentionally flippant to see if a reaction could be elicited from Bill, but either way, he realized he had been enjoying the exchange however falsely rooted it was.

Pining after Bill was entertaining in and of itself as a concept.

Taking another step, Dipper winced at a particularly sharp twinge in his muscle, biting his lip, but then relaxed when it eventually faded. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like Bill planned to return to the apartment, so he was equipping himself for the incoming soreness. “Yeah, it’ll be real hard, seducing your cousins.” Bill flashed him a smirk, but Dipper made a face at the thought. “You can listen to Ford cry about how he doesn’t like it.”

"I'm not doing that."

“Shame, you could take my advice for keeping it in the family.” Bill winked at him, his tone clearly teasing, but Dipper shook his head and emitted a warbling noise of disgust under his breath.

"Stop trying to use me to live out your fantasy."
“Hey, I’m being a gentleman, you know? I can’t live it out with Red involved but that doesn’t mean you can’t have fun in the name of Cali’s perception of my southern roots.”

"California, you dipshit. Also, we don't call it ‘fun’ in the West, we call it ‘incest’ here, sorry."

“Your cousins beg to dipper,” Bill retorted with a sadistic grin, but Dipper let out an exaggeratedly discontent puff of air, refusing to respond to that. Not because it had any merit, but because the pun alone was worthy of shunning Bill for the next ten years over. “What, did I take your breath away with my charm?”

Sarcastically, he mumbled, "I hope so, because I'm pretty sure suffocating is a better fate than this conversation." Unlike callous remarks early in their acquaintanceship, this was softer, bordering on a playful remark but not quite there.

“Ooh, no wonder you’re always stiff in the neck. Fantasizing about suffocation can’t be good for you.”

"Stiff in my neck? No,” he corrected, "stiff in my legs. I'm kind of hurting." It'd been creeping up during the walk and now that they were partially across campus over the span of maybe fifteen minutes, it was starting to reach the point of genuine pain prickling at his muscles at increasing intensities. That presented him with two options: tough it out and face the wrath of his body in the coming hours, in which he might be too sore to move, or he could sit to rest for a while, pray to every god he knew in the meantime that it'd die down.

Bill laughed. “Yeah, I bet your third leg is stiff from all this sex talk.” The joke didn't land given the very real presence of pain. Unsure of what to say to that, Dipper lifted his head to stare at Bill wearily, feeling like exhaustion was dripping from his figure and leaving splotches on the sidewalk in his tracks. He was happy Marigold was enjoying her walk with her tail high and her contented panting, but Dipper was ready to collapse in on himself if this went on for much longer. In an attempt to preserve his strength, and because a gasp-inducing ache reminded him that he didn't have the capacity for pride, Dipper tried to make the subtle change into extending his trapse to give a break to one leg at a time. Resorting to limping correlated with a steep rise in self-loathing, hating the gait and how he'd worked so damn hard to walk properly again only to be forced into reverting under undesirable conditions.

“Why are you walking like that?”

Dipper flushed and felt his stomach drop, quickly correcting his step despite the influx of pain. Under Bill's questioning look, he felt small, embarrassed, didn't know what to say or how to begin to explain himself.

So he lied, "I'm tired." Dipper liked to think it was at least scraping the bottom of plausible. "Maybe we can stop somewhere and take a break."

“Yeah, we can do that.” Bill slowed his pace, and he was ready to throw out a 'hallelujah' because perhaps this would be the day that Bill learned leg length was linked to his ludicrously huge strides. “Do you want to head to the old football field near the student union? It’s close.”

"Sure, uh, can you take this?" Dipper didn't wait for a response and all but thrust Marigold's leash into Bill's hands so he could pause for a moment, grabbing one ankle to bring it upward and stretch the muscles in his thigh, then doing the same with the other. "Okay, let's just… try to make this fast."

An apology was on the tip of Dipper's tongue for being the reason they couldn't continue their
walk around campus or be at the apartment in a standard amount of time. His body hated him.

Bill ushered Marigold close to his side with a low command, and he began to power walk in the direction of the field. “Can you keep up?”

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." Despite that, he was lagging behind a pace or two and limping his way beside Bill again as they approached the grassy expanse. There were students tossing a ball around, some sitting in circles on the dirt and pavement, others playing some ring toss game. A popular place for physical recreation, the thought left an abnormally sour taste in his mouth.

When they located an available spot, Dipper folded upon the grass and chewed the inside of his cheek to distract from the coursing throb that walking produced. Relaxing his muscles couldn't have come sooner. "Thanks, by the way. Sorry about… y'know." Dipper motioned vaguely toward the sidewalk they'd veered off from, pulling his knees in closer. "Earlier, I'd been planning on playing with her in the apartment lot, to be honest, but then you..." he trailed off again and shrugged.

“Ah. I didn’t know, you said you were taking her on a walk and I figured that’s what we’d do.” A shadow draping half across him, he was joined on the grass, and saw Bill searching through the pockets of his blazer. Assuming he was groping for a toy, Dipper presented the tennis ball in offering with a tilted head, uncertain if this had been the desired item, and Bill looked at the ball in confusion after hesitantly taking it.

Leaning on one palm, he scratched the back of his neck with the other as he averted his gaze to anywhere but on Bill. "I know that's what you usually do with dogs, but I... I don't know, I can't really walk that far without being in pain."

“Did you steal this from my pocket? I could’ve sworn I had one in here.”

"My hands don't go near your pockets, dude."

“You don’t want to find my gearshift, huh? Is that it?”

Nose wrinkling at the suggestive nature of the comment, Dipper shoved him in the shoulder and chided, "Don't be so gross." Then again, he was a perpetually shifting mix of weirdness and chaos and flirty charm. In short, Bill was the type to jack off, then file a lawsuit against himself for sexual harassment.

Bill laughed, leaning close to Dipper. “I’m not gross, I’m being honest.” He paused, rolling the ball between his fingers. “So, you’re hurting, what happened? Seems like it affects you a lot.”

Dipper dodged the question with a dash of snarkiness, "Oh, right— well, what happened was, we started at Stan and Ford's apartment and walked on campus for about fifteen minutes, and that made my legs pretty sore, so we had to stop here." It was marvelous to be able to stretch his legs in front of him, in a W-position, in all different angles to hit the right spots to make the pains dull for a while.

“Tha't's not what I meant, and you know it.”

"I know."

Bill narrowed his eyes at him. “Are you going to tell me?”

"I guess, I just don't think it's important." After a conceding sigh, he idly plucked dry blades of grass from the university's lawn and tried to ignore the noisy surroundings of students yelling to
one another, squeals of excitement, the occasional car. He closed his eyes for a couple brief moments to collect his thoughts and draw in a deep breath, which was expelled through a shuddering exhale. "Okay, uh… I— it's… chronic pain," he admitted quietly, gaze cast downward, "and doctors don't know how to fix it. I've been to a lot of them and specialists too, and… nothing works, so I'm in physical therapy to, I don't know, manage the pain mostly." Try out exercise techniques, pinpoint pain sources, all of those awfully draining activities were on the to-do list during a general session.

In the mildness of the evening, he still felt heat on his cheeks surpassing the outside temperature and wished he wasn't so ashamed of this. It wasn't like he could control it, what had happened to him, or anything afterward. That aspect of his life had left him powerless, a victim who had a normal lifestyle torn away after a single night, and the wreckage had taken a year to sift through. Now, it was more like he was cleaning up rather than wading among it.

Something warm wrapped around him, Bill’s arm coming to rest on his shoulders, pulling him close. Dipper tensed under the touch. “Relax. How'd this happen?”

Dipper's mind snapped to the drunk driver in the wrong lane coming at them with a speed well over the limit and creating an almost perfect head-on collision to kill the driver, fatally wound the passenger, scar his sister with gory views of the aftermath and inflict survivor's guilt. And then there was him, scrapes and bruises and instant unconsciousness, a shattered hip bone that ruined his life when it didn't heal properly, nerve damage. The confession was on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it down.

"Car accident."

“Car accident,” Bill repeated, equally blankly. “Must’ve been pretty bad, huh? How long ago was this?”

Trying to keep his mind and body preoccupied with other thoughts and threading his fingers together respectively, he knew that would be the only way he could talk about this without succumbing to a strong emotional reaction, whatever it would be this time since it swapped between fear, anger, insurmountable sadness. "I was fifteen, so that was—"

“So what, five? Six years?”

Startled that Bill had been under the impression he was twenty-one, Dipper raised an eyebrow at him and gave the correction, "Three." Which Bill would have known if he'd allowed him to finish.

There was a pause. “What.” It was flat, demanding, and Dipper didn't know how to respond or what to ask, so he blinked at him, awaiting explanation. "Why are you in advanced classes? You should be taking freshman courses."

"Because I did general education requirements in high school?" Or he could be brutally honest, come right out and say there was nothing else to do in the hospital but plow through assignments until he'd been ahead. "I don't need to take them again." It was a weaker argument now that he was actually in college and not performing as well as he'd hoped to. "I worked really hard over the last two years to get that credit, okay? I knew this would happen." To Bill, 'this' may have been a vague statement, but to Dipper, it meant that he'd realized where his life was headed after the accident. He'd accounted for employment being a hopeless ambition until he could find a career in the field, he'd gradually accepted his fate of studying for eighteen credit semesters while Mabel supported them. It had motivated him to sign up for the reduced-cost college courses during high school so he could shorten his time in university.
Removing his arm from his shoulders, Bill cooed Marigold over, taking off her leash and throwing the ball across the field. One bounce, two bounces, then it was grounded. He watched her dart after it. “I don’t understand how you knew this would happen.”

Noticing his mistake, he coughed and said, "Yeah.. like, y'know, this." He made a hand gesture at nothing in particular. "The situation."

“Being in a park with me and my dog?”

"I knew I wouldn't be able to get a normal job like most students have," he admitted finally, and the words didn't feel freeing, they were binding, reminding he was useless. "Mabel is— she supports us. I'm trying to get through university as fast as possible, so she can be a full-time student."

Bill’s response was noncommittal, so Dipper let the subject drop, falling into the grass to stare at the hazy sky, internally musing about bringing up the money but opting against it in his fatigued state. Aside from the pain, this outing was strangely verging on cathartic. He was enjoying the peaceful moments with Bill and Marigold in the midst of a busy campus, soaking in the evening since he didn't frequently have the liberty of going out.

Pawsteps made soft noises in the grass around them, then Bill must have thrown the ball again because she was dashing away. Watching Marigold pounce on the ball and fit her mouth around it, Dipper smiled to himself as she started bounding to the pair, a sight that stoked odd comfort considering he'd spent the last several days as her daily caretaker with Bill.

"Hey, did Stan ever tell you about the time he tried to train his dog to play fetch?" he asked, a memory coming to mind.

"Stan had a dog? What?" Bill's glance was surprised albeit curious. "When the fuck did he get a dog?"

"Oh, man, yeah. He had a Doberman like five years back, that dog was something else." Unruly but kind, and he assumed Stan didn't talk about him since the loss had hit fast and arduously. "Okay, Stan trained him to fetch when he was a puppy, right? So, he said he'd throw the ball, but the dog would sort of stand there and look at him," Dipper explained with a chuckle. "Stan would get impatient waiting, and he decided he'd bring the dog to the ball to show him how to do it. Every time he'd throw the ball, I guess Stan would eventually cave and pick up the dog to bring him over."

Dipper went on, grinning, "When Mabel and I visited one time, the dog wasn't a puppy anymore. Like, he was full size, ninety pounds of Doberman, and Stan went out with us to play fetch with him. I remember Stan throwing the ball, and the dog jumped into his arms to get carried over to it. It was amazing, probably the best thing I've seen in my life. That was how they played fetch.” He was pretty sure the dog had Stan trained.

Bill shook his head, like he couldn’t believe the story. “You can’t be serious. Why would he train his dog like that? He couldn’t have possibly thought it’d be a good idea.”

Shrugging, he was about to say he didn't know why, but a loud whistle that made him wince derailed his train of thought.

"Hey, isn't it that hot guy Bill sitting over there?" A familiar voice called out to them playfully, and Dipper craned his neck to see Wendy and a few friends walking closer, plodding onto the grass from the sidewalk. She said something to two of them, a larger guy and chick on her phone, something that sounded a lot like "wait here" while she trekked over with a slouching, pierced
beanpole who apparently believed the color black was his spirit animal.

"Didn't expect to find you here," she said, sitting down on his side instead of Bill's, and he raised his eyebrows questioningly, debating who she was regarding with the statement. However, it became clear when she punched his shoulder and almost sent him tipping into Bill. "Or you. Nice to see you, man."

"Yeah, uh, it's nice to see you too," Dipper greeted with a flimsy smile, rubbing the spot where he'd been punched as Marigold dropped running like a fluffy speed demon to greet the newcomers.

"Aw, Marigold," Wendy said, brushing grass from her fur while Marigold squirmed to get closer. "You're too much of a high society lady to be seen like this."

Bill was staring, from Wendy to Dipper and back to Wendy, then at her companion. "What, am I disturbing your date with Robbie now?" The thinly-disguised revolt suggested Bill's mood had plummeted with their arrival, and when Marigold went to lap at Robbie's hands and receive pats, he snapped, "Not that one." to sway her against interaction.

Robbie huffed, rolling his eyes. "Psh, as if. Whatever, man."

"About as much as I'm disturbing your date with Dipper." She chuckled after glancing between them, and although she raised her hand to give his shoulder another punch, she dropped it again to Dipper's relief.

Bill grumbled and ushered his dog between them, seemingly safely tucking her away with a glare at Robbie. "We're bonding with my dog, not prancing around the city in a van with tinted windows crying about the end of MCR."

Amusement igniting in her eyes, Wendy said, "We were going to the dining center to fill up on the ice cream bar with Tambry and Thompson, but maybe we'll see about the van thing later? If you don't want to hang out, I know you've been busy." Dipper shot Bill a doubting glance, wondering when exactly he'd been busy, or if that was his go-to excuse. Beyond working a few nights, Bill's evenings had been open to spend on a theoretical date night, but he used them to hang out at Stan and Ford's apartment with everybody.

“I’ve been very busy.” Bill said to Wendy, then glared at Robbie, who didn’t flinch, collected and cool and too apathetic for his shade. “So busy, I don’t know if I’ll be available later. Or now. I have important places I have to be.”

“Yeah,” Robbie scoffed. “Good thing your friends make time for you, Wendy. Like Tambry, Lee, Nate.. me.”

"Give it a rest, Robbie," Wendy scolded but didn't sound more severe than casual, and Dipper was baffled by the Bill-Robbie dynamic that came across as too bitter to be an initial impression. For now, it appeared Wendy reached her limit of Bill grumping and scowling because she said, "Send me a text if you have some time and want to chill, or if you want to chat for a while. We should get together soon."

"Oh, hey, Wendy…” Dipper started, swallowing hard when she looked at him expectantly, but then what else was she supposed to do? He wanted to smack his forehead for how rapidly his spunk had dissolved, obviously she was going to look at him, he was talking to her… and now it had been at least three seconds, four seconds. Five seconds of silence, say something, say words, Dipper told himself. "Do you… um, go camping? Well, I know you go camping since you were talking about that last week at Environment Club, but I meant… how is that?" Wow, that was the
best he could do? "I kind of want to camp sometime, but I don't know much about it." Nice save.

Wendy, thank god, didn't comment on how socially awkward he was and glossed over it to respond nonchalantly, "Sure, man. I go out basically every weekend, it's cool to chill with nature like that. If you're thinking of camping—"

Bill swooped in, “No. No. NO. We are NOT going camping.” Incredulously, Dipper's wide gaze searched for absent answers pertaining to an interjection in a discussion that had nothing to do with him. His eyebrows furrowed.

"What? I didn't say anything about you going camping, I thought it'd be nice to, y'know, get some tips if Mabel and I ever wanted to." It had been a possibility tossed a few times among the two of them, aspirations of living within wildlife kindled in a crevice of their environmentally-inclined minds. Neither were especially outdoorsy, but camping didn't require being a hardened mountain man, therefore he assumed they were qualified enough and would enjoy the opportunity to disconnect from the rest of the world for a day or two.

“If YOU go camping, Stan’s going to want to go. And he insists on having EVERYONE come with him.”

Dipper's expression flattened at the ridiculousness of the argument, because even if that had been a factual statement... "So we don't need to tell Stan? Mabel and I are capable of camping by ourselves."

“He'll sniff you out. He has a nose for these things. I’m not surprised though, his nose is bigger than fucking Mount Everest.”

"Guys, relax," Wendy brushed a dismissive hand and chuckled at them. "I have an idea, why don't you and your sister come with me some weekend? I can take you guys and show you the ropes of camping, if you'd be into that. Besides, Stan doesn't need to find out." A motion like she was sealing her lips and tossing the key was interrupted by Bill's loud groan.

“Oh, great. Another fucking camping trip I have to go on.”

"Nah, you don't have to go. I know you hate camping, but I could—"

"Wait, you hate camping?” Dipper blurted, puzzled, especially so at Robbie's half-smirk and stifled laugh. "If you hate it, why are you asking to go with?’

“I'm not asking. I don’t want to go, but I have to.” Bill's tone was edging on condescending, like this non-issue was a colossally glaring problem that he was ignorant to.

Wendy didn't seem fazed and shrugged it off to address him instead, "You guys have my number. Tell me when you're open for a weekend and we'll go, okay? Catch ya later. Tambry and Thompson are waiting for us." With Robbie, she picked herself off the grass and gave a short wave, then started trotting to the friends waiting for her.

Dipper called out, "See you, Wendy!" To Bill, he grinned a little and shifted his weight. "I can't believe she offered to take us camping, Mabel's going to be super excited when I tell her." It would take planning on their part to arrange a suitable work schedule and Dipper doing his homework early, but they could free a weekend to journey into nature. And better yet, Wendy had said she would be their guide for the first time.

“I can’t fucking believe you did that.” Bill glowered at him, but Dipper still couldn’t be more lost, unsure of why Bill felt the need to camp with them if he didn't like it. “Now we have to go
CAMPING. It’s the worst thing ever.”

"But you won't know when we're going?"

He froze. “You can’t keep me away. I’ll find out when it is.” A pause. “Don’t leave me alone.”

Although he’d been in touch with Wendy over messaging since the encounter in the football field, he hadn't taken her up on the camping offer. Mabel said she’d try to get some weekend off in a few weeks, but until then he was content to exchange the occasional conversational text, his impressively more awkward. It was probably a feat, or some sort of record, considering how much time he spent dwelling on them before hitting send.

Mind wandering, he thought it was amusing how their living situation had changed his average weekday. Bill would drive him and Ford to campus, he would go to class, and afterward he would sit in a now-claimed-as-his desk in the graduate student office. Passing the time with homework and grading assignments had been significantly improved with the recent presence of Marigold. Unfortunately, she was being Stan's companion today at the apartment, leaving the office much less joyful than usual, but productivity between the three of them had spiked in her absence. Staying with them had been impractical since Ford had a day of meetings with his advisor and the board, Bill had a class to teach… and Dipper was sitting in on it, as per Bill's invitation.

"So," he cleared his throat, fingers tapping restlessly on the wood of the desk, "what should I expect?" The indefinite question said it all: he didn't know where to begin chipping away on an overwhelming amount of inquiries.

“To be amazed by my teaching abilities.” Bill winked at him. “You’ll love it. I have a spot for you to sit and everything.”

"You have assigned seats?" That was extreme for a college course, but Bill's need for control being exerted upon the students wouldn't be a stretch.

“No, but you’re assigned to one.”

"Please let it be by Pacifica and not on your lap." That was a joke, mostly. "That's the only reason I'm going to your class, remember? To observe and see what she does during the lesson?"

Bill rolled his eyes, grinning as he nudged him. “Yeah, sure. Observe her, not my handsome self talking to a group of pupils. Can you resist me, Pine Tree?"

"Hasn't been hard so far," he reported with the smallest of huffs, still without answers to his most pertinent questions. "But should I just… walk in and pretend I'm a normal student taking the course? Isn't someone going to notice? Also, you haven't even told me what you're currently teaching."

“No one’s going to notice,” Bill told him. “It’s a class with what, thirty students in it? You’ll fit in fine. My lesson for this week is on the systems of particles, momentum, and collisions. Basic stuff. You should know this.”

"I do know it." Very well, both from courses taken in high school and after the past week or so in which he'd had unlimited access to Bill and Ford's library of books stashed on the towering bookshelf in the corner of the room. They'd been excellent for review and reference.

Sometimes, he felt like he was starting to understand the subject with the constant availability of help. If he had a question, he could turn to Bill and ask, or look over his shoulder and ask Ford.
Some pieces of the endless puzzle of advanced physics were beginning to come together.

“Then you’ll do fine.”

Although he'd been placated for a moment, that was over when he asked, startled, "You're not going to do anything evil like… call on me during class, are you?"

“If you know the subject, you should be able to answer my questions.” He smirked at him, but Dipper merely frowned with uneasiness. “I don’t usually call on people.”

"Good, because I, uh, know the subject and stuff, just didn't really want to have to talk in front of everyone."

“Uh huh. Hey, kid? There’s going to be a nice pen on the desk next to Pacifica. Sit there.”

After they'd gathered their things, both walked to the designated classroom, and Bill instructed him to hover around for a few minutes before coming in. When he did, he saw the majority of the seats had filled, and like Bill promised, there was a black pen on the desk next to a young woman, bright blonde hair. Pacifica.

Or… or not, because he realized the desk with the pen was situated between two ladies. One was the blonde, the other was blonde as well but had a pink bow. Uh. Concerned, he peered to Bill who was standing behind the podium, organizing his things, and he tried to catch his attention with darting eye movements, the pen twirling in his grasp.

Bill seemed to understand his plight, and he stopped what he was doing to approach the cluster of desks belonging to him and the ladies, perching atop an empty one with his hands folded on his raised knee. “Pacifica,” he greeted the woman with the bright blonde hair, bowless. Internally, Dipper sighed in relief, letting the pen rest without nervous energy to expend. “How are you today?”

“Why do you care?” She sounded defensive, and despite trying to remain unattached to the exchange, Dipper's hand combed through his hair in contemplation. So this was Pacifica, no wonder Bill thought she was a challenge. “You don’t even require us to show up.”

Bill's jaw steeling suggested he'd wanted to say something less than professional. “There’s nothing wrong with being interested in the well being of my students,” he told her, with an icy glance toward Dipper before he retreated to his podium.

A couple dragging beats passed, and Dipper watched from the corner of his eye as Pacifica angled her head downward toward her phone screen again. He could see what looked like a messaging app but his desire to spark a conversation had him stiffly inquiring, "Oh, uh, attendance isn't required in this class? Sorry, I'm… new."

“No,” she slowly responded. “Why are you talking to me? Don’t you have less important things to do?”

Anxiously, he grabbed for the pen on the table and twirled it between his fingers again, mind racing for a suitable response in this social situation. Pacifica came across as almost… hostile, and he didn't know how to proceed. "I didn't mean to bother you or anything—"

“Alright, let’s get this class started!” Bill called out from the front. “Last class, I assigned Chapter Ten in the textbook on Systems of Particles. We're going through a PowerPoint - yeah, yeah, groan, I know - and then we'll do examples on the board during the final twenty minutes. Before I begin, are there questions regarding the reading?” When there were no takers, he turned away, hitting a
key on his laptop as the projector illuminated against the wall. Familiar concepts greeted him, and Dipper retrieved a notebook to appear as though he was engrossed in the information, but kept shorthand notes on Pacifica to guide the experience and recount it to Bill.

The first being, "can't put phone down." Whenever he'd slide his line of sight to Pacifica, he immediately spotted the smartphone hidden under her desk, thumbs dexterous as they grazed the screen to type a message. Or it would be locked, but never far from lighting with a notification.

The next was "not sure if she doesn't like me, or doesn't like the world" because Pacifica's posture suggested she wasn't open to any of this. Not Bill, not the lecture he was giving, not anybody around her. She was guarded, and their brief talk earlier had disheartened him; if he was going to help, she'd actually have to agree to it.

So with that, Dipper watched her for signs that she might. Watched how she would attempt to keep notes beyond pages that were full, watched how she would hesitate and her hand would almost start to raise like she wanted to ask a question but thought better of it. Watched her eventually close the notebook again and send a defeated message.

The last was "resigned - wants to do well, but is despondent", and it made his heart drop to read that, acknowledging how closely it aligned with his situation. Except his was a major in physics instead of a general education class, and also three years into his studies. It likely helped that he didn't text his friends of his woes during class periods, but he wasn't dismissing the possibility that Pacifica's first month in the class had been excellent behavior, ebbing when she fell behind.

Once the class wrapped with Bill instructing students to leave homework on their desks and assigning a new reading, Dipper stretched spindly legs from his desk while the rest flooded from the room into the hallway. Over his shoulder, he watched Pacifica leave, then turned his attention to Bill, who was erasing the practice problems from the board. A small herd had formed around him to ask final questions, so Dipper collected his things and waited for him in his office.

Papers in hand, Bill entered after a few minutes, the door closing behind him with a soft click, and Dipper swiveled in the chair to pull him into view in all his chest-puffed glory. "How’d I do, cutie?"

"Amazing," he replied dryly, but from Bill's unchanging expression, it seemed he expected more of a reaction than a one-word, partially-serious compliment. "You ever hear that song 'Don't Stand So Close to Me'? Yeah, that was running through my head the whole time."

"Of course I know that song. It’s my song. I have a poster of it." Dipper glanced at his 80s posters, spanning the aforementioned song with plenty of iconic others, and he snorted at the display, finding simultaneous entertainment in his musical tastes and the variety in decoration in comparison to Ford's wall.

"But seriously? I listened to some of what you said, not all of it, since I was watching Pacifica for part of the time. She was on her phone a lot, but… it was kind of sad, she'd be texting people and talking about how she doesn't know what's going on because she thinks it's 'super hard science BS' or whatever she called it."

Bill snickered, yet Dipper grimaced, fingers twitching against the desk to create a soft tapping rhythm. “She’d better be glad she’s not in Fordsy’s class, she’d break down into tears.”

Well, that was one way to put it. Dipper already knew that he wanted to help her though, regardless of the possibility of this undertaking being a lost cause as Bill would claim, so he simply said what had been on his mind for the past thirty minutes, fanfare aside, "I want to tutor her."
“Okay? I don’t care, but don’t let it interfere with our work.”

"See, I'm kind of hoping to keep attending class too, just to… y'know, supplement what she's learning." It would be a good method of staying fresh on the material himself and assisting Pacifica in understanding, a logical conclusion he'd considered during the session.

Bill’s eyes slitted at the request, and he dumped his bag, contents pouring over his desk. “My classes aren’t free, Mason Jar.” That was true, but he'd been silently wishing he could get a pass.

Struggling to make an argument in his defense, he pointed out, "I'm not learning anything or getting the grade, so think of it like… auditing the course."

“You only want to attend because you want to tutor Pacifica. She has a text book, you know. You could use that.”

"The textbook isn't going to tell me how you taught the unit, Bill. Besides, sitting in on the class might also be nice for grading too. I can review the material with them, see who is actually trying to do well by showing up and engaging in the lectures."

Bill growled, mildly frustrated, but Dipper didn't react. “You already know this, you don’t need my class. Unless you want it to hear me talk..?” This was slyly speculative, his eyebrow raising in intrigue. "Oh, doll. Now I understand completely. Why didn’t you say so? Beyond mentioning 'Don't Stand So Close to Me', that is.”

The implication had him exhaling in irritation, burying his face in his hands. Although he felt he heard Bill talk more than enough as it was, given how they currently lived together and had been spending excessive amounts of time in the same space, he forgoed lamenting his woes and mumbled, "Can you just let me attend the class?"

“You have to mind your own business. Don’t distract Pacifica, and if she needs help, save it for after or tell her to ask me, the guy running the show.”

The terms were agreeable, and he and Bill melted into an easy silence with the clock and Bill's radio playing 80s classics sole sources of noise in the room while they worked at their separate desks.

Eventually, the hour was nearing five in the evening, and that was when Mabel appeared in the doorway with a bright smile and a cheerful greeting for him, a reserved one for Bill. Walking, she gave a reassuring pat on his shoulder, then set her work clothes onto the floor in a pile. Straightening, she asked, "Are you ready to go?"

If he hadn't heard the exchange earlier, Dipper would have assumed Mabel's question was for him, but he knew she and Bill had been talking about attending Drama Club together. He'd decided he'd wait out the hour or so until they were done, then hitch a ride to the apartment.

Bill's enthusiastic "sure thing" prefaced the departure that left Dipper in the comfortable quiet of the office, a pen busted from chewing drifting over his homework and discharging inky blotches in its wake. A standard occurrence at one month into the semester, his fleet of pens were essentially chew toys.

Attention snagged by a familiar song by the Police coming onto the radio, a grin touched his lips as his eyes danced over the corresponding poster. Mentally, he made a note to tell Bill later. He'd probably get a kick out of it.
Next update will be Wednesday. <3
"She should be home by now." It was approximately the fourth time Dipper had said that within the past twenty minutes, but it was nearing half past midnight, and it wasn't as if he was worried—

Okay, he was worried. Just a little. Any good brother would be. It was an hour after Mabel's shift should have ended, but there had been no communications from her, no text, nothing, and she usually let him know when she'd be leaving.

Nervously, he shouldered past Bill, his captive audience member considering Stan and Ford were asleep, as he continued pacing. At this rate, he'd have calluses on his feet in no time, and his legs would lead a revolution against him for putting them through unnecessary strain, but concerns about bodily harm were on the backburner. It would stay that way until he heard from Mabel or she walked in the apartment.

"If you keep at that, you'll wear holes into the carpet, sugar. Relax, come join me over here." Bill had taken a place on the sofa, legs splayed.

"Think that's why they're actually kicking us out?" Dipper asked and motioned at the room in an indistinct gesture, referring to the announcement that'd arrived earlier: Stan's health was fully restored, so they were free to go. "Because my pacing is wearing down their carpeting?"

"I imagine it's because Stanley doesn't need us taking care of him anymore. His back is 'healed.'" Bill emphasized *healed* with air quotes, and Dipper's shoulders lifted in a shrug because Stan had seemed okay to him after the first few days. Officially recovering over a week later was excessive, he personally believed Stan had enjoyed extra guests and a dog in the apartment.

Dismissing the thought, the familiar surge of fretting overcame Dipper, anxious possibilities of Mabel's whereabouts flooding into him and making his chest feel tighter. "What do you think is keeping her?" he mused with a frown, only fractionally talking to Bill.

Bill shook his head, letting it fall back against the arm of the couch. "Maybe she's having a good time. She's a grown woman, take it easy."

The distraught look shot at Bill demonstrated how "easy" he was capable of taking it. "She always texts me," he mumbled under his breath as if that was definitive evidence something must be wrong. "I don't want to spam her, so I've sent… three texts." He had checked and double checked. "Three texts, and still nothing. Should I call the diner?"

"This is overreacting, cutie."

In a moment of collective pain from his legs and exhaustion and jitters, desperate for a distraction, he asked, "Why do you use terms of endearment with me anyway?" It was almost exasperated, snappish, but he hadn't meant it so rudely and murmured a quick apology to Bill for the outburst.

Bill chuckled, swiveling to rest predatory eyes on him. "Do you have a problem with it, darling?"

"I don't know, it's just weird. Shouldn't you save that for your girlfriend?"

The ever-increasing burn of pain had him defeatedly flopping into the over-sized armchair, draping his body so his legs hung over the side, a curiously comfortable position.

The problem of Mabel's location remained, but he had to relax, Bill was right. He had to focus on
something else. Upside-down, he could still see Bill's outstretched form on the sofa and his dumb smirk decorating a face with defined features and handsomely heightened cheekbones. The curve of his jaw was rather nice too, how it was sharper than what the Pines family produced - it seemed to be hit or miss. Stan had it, Ford recently started filling out in that regard, and he was pretty sure there was no hope for him.

“She’s not one for those terms.” Bill winked at him, Dipper's attention drawn to the duel of colors within one of the eyes. He'd known it was there, but never truly noticed how the speck of bright blue was surrounded by variations of hazel-gold. “Enjoying how handsome I am? I know, I make all the ladies swoon.”

"Mm," he hummed but didn't comment, didn't feel inclined to do so when he supposed Bill was objectively attractive, but admitting it would be an excessive ego stroke. Besides, he hadn't been measuring his physical allure, he'd been keeping his nerves in check.

Closing his eyes, he exhaled a long sigh and tried to imagine sinking into the plush armchair, further and further. It would be okay, Mabel was okay. Mindfully loosening each part of himself, his fingers spread lazily over the cheap cushion, but he froze when he felt something that didn't belong and peeked an eye open to examine the foreign texture. It was a ten dollar bill, and really, he should have seen this coming with the "mysterious" amounts of money popping up around the apartment.

"Hey, don't you think writing a check would be more efficient?" Dipper blurted when he tilted his head back again to bring Bill's upside-down, stalky albeit built frame into his line of sight.

“What are you talking about?” Bill peered at him, confusion scrawled across his face. Snatching the bill between his fingers, he held it up for a few seconds before placing it on his stomach. "I know it didn't fall out of Stan's pocket when he was sitting here earlier. I don't think he owns anything bigger than a five."

“I don’t know where that came from. Stan could have stolen it from someone? The dude’s shady as fuck.”

"Stan or the guy he 'stole' it from?" Also known as Bill.

“Both.”

"Yeah, he and Ford hang with the wrong crowd. Good thing I have such an upstanding Christian friend like you to balance it out." Receiving a pompous 'I'm amazing, aren't I?' in response, he could imagine Bill grinning from ear-to-ear, misplaced pride running rampant. Dipper paused to examine the ten dollars, holding it up slightly, chewing his lip in thought before he lowered the bill and shut his eyes. "So were you going to tell me what's up with the money or not, man?"

"But no, I don’t know what’s going on with the money. I guess they had some change lying around.”

"You're going to pass up a chance at recognition? Okay." That was uncharacteristically noble for Bill's standards, his desire to always be in the spotlight, but he wouldn't force the discussion. Although he'd been about to explain that Stan believed he'd simply been misplacing his money and finding it again, his hand being licked caused his eyes to flutter open, previous thoughts vanishing at the diversion. Marigold was waiting patiently, expectantly, near the armchair, and Dipper's resolve crumbled at her adorably loving gaze, her never-satiated desire for human interaction. Taking that as her cue, she landed beside him and made a spot for herself that was partially on the
chair, partially on top of his midsection.

With her head resting on his chest, Dipper smiled at the calming sight of a content Golden Retriever. He threaded his hand through Marigold's fluffy curls and tousled the already mused fur, stroking her side gently. The motion was more relaxing than he thought it'd be, and apparently, she thought so too since her eyelids were beginning to droop.

“*I didn’t do it,*” Bill repeated, annoyance seeping into his claim. “*Why is she giving you love? You’re accusing me of something I didn’t do. Marigold, come here.*” Her head raised, staring at Bill– but she didn’t budge. “*Marigold.*”

She whined but nevertheless obeyed, departing to join Bill on the sofa. Honestly, Dipper felt like making the same pitiful noise since his source of momentary comfort was gone.

“*Good girl.*”

Gathering the strength to force himself out of the armchair now that there was no immediate reason to stay, Dipper felt the caustic bolts of aching in the muscles of his legs as he stood and stiffly restarted pacing. In the pouch of his hoodie, he tangled and untangled his fingers while he walked, tempted to send Mabel another message. An idea came to him, and on impulse he checked the notification screen of his phone, but his heart sunk when it confirmed he hadn't merely missed a message from her.

Bill was preoccupied with stroking Marigold, signature smirk plastered over his face. “*Pacing won’t make her text sooner.*”

"*I don't know what else to do.*"

“*Sit down with me.*”

That was unexpected enough to halt his pacing for a couple seconds as he surveyed Bill, but then he resumed as if there had been no interruption in the first place. Flatly, he asked, "*What, are you going to start calling for me too like you did with Marigold?*

Bill growled. “*Do you want me to? I fucking will.*”

"*No,*" his nose wrinkled, "*I wouldn't listen anyway.*" Bill would be wasting his breath, but half of the things he said fit that description regardless, so he wasn't sure if it made any difference to him.

“*I’ll get the hose.*”

"*Threatening me with your entourage of promiscuity? No thanks, I'm just waiting for Mabel.*"

“*I said hose. H-O-S-E.*” He seemed irked, his lip curling, but Dipper was internally amused. “*You're pacing for Mabel. Keep at it and you'll be wearing down the sidewalk, too.*” Dipper shrugged at that, though he wasn't sure if it was to suggest disinterest in the conversation or to increase Bill's irritation, the latter giving him something less stressful to obsess over.

“*Are you ignoring me now?*” Bill demanded, and Dipper almost flinched at the authoritarian tone. “*I've been trying to be supportive, I don't deserve this abuse.*”

"*Might want to keep it down, or a half-asleep Stan's going to be giving us an earful,*" he suggested while he rubbed the back of his neck, plopping down at the desk instead. Tonight, it seemed he was destined to try every piece of furniture at least once. "*Do you have anything to grade?*" On autopilot, he grabbed a pen from the holder and started chewing on the end as he surveyed Bill.
"You already graded them. Twice."

"I… I guess I'll..." He trailed off, shaking his head as nothing came to mind. Pacing would be ideal, but he was pretty sure any more of that would push his legs past their breaking point, and wailing in agony from the muscle spasms would definitely wake both Stan and Ford. The thought had him chewing on the pen harder, teeth grinding against the plastic, digging in roughly. His jaw cramped with exertion.

Scanning the room, his restlessness was made worse by the clean state of the apartment; he'd already done that too, a few hours ago. Dishes were washed, loose items were put into their proper places, surfaces cleaned, Stan's stray boxers nowhere in sight since they had been unceremoniously kicked back into his bedroom.

Bill sighed, shuffling to sit up and grab at his phone. “Do you want me to call her?”

Yes. "No, it's... probably a bad idea if she's caught up at work. I'm guessing she's busy." To distract himself again, he found a blank sheet of notepad paper from Ford's supplies and began writing a to-do list for the remainder of the week. The click of his teeth hitting the pen filled the air, an off-and-on sound that fell between the gaps of when he'd take a break from writing to collect his thoughts.

This practice was common for Dipper - he thrived on lists and visual maps, generally creating them when his stress levels peaked at the most obscene hours of the night. When he felt Bill's gaze on him, watching, he realized why he was uneasy.

He'd never done this while Bill was awake. Idly, Dipper inquired, "Hey, why aren't you asleep yet? You're usually passed out in the armchair by now."

"Why does it matter?" Bill said tiredly, defensive as he stroked Marigold's fur. “You have a problem with me being up?"

The drag in his words, the suppressed yawn, everything pointed toward Bill nearing the end of his energy for the evening. Dipper was there too, but running on adrenaline and would be until Mabel was here safely. "If you're going to sleep, I could put Labyrinth on so you have something to watch before crashing." Another one of his beloved 80s movies, perfectly capturing Bill's wild enthusiasm for David Bowie.

“Hey!” Bill bristled, scowling. “It’s a good film! I won't be able to sleep at all if you put that on because Bowie makes me want to jack off whenever I see him as the Goblin King. Can't help it.”

"Jesus Christ."

Letting the subject drop, he returned to his notepad and continued scribbling, chewing, more scribbling, more intense chewing until there was a sudden snap, a gushing of wet bitterness coating his mouth. Gagging, he dropped the bleeding pen and tried to remove the taste from his tongue by rushing over to the sink, washing his mouth repeatedly.

“What the fuck did you do now?” He could hear the groan of the cushions that suggested Bill had risen from the couch, and after a peek at him, he saw he was at the desk. Deciding to deal with that later, gagging again had his focus on rinsing the pungency from his mouth. Several rinses with water faded the foul taste even if it remained residual.

Rejoining Bill in the living room, he was examining the paper Dipper had written on, a puzzled and ashen look on his face as he rolled one of his sleeves back down. And instantly, Dipper was on high alert because it was the sleeve which belonged to that arm.
"What were you doing?" He'd meant to be casual. Normal. But no, it came out highly constrained and shrill, nearly panicked, his voice cracking over the words.

"Thought some got on my sleeve and I was checking it." That soothed him minimally, and he let out a suspended breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. To calm himself, he repeated the mantra in his head: Bill had looked at the notepad paper to see what'd happened, not to check his handwriting because he had a suspicion they were soulmates. Everything was fine. More reassurance came when he stepped over to the desk and noticed the handwriting was covered by the giant blotch of ink drips, extra proof that he wasn't looking for anything, nor would he have found anything.

Despite becoming accustomed to Bill's presence in his life, Dipper was convinced a discovery of their possible status as soulmates would ruin him - societal expectations alone demanded a fast courtship period and lifelong commitment, yet he couldn't take that kind of pressure with anyone, much less Bill. Besides, he didn't think he wanted to date Bill or have any romantic involvement; Bill was… some sort of friend, he supposed, and that was where things would remain. As friends, nothing more. Wariness still haunted him, all of the times Bill had been unwarrantedly cruel to him or outright unpredictable. University and future career options produced an abundance of stress, he didn't need another dose in his life.

His attention was abruptly interrupted by Bill grabbing the inky piece of paper and shredding it into pieces. "Fucking thing."

"What the heck, dude?" The shrillness had returned from pure surprise, gawking at Bill through sunken eyes while he tried to process the fact that his mangled to-do list had been torn apart before him. Nothing had been salvageable on it, but nonetheless… Bill destroying it? When had that ever been socially acceptable?

"Nothing. You have ink around your mouth."

"Yeah, it doesn't really come off." Although he instinctively tried to wipe the remaining ink away, his response was nonchalant now that he'd settled down from the paper-shredding incident. Broken pens were a staple of his life and had happened in the past, many times. They were at high risk around him, and maybe the accidental consumption of ink would poison him someday. God, he hoped so. Dismissively, he went on, "It'll fade in a day or two, and it's not like I'm going to kiss anyone, so you can relax." The last part was a wry joke, but he wasn't sure it would land when it was delivered in the same flat tone as the rest of the sentence. Bill narrowed his eyes at him, thoughtful.

"What if they kissed you? They'd get stupid ink all over their face."

"Uh, that has not been a problem once in eighteen years, so I don't think it'll start now." A pinch of embarrassment swept through him as he realized he'd basically admitted he'd never kissed anyone, or at least nobody had wanted to kiss him - pretty much the same deal. He wanted to hide his face in his hands.

"I doubt you've had ink on those lips for eighteen years straight."

He shook his head, though mentally noted he'd swallowed more ink than the average person with his habit of chewing pens. "I meant nobody has wanted to kiss me, unless you're suggesting the ink makes it more appealing." Dipper's features scrunched in disgust at the thought of tasting that oily bitterness again.

"I have an inkling you're trying to get me to say 'yes' to that. You can't fool me, cutie."
Eyebrows hitching, he said, "I think you have an ink-kink." Or he'd simply wanted to slip the word 'ink' into the sentence as many times as possible.

Bill shook his head at him. “No, you. Great Stars, your obsession with ink is inksane.” Dipper didn't want to laugh—he tried to avoid it by pretending to cough and biting the inside of his cheek—but his chuckling at the pun was unmistakable because its delivery was so likable that it was hard to avoid.

About to speak, his phone vibrated on the desk, and Dipper jolted to check the notification, hoping it was Mabel, wishing with every ounce of his being that it was her and she was fine and—

He breathed a sigh of relief.

(12:43 AM) Hey Dipper! <3 Sorry, had to wait for my phone to charge a bit, it died!!

(12:43 AM) After only like, ten hours. Crazy, right???

A smile touching his lips, Dipper stared at the messages for a moment to report with palpable happiness, "Mabel is okay. It sounds like her phone might've died, so that's why she couldn't text."

(12:44 AM) I'm just happy to hear from you.

(12:44 AM) I was getting super worried since I thought your shift was supposed to end at 10.

(12:45 AM) It was. Remember the guy that needs an attitude adjustment? He kept us late.

(12:45 AM) Oh yeah, I remember you told me about him.

(12:45 AM) What did he do tonight?

(12:45 AM) Robbie was being a total ass, super slow. We could hardly get anything done by the time the diner was closing.

(12:46 AM) I didn’t want to leave him with so much work to do.


Robbie… The name was familiar, and it occurred to him quickly: he'd met him a few days ago at the old football field when he'd been there with Wendy. That had been their sort of-introduction, an informal passing, but the realization that he actually knew him was startling. They had to be the same person, too. 'Robbie' wasn't the most common name, while not unusual, and he certainly seemed like the type to have an attitude problem with the sneering and huffing he'd been doing that day.

Thinking back on that conversation, it'd been strange at some points with the visible tautness between Bill and Robbie, something he'd never received an answer on since he'd forgotten to ask about it. Predominantly, his takeaway from the meeting was that he could set up a future camping trip for a weekend with Mabel and Wendy.

(12:48 AM) Yep! I wish I wasn’t scheduled with him. He’s a nice guy, but the worst at closing

(12:48 AM) I’ve been wanting to set you up with him whenever you’re not so busy

(12:49 AM) Wait, with Robbie? Yeah, I don’t know if that'd work out.
Assuming it was the same Robbie he'd met, he wasn't sure they'd be the cute couple that Mabel was undoubtedly envisioning them to be. He'd take her word for it when she said Robbie was nice, but a nice fit for him? Not so much. Dipper couldn't picture 'his type' at all, much less with Robbie being within that category.

(12:49 AM) We’ll chat later, be there in fifteen or twenty minutes.

"That guy that was with Wendy the other day… Didn't you say his name's Robbie?" Dipper asked as he locked his phone and set it onto the desk, peering to see Bill had rejoined Marigold on the sofa. He wished he'd remained quiet, since Bill's eyes were closed with an unruffled expression on his face, and if he was asleep he hadn't wanted to disrupt that.

“I don’t want to talk about Robbie,” Bill grumbled, effectively demolishing his theory that he may be resting. “That fucking asshole.”

"Uh, can we talk about him a little bit? Like, why you have such an issue with the guy?" It was obvious from how they'd interacted, the intentional distance separating them when Wendy had sat with him and Bill, the glares exchanged and dismissive answers. "Wendy seems to like him well enough, and Mabel too. Oh- that's another thing, turns out she works with him at the diner, or at least I assume it's him."

“Yeah, the food there isn’t the only greasy thing I avoid by not going. Stars, he’s fucking awful, don’t let the other ladies fool you. He’s a piece of shit.”

"You're going to have to tell me what's so bad about him because I'm not really— wait, did you say 'other ladies'?" Dipper frowned, then shook his head as he folded his arms over his chest. "There's no 'other' in that."

“I dunno,” he mused, watching through a half-lidded gaze while Dipper started in a circle around the sofa to resume pacing. “You look pretty lady-like to me, doll.”

Feeling the topic slipping, Dipper drew it back with a sarcastic question, "Do you think that's why Mabel's thinking of setting me up with Robbie? Because he'd appreciate my feminine qualities?" Already, he was assuming Bill wouldn't like that, the concept of a trial date with someone he apparently had a deep dislike of for no concrete reason.

“Why would you consider going on a date with that sleaze-bag? He’s a dick, plain and simple. Stay away from him.”

"You still haven't told me why."

A possessive growl formed in Bill's throat. “Maybe it has something to do with soulmarks and how he’s paired with Wendy and wants to be with her, so he's been undermining our relationship." They… were soulmates? Dipper had no idea, but his face must have betrayed his surprise because Bill elaborated, "He’s been trying to steal my woman for years, the fucking ass."

"They're soulmates? Like they have the matching marks and everything?" he clarified for good measure, disbelief still etched into his features. He wondered if they had sent in inquiry letters for government confirmation to cross-reference the mark dates, the sole near-certain way of determining an intended soulmate, but Dipper didn't ask. It felt too personal. "I guess it's weird, not many people our age have found theirs… I mean, I guess it's becoming more frequent since— it's common in your twenties," the decade engraved in pop culture for finding the destined soulmate, "but yeah." Granted, he wasn't twenty, not yet. That gave him a small bit of groundless hope that Bill wasn't his soulmate.
“Those two did when they were children.” Bill sounded bitter. “They dated in high school, and he’s still chasing after her. Fuckwad. I hate him.”

"Oh, sorry to hear that, man." Dipper's sample size was exceedingly limited, but nothing he'd seen of their interactions had suggested Robbie was still pining after Wendy; they were friends, not quite two teenagers dumb with gushy love for one another. However, it was strange for them—or any two people—to know they were soulmates and yet refrain from acting on that. He guessed their families were either supportive or didn't care, but then again, Wendy wasn't the type to let anybody else dictate what she did with her life, so it had to be by choice if they'd dated and since broken up. "That's kind of cool, that they're soulmates but just friends after giving dating a try," he commented but the displeasure pronounced by Bill's glower convinced him to veer the subject from that.

Pausing by the couch, he placed his hands on the back of it to lean over, hovering atop Marigold and Bill. "Look, Wendy chose you, that's what's important. Plus, I don't know if Mabel has asked him yet but if Robbie is trying to date people, he might not be interested in Wendy anymore."

“Please, have you seen the looks he’s been giving her? It’s like he wants to rip her clothes off in front of me.”

Trying to remember the day on the old football field, Dipper said, "He looked like he was falling asleep." Robbie had seemed bored out of his mind, but perhaps that was his default expression because Dipper couldn't recall seeing other emotion on him.

“He’s sneaking peeks at her. Watch that fucker.”

"I seriously don't think he is." Since his pacing continued, he found himself at the foot of the sofa and could reach Marigold, scratching behind her ears as he took a temporary seat on the armrest. Teasingly, he added, "Don't worry, once he and I go on a date, he'll never look at Wendy again." Dipper had mixed feelings but leaned toward not going on a date with anyone because he was busy and had too much to attend to as it was with schoolwork and life stress.

“Why are you going on a date with him?” Bill’s voice rose, verging on demanding. “He’ll show you how much of a dick weasel he is.”

"Jeez, calm down. Dick weasel or not, he's the only one I wouldn't have to kidnap." Bill huffed at his joke. “You don’t have to kidnap me.” Although he'd moved to pace the floor again, this time in a straight line from wall to wall, Dipper froze as he processed the underlying implication.

Uncertain but trying to persuade himself that Bill hadn't understood the dry quip, Dipper tentatively clarified, "I meant… to go on a date with. Like, nobody else is going to do that willingly. With me."

“You just need to meet the right guy,” he said, winking at him. “I think if you got out more often with me, you’d have a better pool of suitors.”

"What? Being in a… a relationship isn't a good method of getting," he hesitated, eyebrows pinching together, "suitors." The wording suggested it was not college dating, but instead engaging in courtship rituals and although he didn't like to think about it, the only one who possibly should be doing that was Bill. Supposedly. Maybe he should start trying to scratch off his soulmark again like it was the worst lottery ticket in the world.
“It totally is, you’ll make all the men jealous.”

"Um," his pitch had raised, "you know I'm not exclusively into… men, right? And also, it hasn't worked for you. I know it's anecdotal, but I'm not jealous, and you're in a relationship." Once he'd said it, he was worried Bill would take that wrong; he hadn't meant to promote the idea that he might have feelings for Bill, he didn't. They had an aberrant friendship, but that was the extent of it.

Bill chuckled. “None of that matters. Let me give you a good time, rile up some guys at the diner and shove it in Valentino's face.” Dipper shook his head at the idea because if he was going to be dating anyone, it wouldn't be Bill despite his delusions of a romantic evening together.

Although he'd been ready to shut down the discussion, Dipper was distracted by the apartment door being fumbled with and opening to reveal Mabel. She was the embodiment of a long night at work: still in work clothes, bags under her eyes, a rumpled skirt from an eight-hour shift. He'd heard from her earlier, but her presence still invited a huge rush of comfort, knowing she was safe and here and nothing had gone wrong. "Hey Mabel," he said, unconsciously breaking into a smile. "I'm glad you're finally back."

“Glad to be back,” Mabel said with a tired grin as she crossed the room to put her bag down. “What happened to your mouth?”

"Technical difficulties with a pen."

"Oh, got it." Yawning, she added, "I feel like I could sleep for a year." On a similar wavelength as his twin, Dipper didn't mind if she crashed after a particularly draining shift at work, so his eyes slid to Bill who was still on the sofa. He cleared his throat, head tilting to silently ask him to evacuate his and Mabel's makeshift bed.

Bill stared at him. “What are you doing?”

Already halfway down the hallway, Mabel responded, "I'm going to shower because I feel like I'm wallowing in grease. See you in fifteen."

When Bill's gaze didn't waver, it registered that he was expecting an answer from him. "That's our bed…?” And with that, he motioned toward the armchair since it was where Bill had been sleeping. "It kind of sounds like Mabel plans on using it once she's done showering, so if you could…” Dipper trailed off and cleared his throat again, louder this time.

“This is my couch,” he grumbled. “You're not even asking for it nicely.”

"That's Stan and Ford's couch," he said in the interest of establishing a factually-correct base first, intrigued that Bill would attempt to claim a visibly-secondhand piece of furniture with various tears and signs of age, "but it'd be nice if you could… y'know, please let us have our bed."

“Fine.” Bill huffed, relenting, and Dipper flopped onto the cushions only to be greeted by Marigold licking his hand, then inching partway onto his stomach. “You owe me. It’s way too early to go to bed, and I'd bet Shooting Star hasn’t changed out of her dress. She just got into the bathroom.”

"You've gone to bed earlier than this everyday this week," he sighed, closing his eyes. Now that the adrenaline of waiting for Mabel had drained from him, he was running on empty. "Also, 'Shooting Star'?"

“Don’t like her nickname?”
"I don't know what it means?" Dipper replied, recalling Bill had referred to her as 'Shooting Star' as of late, starting after their first Drama Club meeting together. "Never mind, I'll ask when she comes back."

Although his eyes were closed, he could still imagine the faint lines of irritation on Bill's face because he likely didn't care for that, being told he wasn't needed. However, there was no protest and approximately ten minutes later, Mabel reentered the living room, and she claimed a place beside him. “Dipper!”

"Oh hi," he greeted, cracking an eye open to draw her into a playful hug as they collapsed into the couch. "So what's this about your nickname, Shooting Star?"

“That’s something the people in the Drama Club call me,” she explained. “Cool, right? I like it a lot.”

Across from them, Bill grumbled as he took a seat on the armchair, glaring at them. “I started it.” His eyes shifted to Marigold. “Why do you have my dog again?”

"I don't know, I guess she wants to cuddle with us?" But Dipper didn't dwell on that, snapping his attention to Mabel once more, asking, "How did it go, by the way? What do you theater nerds," he teased with a gentle poke at her shoulder, "do in the Drama Club?"

“We’ve been practicing switching out roles on a play,” she said, a flash of passion in her gaze. Her excitement was contagious. “It’s about a married couple who’s going through a rough patch. It’s pretty fun! Last week, I had a chance to play some extras, then I did a few scenes as the wife and Bill was the husband. It’s where ‘Shooting Star’ came from.” In his peripherals, he noticed Bill staring at them, beginning to slowly shuffle from the armchair to the couch to take a spot on the armrest. Dipper's intense stare-down didn't sway him.

"Wow, Bill can act like—" a good significant other was the rest of the sentence, but he had enough sense to hold his tongue after getting into hot water over a very comparable comment before. Voice dropping, he mumbled, "—like... uh, I'll tell you later. But anyway," he cleared his throat, "are you guys going to be performing that play eventually, or...?" Although one arm was slung on Mabel, the other felt around the sofa until he found Marigold and started to lightly touch her ears.

Mabel nodded. “I don’t know what my role will be if I'm picked, but I’m looking forward to it.” Bill leaned over them, staring at Dipper as he petted Marigold on her neck. He tried to ignore it but felt his palms starting to sweat.

Recalling Mabel's complaints about her classes establishing background information, he said, "It's good that you're getting actual acting experience now, not that the learning part isn't important. But I'm glad it was fun. Are you going next week?"

“Of course. I really enjoy it and have met a bunch of awesome people.” Mabel grinned, nuzzling into him. To his discontent, Bill's looming presence drew nearer, and Dipper stiffened, unnerved.

"Hey, man. Can I help you with something?"

Their eyes met. “I want my dog.”

"Oh. That's why you're about five more seconds of creepy staring from becoming Norman Bates? Jesus." He didn't know why Bill didn't simply call Marigold to him but leaned down to cup her face, smiling at her big eyes and calm demeanor. "Hey girl, do you want to sit with Bill? Go on."

“I'm not moving,” he informed him. “I'm not in your way, therefore I can be on the couch. With
"Wouldn't you rather be on the armchair? With your dog," he said, imitating Bill's unyielding tone.

Squeezing his shoulder, Mabel nudged him, and Dipper frowned a little since he had a feeling he knew what was coming. "Chill. He'll go away if you don't give him attention," she added in a mock whisper, obviously joking but the message remained. She was right: Bill wasn't obligated to move, he wasn't necessarily disrupting them.

"You wish!" Bill slimed his eyes at them. "I'm not a problem you can eradicate." Yeah, they'd need the help of a professional pest control specialist.

Motioning to himself and Mabel, how they were intertwined together on the sofa cushions during a quite critical twin cuddling session, he asked with a snort, "Feeling left out?"

"Very. I want in."

Flushing, his thoughts came to a screeching halt as he pondered how to handle that. He waited, head tilted in astonishment, hoping Bill would start in on the maniacal laughter that'd give it away as a joke, but he seemed solemn… which was a problem. "Oh, uh—" he instinctively tried to rub his arm but was thwarted by Mabel's weight partly atop him, "I don't know. There isn't a lot of room over here..."

"Shuffle over so I can be the bottom. You both can be on top of me." He winked at him, and Dipper swallowed, fidgeting anxiously. Uncertain, his gaze slid to Mabel, who was biting her lip and giving a small shake of her head. Considering they were hardly friends with Bill, he understood not feeling comfortable enough to literally sleep with the guy.

"I think we'll pass," Dipper told him. "Sorry, dude. Another time or something."

Bill paused, traces of disbelief in his expression, in the twitching corner of his mouth. "What? You're refusing to let me join?" Dipper was about to reply, but Bill went on, louder, "Do you know who I am? Do you know who my father is?"

A bit over a month ago, he probably would have been intimidated by that but now, it sounded like an empty threat, a last ditch effort of getting what he wanted from this exchange. Guardedly, he mumbled, "Bill, seriously. It's not a big deal."

With mutters under his breath, Bill abandoned them for the armchair. "Leave me alone." The tense atmosphere didn't set well with Dipper and he glanced to Mabel in mild alarm, feeling undeniably like he'd messed up this social interaction and had no idea how to fix his mistake. All the options that came to mind likely wouldn't smooth things over, and the tightness in his chest didn't allow him to easily let it go. Dipper didn't want the night to end like this.

Mabel frowned but attempted to restore the light-hearted nature of the discussion. "If you want to sleep with twins, you can always do that with Stan and Ford."

"Ford'll kick me out," Bill responded bitterly, patting his knee as he tried to coax Marigold to him, and Dipper prodded her with an encouraging nudge, hoping she would give Bill company in his loneliness.

Dipper suggested, "Sleep on Stan's side." And a nervous chuckle escaped him at the lame joke, the forced display of amusement quieting into an awkward cough as he sunk into Mabel as if hiding from Bill's dichromatic gaze.
Bill huffed. “He doesn’t care what side I’m on, he’ll kick me out anyway.”

"Alright, well…” he tapered off until he'd run out of words and ideas of where to go from here. It was pointless, he couldn't salvage this with what minimal social skill he had, and even Mabel in her usual cheerfulness couldn't sway Bill's mood. Abandoning his earlier hopes of eliminating the unseen agitation making the interaction impossible, Dipper buried his face into Mabel's shoulder and wondered if he could pretend to have fallen asleep in two seconds.

Mabel just sighed, arms wrapping tightly around him, her breathing slowing as she succumbed to sleep while Dipper remained awake, painfully alert and obsessing over how the uncomfortable tension never had been resolved. Maybe it would fade by morning.
Chapter 12

Busy week, so I didn't get to your fantastic comments, but thanks Jaylafer, Piqued Penguin, Frost2098, Acewolf, Techtonictess, MamMothFerre, and heedayy <3 Hoping to reply before the weekend, life permitting.

Although he’d been ignoring the increasingly frequent growls of his stomach, it was becoming harder to neglect hunger to keep his focus on grading papers. Chewing the pen didn't help, the scraping of teeth on plastic combining with the tick of Bill’s clock from the desk beside him, none of it could ease the gnawing for food.

When Bill had reached out to him via text to ask if he was ready to grade today, he'd suggested locations: grad student office, the library, the union, Stan's place, but Dipper declined. Despite some rougher interactions recently, he'd dropped the idea of being in the presence of others under the circumstance that another incident of violence would be the permanent end of that trust, so they were in his apartment together, working side-by-side at the desks. He was kicking himself for rejecting that offer, now wishing he would have gone with a dining center as a destination of choice because he could be grading and choking down the university's slop, but it was better than nothing.

Perhaps it was an apology for past behavior or a sign of gratitude, but Bill had placed a fluffy, oversized pillow on the desk chair for him and neatly organized the most pertinent physics textbooks, stacking them in the corner of the desk’s surface. It was comfortable. Or it had been until his body demanded fuel in exchange for paying attention to the task.

"Hey, are you hungry?" he asked idly without looking up, trying to sound casual like they were friends having a discussion. Nothing weird about that, but he did hope Bill was facing a similar problem since that'd give him permission to use his kitchen, prepare a meal for them. When there was no immediate reply, Dipper saw Bill was sliding over on one side, leaning into him as his grip on the desk slowly failed. Eyes closed, he mumbled something unintelligible, but otherwise didn’t make a sound. Experimentally, he poked Bill in the shoulder to rouse a livelier reply from him or at least encourage regaining consciousness.

Bill jolted away, a grunt of dissatisfaction escaping. “What?” It was a sleepy mumble as he rubbed his eyes, and that was when Dipper noticed the dark bags that had gathered there, presumably a result of bartending shifts or the extensive project he and Ford were working on. Honestly, he wasn't looking too healthy with the obvious lack of sleep and sunken eyes, blond hair sticking out at odd angles like he hadn't brushed it in several days, a signature Dipper-look that appeared odd on Bill.

"I asked if you were hungry."

“Yeah. Pretty hungry.” He glanced at him, stifling a yawn. “What, are you?”

Ignoring the question to check the time, he inquired, "What time did you last eat?" If it had been at noon, that was already seven hours ago.
Drifting forward, Bill held his face in his hands, seemingly trying to recollect his composure. “Am I supposed to remember that? I think I had some booze last night, that’s it. A bottle or two.” Dipper’s eyes rolled at the absence of self-care, any semblance of an attempt thrown to the wind if the last time Bill had eaten was approaching a day ago, and his dinner had been alcoholic beverages.

"Dude." Previous hesitance over consuming Bill's groceries to make them dinner had disappeared, and Dipper slid the chair away from the desk to begin walking to the kitchen. Behind him, he heard the click of toenails on flooring and realized Marigold had risen from her spot on the sofa to follow him, probably curious — pets weren't allowed in university housing, but Bill had said he would be bringing her home this weekend.

Searching the cupboards for ingredients, he announced, "We're having dinner. I'm going to make us some, uh... how does pasta sound?"

Over the half-wall, he saw Bill groggily turned to face him in the chair. “Fine. Feeling like you’re only doing this as an excuse to make food for yourself.” The amusement in his statement diminished any sense of shame. “Am I wrong?”

"Yeah, you are. I'm doing this because I'm an amazing person," he said through a bright grin over the clatter of a pot and utensils, "and I care very deeply about you, even if you are a total dumbass sometimes. I mean, booze for dinner? What the heck, man?"

“It’s called fine dining, you should try it sometime.”

Dipper's nose wrinkled, unimpressed, but he decided to feign offense. "Oh, so you don't think my pasta is going to be fine dining? I'm insulted, maybe I'll eat at the dining center and leave you to your alcohol poisoning with a side dish of liver damage."

“Hey, I can afford liver damage. Preach to Stan.”

While he was about to remind Bill of impending health issues, he caught himself, uncertain if he should proceed. He didn't want Bill to actually drink himself into a hospital or the graveyard, but annoying him wasn't his intention either, especially because Bill knew what he was doing and wasn't blind to the risks.

He'd already gathered the pasta and a bowl of water, but he didn't proceed. "Look, do you want me to make you dinner or not?" he asked, hesitating. When Bill responded affirmatively, Dipper resumed with renewed vigor, desperate to satiate his own need for food, eager for an end to the hunger pains by muting the growls of his stomach.

Soon, he had two dishes of pasta and the kitchen was semi-cleaned, so he brought them into the living room only to find Bill had switched to the sofa. Dipper gave his portion with a quiet "here" and then sat a cushion-length away, wasting no time in devouring his dinner.

“Thanks.” Bill wolfed down his pasta, finishing the heap of noodles within a few minutes. Once done, he set the plate on the coffee table and stretched out like a lazy jungle cat to announce, “I’m tired.”

As he finished the last of his pasta, a hum of agreement spilled from Dipper, examining the blueish-black skin under Bill's eyes again that suggested it'd been a while since he'd received a decent night's sleep. "I bet. You look tired. Do you want me to leave so you can rest?" Although he briefly peered at the desk of ungraded homework, he supposed it wouldn't have to be done tonight. Bill's students could be patient and wait another session or two for their returned assignments.
From attending Bill's class recently, he could assume it wouldn't break their hearts because a decent half were anxious, picking at themselves or squirming, when homework was being distributed.

“No,” Bill murmured as he closed his eyes. “I sleep better with people around. The last few nights have been lonely.” There was an implication attached to the statement concerning him and Wendy that Dipper was actively avoiding. So as his gaze darted around the room, he was thankful for a familiar Golden Retriever landing in his line of sight.

"Seriously? Marigold's right here," she perked up at the sound of her name and pranced over to rest her head in his lap, which drew affectionate rubs from him, cooing, "aren't you?" At Bill's expression, he caved a little, "Okay, I know she's not 'people', but… I'm guessing she's an expert cuddler."

“She does cuddle nicely,” he admitted. “But it's not like the hot skin of someone pressed against you.” Dipper wasn't sure how to formulate a response to that but stared at Bill, outright gawked at Bill for at least thirty seconds, then he swallowed, fingers sweeping through his hair.

"You… realize I'm not—" he shook his head, struggling to rephrase, "you know my, uh, 'hot skin' isn't going to be pressed against you if you fall asleep, right?"

“No, but I like the thought.”

"Yeah, after that conversation a while ago, I kind of figured you might be looking for a cuddle partner," he said with a weak laugh, the same hand that'd brushed through his hair rubbing at his upper arm. Despite the discomfort coursing through him, it wasn't the act of snuggling with Bill that Dipper had a particular issue with. Sure, he maintained reservations since they hadn't known each other for more than two months, but it was Bill's relationship status that made him feel it was crossing a line.

"Looking only for the best." he tiredly hummed. “You in, doll?”

"I was going to—" he coughed, gesturing toward the desks pressed together, "finish grading your students' papers, then probably go for the night."

There was clear disappointment in Bill’s voice. “You weren’t staying?”

"Wait, staying the night?" The surprise was in his reared back stance and wide eyes, disbelief trickling through Dipper as it occurred to him. "Why would I stay with you? It's not that I'm against it," he said carefully, "but I just… don't know why I would."

“I don’t know why you wouldn’t. Think about it! We can take a nap, then I can take you to work.” At first perplexed considering he didn't have a job, the next statement made him realize Bill was talking about his own work: "I'll get you a Shirley Temple so you have something to sip on."

"Um, I'm flattered, I think? But I probably shouldn't stay the night with you," he said, nervously chuckling. "That might give people the wrong idea about us. Besides, Stan invited me and Mabel to the comedy club this Friday for their special deal on food, something like half off. I don't know if you're working that night, but maybe we'll see you there?"

“Oh, you’ll see me for sure now.” Bill sighed. “I really wanted to—” There was a pause as he checked his phone, frowning, and the abrupt stop had Dipper wondering what the rest of that had been. Shaking his head, he continued. “Well, I wanted to nap with you at the very least.”

Head dipping toward the phone to indicate the strange reaction, he asked, "Hey, what's up?"
“Red wanted me to hang out with her and some others,” he shrugged, “so I said no.”

"Too exhausted? That's understandable," he said. "I know you've been, well…” Dipper couldn't decide how to end that to strike the balance between concerned and inoffensive to Bill by flat out saying he looked like he'd been through hell and back.

“Actually, I don’t want to be around her right now.” Dipper didn't bat an eye at the explanation that felt all-too-common after similar sentiments in the past. From an outsider's perspective, Bill and Wendy's relationship operated in stages: beginning with periods of being enamored, and they'd meet up every few days. One of those meetings would go awry, then it'd be a week of no contact or dodgy responses, or a breakup that'd prove to be temporary.

"What are you guys fighting about this time?"

Another shrug. “We’re not fighting. I don’t know why you think we are.” Although he'd been starting to collect the dishes to move them from the living room, Dipper halted at that and debated how to respond, opting for honesty.

"You guys fight, then you usually avoid her until things smooth over. That's all. But look, I get it, you're tired tonight and don't want to go out with her and her friends." It wasn't a big deal, and he hoped Bill wouldn't make it into one by misconstruing it to believe he was calling him a terrible boyfriend or old or an equally ridiculous insecurity.

Bill grumbled as Dipper disappeared into the kitchen to put the plates in the sink. When he returned, Bill was looking at his phone with a sour expression. "And now she’s on the way over. What the fuck."

Clearing his throat, Dipper had been about to sit on the sofa again and procrastinate on grading a while longer, but this changed his mind - suddenly, the prospect of grading was fascinating - and he sidestepped to the desk.

Head bent over the remaining few papers, he said, "I don't think I should be a part of this.” Concerning himself with the details would lead to choosing sides or getting in the middle of it, yet he had no need to interject an opinion. It wasn't his relationship trouble.

“I can’t believe her. Why would she do this? She knows I don’t want to be bothered.” In the background, he heard Bill's rant continuing but tuned out, unwilling to be a participant in the 'my-life-sucks' circlejerk today. Poor Bill, having a stellar academic record, a girlfriend, enough money to fill an ocean, a job he did for fun. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth and he drew closer to the homework sheet to focus, eyes narrowed, trying to ignore Bill's tirade and the flaring of chronic pain. But obviously, Bill's life was the worst.

It was amazing how the rant had still been going when the door opened and Dipper could see Wendy enter out of the corner of his eye, her posture relaxed and strides confident with the easygoing air that he admired in her, quietly wished he could harness in himself.

The hostility was instant. “Why did you bother coming?” Bill snapped as he stood from the couch, stalking toward Wendy as he stared her down, but she didn't seem too fazed, merely confused. “I told you I wasn’t in the mood.”

"What? You didn't want to go out with me and the gang," Wendy replied with a shrug, already kicking her shoes off, "so I figured that meant you wanted to chill here for our date night." When she looked up again, her eyes slid past Bill to settle on him, giving a smile and a wave, which he
tentatively returned. "Oh, hey Dipper."

"Hey, Wendy." His greeting was shier, feeling out of place. The atmosphere had become noticeably more tense when Wendy entered, but it wasn't her fault necessarily, it was Bill's extreme opposition to her presence, the overreaction that accompanied it. Tugging at his shirt collar, he asked, "Um… this is your date night?"

"Yeah, but don't sweat it." Wendy seemed amused at his obliviousness, placing a hand on Bill's shoulder to urge him to the side, passing gracefully to stroll further into the spacious apartment.

“First you barge into my apartment, now you’re talking to Dipper?” Dipper flushed in stunned embarrassment, throat feeling tight, completely at a loss. Minutes ago, Bill had been the one pushing the boundaries of their relationship, now he was basically being thrown under the bus and desperately wished he knew what Bill perceived to be wrong with him, why Wendy shouldn't converse. And calling him 'Dipper', that was new. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

With a brief glance over her shoulder, Wendy seemed mildly offended, but leaning toward annoyed instead of the dejectedness Dipper was struggling to contain. "You need to chill, man. I'll leave if you're going to be a jerk," a hint of a frown touched her lips, "but I didn't think it'd be a problem since we set this up, like, a week ago. Wednesdays are pretty much always our date night. I didn’t know you were canceling on me."

It was funny, Dipper had believed hearing about their relationship problems was about as awkward as it could get, but now he was witnessing them and hating every second. It was uncomfortable, making him sweaty and twitchy and so goddamn nervous that he simply wanted to pack his things to leave for the evening. Mabel would be done with classes soon, and hanging with her would be infinitely more enjoyable than this trainwreck. It was brutal, a mess of miscommunication and aggression, but he couldn't muster the strength to look away.

“'I didn’t want to be with you tonight, and you’re not respecting that."

That slowed Wendy's pace, and she leaned against the wall to survey him. "Sure, I can head out," she said after a pause, skeptically, "but don't text me in an hour begging me to come back because you're alone and bored, then you can't get upset and call me cold when I don't run over here."

“Fine. I don’t need you anyway, I have Pine Tree here, he actually makes dinner and does the dishes.” He walked over to throw his arm across his back, and Dipper shrunk down when he saw Wendy's expression darken, at first assuming she was mad at him for his supposed involvement.

But no. Her attention was on Bill, she didn't appeared to notice him, much less care that Bill was using him as a prop in this dumb argument.

"Really?" she demanded, collected but seemingly on the verge of losing her patience with this.

"Are you still on that? Bill, we've been together four months, and I've told you hundreds of times that I'm your girlfriend. I'm not your maid."

Coughing, he shrugged Bill's arm from his shoulders, stating tentatively, "Yeah, okay. This— this is super uncomfortable, I think… I'm going to—"

“No, you're not going anywhere. I’m not asking for a maid. Red. I want a good wife. A housewife. And you? You're not even trying, you won't let me knock you up or anything.” With a sharp intake of air, Dipper was off the chair and on his feet, staggering away from Bill in disbelief.

"Whoa, what?" he squeaked, voice cracking as he regarded Bill. There was a lot to process in what
he'd said to Wendy, and his spinning mind could hardly comprehend what he thought he was hearing but hoped he wasn't.

Wendy didn't seem impressed, yet was far from surprised. "Yeah, he has this whole thing about wanting a wife from the fifties or whatever, it's dumb." From her nonchalance, Dipper could estimate it'd been brought up on more than one occasion, perhaps the entire lifespan of their relationship, but partial context only made him feel worse about witnessing this intimate moment of anger.

"You’re the one who’s dumb. Get the fuck out of my apartment."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Bill. Fine, pout on your own, then." Exasperated, Wendy shook her head and walked toward the entryway, though Dipper swore he heard a "because I'm sure that'll make you happy" under her breath as she went. Blinking as he peered at the two, Dipper inched in the direction of the door as well. Cleaning up the aftermath wouldn't be pleasant, and he was feeling a little displaced after the scene that'd transpired before him. As Wendy disappeared from the apartment, he followed after but was stopped:

“What’re you doing?” came a growl, Bill stepping between him and the door. “You’re not leaving.” Although he may have gauged staying prior to the comment, the feeling of discomfort was now rivaled by something closer to intimidation, shocked that Bill would imply it wasn't within his rights to leave, and subtly using physical threat to make his point.

"Bill…” he murmured, aware he could go around him but unsure of what would happen if he tried. In all likelihood, probably nothing, but he stayed rooted as he grasped for a peaceful way to terminate this interaction. Shakily, he placed his backpack on the floor beside him to coax Bill into relaxing, treating the situation like a careful negotiation.

"Come on, Mason Jar. You can’t leave, we can have some fun– chill on the couch, play a game or something. I have consoles and co-op PC games."

"You're blocking the door," he pointed out, tongue-tied, fumbling over how to handle this. He wasn't afraid, he knew Bill wasn't violent, but he didn't want this to erupt into an argument. "And, uh, I don't think you should tell me that I 'can't leave' because that's..." He worried his bottom lip, hoping he didn't have to spell out that it wasn't alright and could actually border on threatening, truly terrifying, if someone didn't know him well enough to recognize the lack of actual danger.

Dipper's shoulders dropped from their tensed position when Bill's expression fell, the recognition sparking. “Ah, fuck. Fuck.” Bill shrunk back and moved away to curl up on the couch. “Fuck me.” Relieved that the pressure had dissipated, he sighed as he saw Bill in this sorry state; he knew this, the regretful expression and defeated posture, and deduced it'd likely precede a long drinking session.

"Hey."

It was a gentle condolence as Dipper perched atop the sofa's armrest, lifting a hand, hesitating, then going through with it and giving Bill's shoulder a squeeze.

“What are you doing?” Bill mumbled, not looking up at him. “I thought you wanted to leave.”

"Yeah, I—" the words caught, and he dropped his hand into his lap, tightening his knees together to regain his balance, but it only made him feel smaller, "I will. I just... wanted to make sure you were okay, y'know? That was pretty intense, with Wendy and everything." And Bill somehow looked worse than he had before, ten times as tired, older like he'd aged years in the span of the
past fifteen minutes.

“I’m fine, but I don’t know.” He sank into the couch, an escaped sigh somehow deflating him and leaving his stare hollowed. “I’m not worth your time.”

"Oh, come on, dude. Don't do that,” he chided with the lightest of groans, pressing a hand over his face to run through his hair. What he was referring to, either the path of self-deprecating thoughts or a grab for sympathy, but he wasn't sure which it was given the two, not that either were going to fix this. "I think you seriously need some sleep." His minimal grip on the armrest was slipping steadily, the fabric sliding from beneath him. Although he scrambled for better purchase, none was found.

“I don’t think I can.”

Dipper winced as he remembered that earlier conversation. "I am not pressing my hot skin to you. Also, you've been able to sleep for your entire life so far, you don't need me now." Slipping downward had Dipper plopped onto the couch cushion, and he tried to inconspicuously rearrange his legs so they were over Bill's lap. They didn't fit in the space beneath him or in the pocket separating their bodies.


"Is this about what you said— do you really want her to be your housewife?" he asked, but he was preemptively kicking himself for being aware of these details, the inner workings of a relationship he wanted distance from with its tangled web of complications. "You know that's not going to work, right? You can't just… force someone to do that, so maybe you should be supportive of her." The suggestion was a mumble, and Dipper wished he could backpedal, wished he hadn't even opened his mouth, wished he would've left several minutes ago. He shouldn't be talking about this with Bill.

“I need a housewife, Pine Tree. I can’t stay with someone who doesn’t want kids– I keep getting pressured, and it fucking sucks.”

Raising his eyebrows, he wasn’t sure where to begin or what to think of the statement. “Wow, there’s.. uh, quite a bit to unpack with that. I don’t think you need a housewife to have kids. You realize that’s not a prerequisite?”

“In my family it is. I need to find the perfect housewife to have children with.”

“If that’s the whole reason you’re with Wendy, it’s time to re-evaluate. Actually, it was time to re-evaluate a minute after your relationship became official.” Before that would've been ideal, too.

“Why do you care? You're not in a relationship with us.”

A sigh was suspended on the tip of his tongue before it spilled over, and he lowered his gaze. “You’re right, man. I’m sure you and Wendy will figure it out.” Dipper didn’t know what to think anymore, where his place in this was. Logically, he had no standing in their drama, but the confrontation tonight and subsequent conversation somehow involved him again.

Quietly questioning if Bill would want him to hang around, he admitted, “I should probably go.”

“You do that. Leave like everyone else does.” Bill turned away from him, pushing himself into the sofa.

Although it was light, Dipper swatted his arm, but there was no malice or annoyance behind the
motion. “Stop that. Guilt ing is kind of a dick move.”

“Leaving someone who's in pain is kind of a dick move.”

Torn, uncertain, he tried to assess the circumstances. Bill had been in a bad mood prior to Wendy's arrival; he had been unhappy about her presence, kicked her out, then redirected his attention on him. Relying on that to elicit sympathy seemed like he was scraping for any rationale available, desperate to convince him to stay longer, but Dipper didn't think he needed the emotional support in a trying time he created to use as leverage.

Dipper thought staying, essentially giving in to this, would set a dangerous precedent for them and give the wrong message about communication in adult relationships. “I guess you can text me if you need someone to talk to, but I’m not being guilt tripped into staying. I'll see you sometime this week, okay?” Bill's loneliness wouldn't last forever, Dipper knew that. Tomorrow, he'd see his students, Ford, faculty, friends… he and Wendy would make up, his behavior was melodramatic. Friday, Bill seemed to be convinced they'd see one another at the comedy club, so he didn't know why it was worth the heartache of an argument.

“Fine. Go. You're real good at leaving.” What he'd said about not being guilt tripped felt flimsy when that struck him hard, and he bit the inside of his cheek as he collected his backpack and left.

The weekly Environment Club meeting was wrapping up after an hour of discussion on the pollution produced by modern farming techniques. While some members of the club trickled from the conference room, others chatted in their own social circles or conversed with the guest speaker. But they couldn't stick around today, he and Mabel had plans for the evening. "Hey, are you ready to take off? I think we could join Stan at the comedy club, if you're still up for that."

“I’m totally up for it. Stan’s been texting me for the last two hours, he really wants us to go.”

"Half-off all of their food is a good deal." The perfect circumstances to lure in a wild Stan: discounted food from the restaurant side and people to laugh at in the comedy club section. "I wonder if he's already ordered everything on the menu."

A friendly question came from behind them, "What's up?" Wendy had placed one hand on the back of each of their chairs, tilting forward with cool interest, a lazy grin across her face. Beside her, Robbie stood with an indifferent expression, out of place but he didn't look like The Devil that Bill claimed he was. "You guys doing something tonight?"

“Yeah,” Mabel said. “We’re going to the comedy club for the half-off deal they have tonight. Are you coming with?"

"The comedy— oh, that one nearby? The bar?" Dipper nodded the confirmation. "Dude, half-off is sweet. All I had to do tonight was host this meeting," she said, then shrugged, "so sure, why not? Are you coming with?" This question was directed at Robbie with an elbowing nudge.

Robbie huffed. “Yeah, okay. Whatever.” Wendy didn't seem amused by the less-than-enthusiastic response and muttered a playful "try to look alive" to him while Dipper and Mabel fell into step with the two, walking through the hallway of the student union. The conference room for Environment Club meetings wasn't far from the entrance, but Dipper still felt odd traversing the lounge-esque area with deceivingly-uncomfortable chairs, coffee tables, and couches for group studying sessions — the occasional glance from a stranger had plunged him into self-consciousness, even if he knew it was nonsensical.
"If you don't want to..." Dipper started and clasped his hands behind his back, but he didn't finish the sentence since Mabel seemed to make up for Robbie's absence of excitement.

"Great!" Mabel beamed. "Are we leaving right away?"

"Sure, maybe—" his eyes slid to Wendy and Robbie, coughing, "maybe if you guys want, we could carpool? Mabel and I drove to this meeting, so our car's in front of the building." He hoped they wouldn't pry, reluctant to share that driving was kinder to his health.

But neither did, and Wendy said, "Yeah, sounds good."

Mabel nodded, already waiting for the others in the entrance to hold the door open.

"Uh, okay. Who’s driving..?" Robbie's confusion melted to disappointment as he watched Mabel get into the driver's seat through the window, which Wendy seemed to notice as well because she chuckled at Robbie's visible displeasure.

While Dipper was trying to get comfortable in the passenger seat, Wendy filed in with Robbie and teased, "I know you're proud of your license since it took you two fails to get, but you don't always have to drive, man."

Mabel hesitated. "Oh, does he want to—?"

"Don't worry about it. It's like, three years later, but he's still riding that high of being seventeen and able to drive without his weird parents bringing him everywhere."

"Hey! My parents didn't take me everywhere. I had a bike. Before some asshole nerd and his buddy stole it...

Dipper gave him a small smile through the rear view mirror, trying to reassure, "Oh, uh, hey. It's not really an issue, I mean... Mabel drives me everywhere. I don't have my license yet, and at least you actually got yours." What he had was an expired learner's permit that was as good as being told he'd never be allowed to drive on his own; medically, it wasn't feasible, and instead of denying him altogether, his incredibly narrow restrictions didn't make it worth the while.

Robbie shook his head. "What's the point in having it if I can't use it?" Dipper thought he heard him lowly add, "Driving is a passion, and it's been ripped from me like my heart."

"Um. Okay." Dipper didn't know what else to say to the melodramatic whine, and apparently, neither did Wendy, though he could see her rolling her eyes and mumbling a sarcastic 'deep' which earned her a frown. "That's... rough." So Robbie was a little strange, but he was a little strange too, nothing that was nearly as concerning as some of Bill's behaviors, if he were to judge Robbie versus Bill on a prospective friendship meter.

"Hey Dipper," Mabel broke the quiet. "Are you looking forward to eating some good food for once?" Dipper hummed his confirmation, meanwhile he heard a side conversation fire up from the backseat but couldn't make out anything. "What do you think we should get? Appetizers, those super good sandwiches? Oh! Maybe a burger. They make the best veggie burgers."

"Maybe we can look at the menu and decide which dishes to split?" he suggested. "Then we can try all our favorites, or something new if you want."

Between them, the discussion was enough to fill the car as they drove to the bar, but it proved to be a short ride. Mabel parked and prepared to get out when Dipper reached over to stop her, but he directed his comment to Robbie and Wendy, "You guys go ahead. We'll join you in a second,
just... have to take care of something." There was no resistance as Wendy nodded and continued inside, Robbie too disinterested to bother questioning him.

Once they were gone, Dipper asked, "About Robbie... Did you," he gestured, averting his eyes, "say anything to him? I know you mentioned thinking about setting us up and that was a whole thing, but... yeah, you didn't tell him that, right?"

"Was I not supposed to?" she asked. "I thought you were into it but busy with your classes. I let him know you might want to."

flushing, his eyes darted again before they settled on Mabel. "No, it's... it's fine," he stammered, scratching the back of his neck. "I— I didn't know he knew. I guess it doesn't matter anyway, huh?" He forced a laugh, then a relaxed appearance by dropping his tensed shoulders. "Since he doesn't seem that into me, which is fine." Honestly, Dipper didn't think there was anything to be into when it came to him — some awkward kid who couldn't socialize to save his life, and he supposed he didn't know Robbie well enough to make that conclusion regarding him.

"Hey, it's okay. You need to give it some time to warm up to him,” she said. “He’s kinda like you, it takes a while. And if it doesn’t work out, at least you’ll have a new friend to hang with.”

Although he hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath, he released the puff of air in a controlled, tight sigh. "I... okay. I guess you’re right." Besides, Robbie didn't seem rude or otherwise disagreeable, merely bored and dramatic. He could work with that better than he could, say, moody outbursts and unpredictable reactions. "Are you ready to go in?"

"Ready as can be,” she told him with a grin. They headed inside, only to be met by the sound of a gruff voice calling them over, and the sight of Stan and Wendy waving at them while Robbie stared at the menu like he had a million places he'd rather be. Dipper couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested in going with but didn't know why he'd agree if he preferred to be somewhere else. Sitting at the rounded table between Mabel and Robbie, he stole a menu from the basket and slid it toward himself, inwardly pondering if he should feel impressed or disgusted by how Stan had two plates of food sitting in front of him.

"Guess who we saw when we came in?” Wendy said and tilted her head at Stan. "He said he was meeting you guys here."

"Stan,” Mabel spoke his name excitedly. “Your food looks really good, like ultra delish. Can I have some?"

Stan grumbled, slowly pulling his food close to him. “Get your own food, I didn’t invite ya here so you could steal mine.”

Amused, Dipper asked, "Why did you order food? We said we were on the way. Couldn't wait five minutes?” The food at the comedy club-slash-bar and restaurant was nothing to scoff at, it was quite delectable, but he didn't know if it was to the point of throwing social expectations out the window for. However, it was possible that didn't apply when evaluating Stan's questionable decisions.

Glancing around the seating area, he realized it was busier than what the average night would be, and packed tables of guests talking among themselves created a mindless wave of sound that rose over the energetic music in the background. Although he didn't immediately see Bill in the bar area, he didn't write off the possibility that he was here since it would be strange of him to miss an opportunity for interaction.
“I wanted to be ready for the show,” Stan explained. “The guy who’s performin’ is a real hoot, his name’s Soos.” Eyebrows furrowing, Dipper leaned forward to hear the name more clearly, a toss up between ‘Zeus’ or ‘Soos’. ”Great guy, I think you’ll like ‘im too.”

Shortly after, a waiter stopped by to collect drink orders and give them a few more minutes to choose what food everybody wanted. While it would have been nothing out of the ordinary, Stan surprised him by ordering an alcoholic beverage and when prompted, he'd shrugged then said it was a treat for him and Mabel to share during the show, a wink following the explanation. "Makes everything funnier," had been his coarse words regarding the gesture, along with: 'hope ya like the show 'cause you ain't going anywhere 'til that's worn off." Dipper didn't believe sharing a drink would prove intoxicating for either of them, but he appreciated the subtle display of affection.

The waiter had come and gone again in the next ten minutes, taking their food order and promising a bartender would deliver the drinks. And because the universe loved to do this kind of stuff with him, Dipper wasn't surprised in the least when he saw who it was.

“Well, well. Look what the sale dragged in. Stan,” Bill’s voice rang out as he appeared beside the table, drinks on a tray. It was kind of amusing, the fact his attire changed very little despite the vast shift in scenery; it was the same formal outfit, less yellow than usual. "You’re a sight for sore eyes. Here,” he began to allocate the drinks, placing two in front of Stan. “You must be thirsty. Fordsy not letting you stockpile at home?”

Muttering, Stan pushed one of the drinks over to him and Mabel, yet Dipper stared and grimaced, wondering if they would be reprimanded for that. Bill knew how old he was, and by extension, how old Mabel was. However, Bill didn't notice, or he didn't care to, avoiding an acknowledgment of where the drink had landed.

“Nah,” he responded. “I have plenty of booze at the apartment.”

“Uh huh. Hey Red, hey Graverobber– I mean Robbie.” But he didn't sound apologetic at all.

"'Sup," Wendy greeted, leaning back in the velvet-lined chair. "Didn't know you'd be working tonight, but that's cool. I thought you said you didn't have a Friday shift when I asked last week."

“I thought you weren’t going to be here,” he countered, gaze critical. “What, did you only come because of them?”

"Yeah, man," she confirmed with a crooked smile and a nod. "I heard them chatting about coming, so Robbie and I tagged along. Is that a problem?"

“You were with Robbie before coming here?”

"Sure, he was at the Environment Club meeting."

The tension was building despite how some of the individuals at the table chose to ignore that, and Dipper coughed, his fingers tapping on the side of the beverage's glass. In the corner of his eye, he could see Mabel trying to meticulously angle a straw into the red liquid, but Dipper's focus was on Bill.

"Hey, you're… actually here," he said lamely, scratching the back of his neck, but he guessed it would achieve the goal: getting the focus off of Wendy and Robbie. "I know you said you would be, but yeah." It was still strange to see him standing there in his bartender outfit, multi-colored buttons spanning the vest, and stupid long sleeves. It was beginning to dawn on him that it was quite possibly a conscious choice to hide his soulmark, hence the constant cover, but there was
room for doubt when most of his own attire would have the same effect. The plaid shirts and hoodies were great at keeping it from Bill’s sight.

“Of course I’m here,” he muttered. “And I’m not running around with my soulmate behind my girlfriend’s back.”

Oh. Possibly ruining his argument wasn't worth the heartache if they turned out to actually be soulmates, so Dipper held his tongue, but he felt Mabel's gentle nudge under the table and nodded slightly, confirming he heard that too. But… he supposed he could test the waters, toss the suggestion teasingly and measure how it was perceived. "If you were, I guess that would make me your soulmate," he said with a laugh that hopefully sounded genuine, aiming for a playful, joking tone.

“Yeah,” Bill actually laughed along. “Could you believe that? It’s ridiculous.”

"What?" he asked, attempting to mask the anxiety in his voice, worried Bill—and everyone else—heard the small tremors. "You don't think I'd be a good soulmate?" Dipper could imagine his smile and laugh were about as fake as they came, but nobody had reacted badly aside from Mabel’s warning glances, so maybe it wasn't so obvious.

"I could see it— you and Dipper. Real cute," Wendy commented, relaxed, chuckling at the idea and shaking her head. Again, Dipper wished he could be like that. She seemed significantly more at ease with this conversation than the previous, probably because it wasn't begging to interrupt into a fight in the middle of the comedy club.

But it didn’t last. Bill rolled his eyes, bristling at Wendy. “Do you want me to date him instead of you?” At that, Dipper's eyebrows shot up.

"Chill, I was kidding." It was the same taut sort of reply that she'd used before, as if trying to silently tell him he was reaching the end of her patience, simultaneously implying they shouldn't escalate into yelling here, of all places. "We should let you go, I'm sure you want to get back to the bar since it’s busy tonight."

When Bill's face contorted in anger, Mabel must have noticed because she jumped to soothe. "I think the show's going to be starting soon," she supplied. "We can catch up later!"

Bill let out a low growl, before he turned and stalked back into the crowd. Stan watched him, sipping his drink. "Well, here’s to hopin’ his mood ain’t fucked for the whole night."

"Just let him do his thing," Wendy said. "He'll stop pouting over it eventually." It wasn't clear whether 'eventually' ever came because Bill didn't return, even after the food arrived and the show started. There were plenty of laughs during Soos' set (his introduction confirmed his name was indeed 'Soos') with Stan being the loudest, cheering and hollering him on; maybe it would have been embarrassing, but being in a bigger group reduced the discomfort. Or it was a byproduct of the red beverage that he and Mabel had sipped to the bottom of the glass, but he doubted it.

Between the set as the group was talking, it was to Dipper's absolute astonishment that Robbie actually spoke to him in reference to the MC's joke about Ginsberg. Robbie had been floored that he laughed, much less understood it, citing nobody in his life had ever shown interest in poetry. It wasn't necessarily his favorite—poetry in general, he preferred mystery and suspense—but he'd explained he knew at least some of the major American poets, which seemed to open the floodgates into Robbie sharing his startlingly deep knowledge on the subject until the conversation was violently shh’d by Stan while the new set started.
The show drew to an end an hour later, and unlike Soos, this comedian’s jokes relied on edge humor and it wasn't holding Dipper's attention — the only laughs it'd squeezed from him were nervous ones, and he'd become bored with twirling his straw around the drink or counting crumbs on the many empty appetizer plates. Most of the patrons either had similar thoughts or decided it was getting too late to be frequenting a bar because the crowd had thinned with only a few full tables remaining.

After he'd looked around, Dipper cleared his throat and murmured so as not to disturb those who were enjoying the show, "Hey, I think I'm going to see if Bill's doing okay." It was directed at no one in particular and although he received a few agreeing mutters and nods, the rest didn't seem to care, with the exception of Robbie who took his departure as an opportunity to say he was also stepping outside to vape.

Eyes sweeping him, a sole reaction was formed: Classic.

Dipper broke off from the table and claimed a bar stool at the far end, away from those who were actually chatting and enjoying the alcohol, then instantly spotted Bill preparing a drink. There was a wide smile on his face and charmingly sweet words falling from his mouth to the patron. No wonder he did well as a bartender, he could convince anybody he was their best friend within the creation of a single drink.

Once his customer was taken care of, Bill seemed to notice his presence and flashed that Hollywood smile at him, hopefully unaware of the fluttering it’d ignited in his stomach. “Mason Jar! Finally decided to hang out with a real man, huh?”

Dipper frowned, gaze darting from Bill to each side. "Who?"

“.Do you seriously not know?”

Bill’s hurt tone was a surprise, and he silently tried to determine who Bill was referring to until he saw the answer was literally staring at him. When the realization hit, he flushed and mumbled a quiet "oh", leaning forward to put his face in his hands. "Sorry, man. I didn't… I didn't get that, at first."

“Am I not a real man to you?” Bill wasn’t satisfied with his reaction. “Are emos the new ‘man’ now?”

"Oh, come on. Don't be an ass about this, you know you are," he protested, but it was muffled. "And what are you even talking about?"

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Bill huffed softly. “You and Robbie. Stars, it’s gross.”

"What about it?" he asked idly, bathed in uncertainty over whether he wanted to open this door or if he should disengage from this conversation, aware nothing good could come of it. "We were talking, and besides, I thought you'd like that. If he's distracted with me, he's probably not convincing your girlfriend to cheat on you." Dipper's delivery suggested he didn't believe a word of Bill's paranoid complaints concerning Wendy's loyalty to him, seeing it as a non-issue after Wendy and Robbie’s interaction. She couldn’t be more uninterested in romance with him.

Lowering his hands from his face, he saw Bill’s expression dropped further, and he was giving him a hardened scowl. “He wishes he could convince Wendy to cheat on me. I’m the best, and he’s the sucker I’m going to punch if he looks at her or you again.”

"Whoa, back up. Or me?" he repeated, incredulous. "Bill, I'm not yours to… what, be possessive
"I'm allowed to be possessive over you," Bill told him. "I'm protecting you from that Edgelord."

"What was that?" Robbie demanded as he approached, and Dipper detected a distinctly sweet-fruity scent clinging to him.

"Oh, you know your name. Good boy."

"Seriously?" Dipper mumbled to Bill, exasperated. He didn't have to be rude. To Robbie, he said, "Hey, man. The others are still at the table, I was just…'Checking on Bill' didn't seem appropriate to say in front of the very guy in question, so he shrugged.

"Yeah, well. You want a drink while we’re over here? On me." Although it carried a similar tone as his usual deadpan statements, vulnerability and genuine interest seemed to paint the offer, and the look Robbie was giving him… It was tender, friendly, but Dipper must have taken too long to collect his thoughts because Robbie cleared his throat, "Don’t have to or anything, but since you’re not driving…”

Flushing, his throat felt dry. "Oh, uh—"

"Are you getting him a water?" Bill challenged. "He’s not twenty-one, you can’t get him a drink. In the state of California, it’s only legal if he’s in a private residence and it’s provided by a parent, legal guardian, a responsible relative, or a spouse. You any of those? No? No.”

Dipper's eyebrows furrowed, then raised as he recalled a similar situation that'd been a mere two hours ago. "You do realize that you served me and Mabel an alcoholic beverage earlier?" It may as well have been without the booze entirely since it didn't result in even a buzz, the alcohol content extremely low and split between them.

"That was different," Bill told him, confirming he did indeed see that exchange but chose not to comment on it. "This guy is trying to drug minors. He needs to be removed from the premises. You hear that, Graverobber? You have five minutes to get out or I’m calling the manager.”

Nothing but drama would come of the manager being called over, so dodging the encounter seemed logical, but it appeared Robbie had other ideas. "What? That’s lame. You can’t kick people out." He took a step toward the bar, putting his elbows onto it to hover near Bill. "I haven’t done anything wrong. Yet."

Bill's features darkened. "That's it—"

Trying to diffuse the situation, Dipper said, "So, Robbie… Why don't we—?" He motioned to the table, then coughed. "I think they were planning on leaving at the end of the set, and that's been finished for a couple minutes. They're probably waiting for us, and it...uh,” he laughed a little anxiously, "sounds like you're being too rowdy anyway." Robbie cracked a smile at that, to his bewilderment; he hadn’t known that was something the guy could do, given how he had cycled the same three expressions throughout the evening.

"You can’t possibly want to leave with him,” Bill mumbled. “He’s up to no good. You can’t trust him.” Patience waning each time Bill insisted he knew what was best for him, Dipper's jaw set tightly.

"I'm leaving with him, and Wendy and my sister. We came together, and I doubt Stan is specifically going to drive him home to appease you." Dipper didn't know what it was, this surge of possessiveness over Wendy and himself while maintaining a strict grudge against Robbie, but it
felt like it was spiraling beyond acceptable, if it had been anywhere near that in the first place. With a sigh, he shuffled off of the bar stool and mumbled out a "let's just go" while he brushed past Robbie to walk toward their companions.

Arriving at the table, Wendy joked, "Regret going over there yet? While you guys were dealing with Bill, we were figuring out how to divide the tab between us, and I still think I'd rather be here considering Bill's mood tonight."

Stan chuckled. “Ya really got him riled. I don’t know how ya managed, he was in such a good mood before you kids came around. Must be your face, skinny jeans.” Robbie replied with a halfhearted echo of “must be” and a shrug.

"Yeah, he's got this whole insecurity complex," Wendy said. "He's usually okay, but sometimes he gets upset over it. I'll talk to him later, make sure he's doing alright."

Robbie huffed. “Whatever, I’m sure he’s fine. He tried to kick me out for ‘trying to drug minors’ or something.”

"What did you do?" Mabel asked, puzzled and concerned.

"I can tell you about it later," Dipper promised. "But if you guys are ready, we might want to go. Robbie kind of... well— you know. Bill gave him five minutes to leave, or he was getting management."

Stan raised his eyebrow at him. “Well, get goin’ then. We’ll meet ya outside, we gotta settle the bill.” To Wendy, he proposed: “I’ll pay twenty percent, or.. whatever five bucks covers.”
Chapter 13

Silence from Bill over the weekend had been jarring, would have even been lonely if not for Robbie picking up the slack. They’d exchanged numbers after the bar incident and kept in touch, a lively group conversation with Mabel, Wendy, Robbie, and himself coming to fruition, opening the door for casual conversation about whatever popped to mind. Dipper liked it, having a somewhat healthier social life, but… there was the issue of Bill and Bill’s class meeting today, inevitable awkwardness waiting to happen if they were on bad terms.

Hovering in the hallway of the physics department, Dipper paced the short, narrow path too many times to count. As he slowed near the grad student office, he gulped in a shaky breath, collected his courage, then knocked. From the other side, he heard what had to be Bill's "come in" and that alone had convinced him to take off, never look back, forget about this dumb idea of confrontation. Conflict avoidance made it a pipe dream from the start, really.

But then, the sound of his demise: Bill's chair dragging across the carpet and knocking against the wood of his desk, meaning he was getting up. He was coming out here. Dipper's eyes went wide, and in a panic, he threw the door open and almost hit Bill with it, indicated by his reflexive flinch.

"Hey, I…” It felt like there was cotton in his mouth, the words a struggle. "I had a physics question."

Bill’s expression picked up as he ushered him over to his desk, and Dipper complied, trying to gather his thoughts because this certainly wasn't how he thought the interaction would go, but he was glad Ford didn't seem to be here. “What is it?”

Taking a seat in Bill's chair, he said, "I was wondering why you were such a huge jerk on Friday." It was blunter than he thought it'd be, but there was no taking it back, no opportunity to rephrase it to lighten the blow. He wanted to smack a hand to his forehead, this surely wouldn't be productive. Bill stared at Dipper, the light in his eyes fading.

“That’s not a physics question.”

"Look, I hardly have any idea what's going on in my classes. How was I supposed to know your attitude wasn't part of the theoretical concepts?"

“If you’ve come to bitch at me,” he spoke quietly, “you’re free to leave.”

The coldness of the implication chilled him to the bone, and he unconsciously placed more space between him and Bill, leaning in the chair to rest his back against the desk. Dipper was already feeling like it was a lapse in judgment, regretted each misstep. He clearly wasn't ready for this. "Sorry," he sighed after a second. "I didn't— this wasn't how I wanted this to go. Uh, could you just… maybe, tell me why you were acting so weird about everything on Friday? Like, almost getting in a fight with Wendy, being all possessive, threatening to kick out Robbie? What the heck, man?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Bill shook his head. “I didn’t do anything weird or unreasonable the other night.”

"Why were you overly-upset about Robbie being there?" Dipper questioned, scraping what seemed to be the key problem. "If this is still cheating anxiety, it's not happening. Seriously."

“You’re really obsessed with Robbie,” he muttered. “Are you actually planning on dating his
stupid ass?” Hesitating, he frowned, mentally evaluating if that was Bill's concern. On one hand, he could be worried as a friend if he had logic beyond a childish dislike of Robbie, a valid reason why they shouldn't be exploring romantic possibilities. What ruled against that theory was Bill's total lack of evidence that he was as terrible as he claimed. On the other hand, he was being possessive as…

As a soulmate, Dipper acknowledged with a familiar discomfort arising from the notion. It wasn't impossible that Bill's near-irrational sense of possessiveness was an unconscious manifestation of trying to keep his soulmate to himself. But that was assuming they were soulmates, another problem entirely.

Then, the matter of dating Robbie. He seemed okay, 'nice' like Mabel had told him, but that was about the extent of it. The connection—the spark, for when he was feeling cliche or on a trashy novel binge—was absent and had his interest wandering, though he held onto hope of a bond developing over time. However, with a busy schedule and midterms coming soon, his wishy-washy approach had him procrastinating on a date. "I don't know, he seems fine," he finally answered, pinching the bridge of his nose and exhaling in frustration, but he wasn't sure who it was directed at. "I don't see why you have an issue with that."

“I don’t have an issue with you dating. I have an issue with him.”

Skeptically, he stated, "So it could be anybody else." That was a relief, he'd prefer to discredit the soulmate idea and deal with the overprotective friend. "Who do you suggest?" It wasn't as if he was going to blow off Robbie and date whoever the answer would be, but he couldn't contain genuine curiosity over who Bill would recommend.

“Not Robbie,” he insisted, leaning over the desk. Dipper could see the grin forming on his face, the curve of pale lips was almost wolfish. “I was thinking... me.”

Breath catching, Dipper sat upright so fast that he nearly fell out of the chair when it was thrown off balance, but Bill's hand steadied it. The motion did nothing to stabilize his thudding heart or racing thoughts, the resurgence of anxiety from the possibility that Bill seemed to want to date him, the obsessive panic from sleepless nights wondering if he'd found his soulmate and it was this guy. He didn't know what to say or what to do about this, surely it had to be a joke because Bill was in a relationship. Through a strained squeak, he stammered, "I, uh... wow— I..."

Bill's eyes flashed mischievously, corners of his grin raising. “Do you want to go on a coffee date with me right now? I was getting ready to go to lunch, you can come with.” Instantly, he relaxed, too thankful for the out to be peeved about the invitation to a date that'd not been a date at all, but a lunch hour with Bill. But how close he'd come to having to make a decision, undoubtedly a rejection, had been a splash of reality.

"Jesus Christ, I thought you were serious for a second," he said, fluffing the wave of hair on his forehead, "and we were going to have to talk about basic decency, like not cheating on your current girlfriend." With an affectionate and relieved laugh, he said, "You're the worst, dude. I can't believe you did that."

Bill chuckled, looking cocky. “I can’t believe you fell for it. You looked like you were about to faint.”

Smile sliding lopsidedly, he said, "Yeah, people do that when they're horrified."

“You were horrified? Ouch, nice to know how much you’re looking forward to our date.”
"It's a friendly coffee date over your lunch break. That's hardly the same deal, you dork." Bill knew that, they both did, so Dipper understood his offense as purely for show. "But I guess I'm flattered that you're taking time from your very busy life to spend it with me. What were you working on before I came in?" To answer his question, Dipper spun to face the open laptop and paperwork, resting on the chair's padded backing as he peered over the sheets.

“Nothing important.” Bill leaned forward further, his chin placed on the top of his head, and Dipper tensed as he felt heat from Bill's body radiating onto his back. His breathing staggered, and his thoughts short-circuited, only barely registering the comment, “This is cozy.”

Bill's exhales brought hair tickling at his eyelashes, but he didn't dare correct the issue in fear of accidentally hitting Bill in the face or otherwise swiping him — and more honestly, he was afraid to move, caught in this position. Frozen. Dipper's palms had dampened, tremors of electricity racing through him, and he determined with a suddenness that they couldn't be at this proximity. His reservations were heightened by uncertainty of what others would think, knowing they shouldn't do this because breaking that physical barrier was a slippery slope, but most of all, he was terrified of the simple truth: he wasn't uncomfortable despite knowing he should be, but the aversion never came.

"Okay," Dipper said breathlessly, but he'd long since forgotten what he was replying to, mind in a haze. "Are we— do you still want to get coffee?" The physical effect was minimal with only palm-sweating and an adrenaline rush to cite as reactions, but the mental one was greater as his thoughts swam with the new knowledge that this wasn't bothering him like it should be.

“I do.” He blew at his hair, and Dipper screwed his eyes shut from the strands brushing against his eyelashes again. “Are you ready to go, doll?”

"You're going to have to move."

When Bill climbed onto the seat, trapping him, Dipper let out a huff of feigned discontent and shifted his hips to draw closer to the straddled back of the chair, away from Bill. "Whoa, uh, that is not what I meant." More cheekily, he tried to keep it together to remark, "If you're going to be a jackass, I might change my mind about going with you."

“Please,” Bill teased. “You can’t reject me. You love the idea of going on a totally platonic coffee date.”

"If I get a free coffee out of it," he admitted, then with a nervous laugh continued, "but we shouldn't be cuddling in your chair. I didn't close the door when I walked in." Bill jolted back, scrambling away from him at the realization. Although that had been the end of his original sentence, Dipper flushed as he noticed it didn't encompass the most obvious reason why they shouldn't — couldn't be doing this, so he added, "Among other reasons." Such as being uncomfortable, which was a totally valid justification and Dipper inwardly shamed himself for not feeling that way.

The last few weeks with Bill had shifted something in their dynamic from acquaintances to friends, and he didn't know if he was thrilled about it, being increasingly more comfortable around one another. Talking with Bill was easier, managing his intense moods, and somehow, he was slowly discerning patterns of behavior, making it seem less violently unpredictable.

“We should go,” Bill muttered and averted his gaze. “Come on, Mason Jar.” He walked to the door, waiting beside it for Dipper, and once he recovered from the confusion of seeing Bill in a sullen state, he scampered after.
Luckily, going on this platonic coffee date didn't require sitting in a vehicle or walking far, both activities that had their limits for Dipper. Approximately two floors lower than the physics department in the basement of the building was a small cafe and study area, a coffee shop attached, and that was where he and Bill ended up with their drinks set before them on the tiny round table. The annoyingly high chairs weren't pleasant, but he didn't think they'd be here long enough to make it problematic.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Dipper asked in a brief pause during their conversation. "You've been kind of quiet since we left your office." Despite his previous thoughts about how he was beginning to understand Bill, this was a reminder that he had uncovered the tip of the iceberg; he didn't know what'd gone wrong, if anything. The banter had died down immediately and never returned, the absence of flirting cause for distress. Bill was taking a sip of his coffee, glancing at Dipper as he swallowed.

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

"Oh, okay." Shrugging it off as misreading the non-verbal cues, Dipper was content to believe there was no issue after all, the discomfort purely of his own paranoia during social situations.

Bill took another drink from his coffee. “You’re not going to prod me?”

"Uh," he hung on the syllable an extra moment or two, eyes flicking up and down Bill's form. Then, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, indulging in a drink of sugary-sweet coffee to buy him time in responding. "No? I heard you the first time when you said you were fine, you don't have to repeat yourself. Besides, it was a nice gesture to buy me coffee, so it'd be lame to annoy you like that."

"Just because I said I was fine doesn’t mean I’m fine."

Eyebrows pinching in thought, he jokingly inquired, "Does it mean you're secretly a woman?" Hiding emotions wasn't specific to any gender, Dipper was aware, but Bill doing so was completely foreign to him. This was the same guy who'd generally tell him his feelings, oversharing them after no further requests for information. Recently, he'd become more tolerant of the practice, letting Bill ramble and rant to him about most subjects, a single exception being his relationship since Dipper didn't think it was his place to hear about that. No matter how decently his and Bill's friendship was taking shape, he doubted that would ever feel like an appropriate subject.

Tuning into Bill, Dipper observed his blank, rigid stare. “No, you’re a woman. I bought you that coffee.”

"What? Women buy coffee all the time. I'm pretty sure that's an equal-opportunity purchase."

“I think my joke went over your head, little lady.” Thoughts buzzing, Dipper was still considering it, squinting as he stared at the line for the coffee shop. Men, women, all genders. Bill's apparent rationale wasn't connecting. “You know, emotions are equal-opportunity. You should be more considerate.”

"Yeah, I know. I was making a joke about the stereotype—" At Bill's instant disinterest, he stopped and switched directions. "Hey, you've never pretended you were fine then went back on that before. I didn't know you were going to start today." Genuinely uncertain, he glanced around and lowered his voice, "Is this because I mentioned going on a date with Robbie?"

If that was the case, Dipper supposed he'd have to be less subtle about his take on the issue: indecision was running rampant. It seemed narrow-minded to shut it down without at least
exploring the possibility, but his hopes weren't high.

“Oh, fuck you. I’m returning your coffee.” Dipper’s fingers tightened on the plastic cup, pulling it closer protectively. ”And I’m going to have Robbie banned from the bar and the diner. See where you go on your date then.” Although Bill sounded somewhat serious, Dipper knew enough about his mannerisms, his patterns of speech and for god's sake the loudness factor, to understand this was anything but a true threat.

Musing about the improbable reality, he idly asked, ”I don't know. LA?” Honestly, he wasn't sure the date would even come to materialization, had his doubts about that when it was him and Robbie- yeah, that was unlikely. Maybe Bill would be doing him a favor if he went through with his threat to ban him.

“I’ll get him banned from everywhere,” Bill said. “I have money. They know who my father is.”

"Same, but they also know my mom."

“You should drop Robbie and his bleeding heart. Get yourself someone with money, since your parents suck and won’t let you touch theirs.” It was shockingly astute; he’d told Bill the situation with his parents' money before and how they wanted their children to be capable adults, but he hadn't thought he'd listened during those explanations. Those sessions had felt long ago considering how far they’d come in that amount of time, but it hadn't been more than two month's time or so since they'd met at the beginning of the school year, and now the semester's halfway mark was looming. “And someone who listens, considering that seems to be surprising to you. You know, it’s funny you brought your mother into this. She only got into office because she was a poor housewife and used her husband’s funds to fuel her campaign.”

"Awkward, but my dad married into money. I thought Ford would've mentioned that, there's a whole… 'thing' with that side of the family over what happened.” Dipper coughed, amused. "So what you described, but switch my parents."

“I don’t listen to Fordsy. Only you.” He winked at him.

"I feel so flattered.” Dipper mumbled sarcastically, hunching over to take an extended sip of his drink while maintaining dead-stare eye contact. In a flicker of recognition, he sat up again, expression bright. "Wait, you never did tell me what was going on because… I guess you're not actually fine? What's up with that?”

Bill paused, looking thoughtful. “Uh, give me a minute on that.” That minute was not a minute, but a drink from his coffee. “Might have something to do with the office stuff.”

"Don't want to cuddle with me anymore on your chair?” Dipper asked, trying to pose it as a joke but the inflection was off, and he rubbed at his arm sheepishly. "I mean, I'm kidding about that, obviously— but yeah.” Beyond sitting in his chair, he couldn't pinpoint what "the office stuff" entailed other than the chat about a potential date with Robbie which hadn't gone as smoothly as he would've hoped, or Bill's odd reaction toward the end of the visit.

“I can’t. I’ll get written up. Or dismissed.”

"What? Oh, for messing around? Yeah, I know Ford's kind of overzealous about enacting his 'professional environment' policies usually, but I could see where he's coming from here.”

Bill glanced away from him, frowning. “I've gotten into trouble for that. I accidentally blocked the doorway and it made the student uncomfortable, so she reported it to my advisor.”
Sucking in air through his teeth, he winced. "Sorry to hear that, man. Is that why— oh." And now, the pieces of a previous interaction fell into place, why Bill had taken it so hard when he'd pointed out that he was blocking the exit to his apartment.

"Yeah." Another sip of his coffee, and Dipper did the same after emitting a sympathetic noise, or at least one that he hoped conveyed the message. There were a few seconds of awkward glances and small sips of coffee, and Dipper was glad when Bill spoke again to break the silence, "I'm going to be busy with midterms, but do you want to come over to study tomorrow? Once the Drama Club meeting ends."

"You're busy with midterms?" he asked, tilting his head to survey him, then noting that might explain part of why Bill's appearance was on the gradual decline. Although it wasn't as visible today after he'd evidently tried to appear presentable at work, the bags under his eyes didn't lie even if his clothes were pressed and hair was smoothed back.

Bill nodded. "I have a couple classes of my own, and some larger projects I've been working on. Besides, I've been working on my midterm key."

Tensing as he recalled he'd be responsible for the aftermath of that, Dipper felt the beginning of a headache drift in. He had too much to do, too little time to do it. "I hope you're giving it near the end of the week, because I have my own midterms to study for, and I won't be able to grade yours until they're over."

Currently, his schedule was packed between juggling the usual amount of homework, then attempting to review his courses to get ready for six assessments over the next week, frequently rereading the textbooks and looking over notes for hours on end during the evenings. It was consuming his life, digging into his sleeping pattern, causing him to wake in terrified panics. Dipper knew he was overdoing it with his studying in preparation for the exams, but he couldn't help himself when he'd never feel confident in knowing the material enough to be tested on it.

"So is that a yes?" Bill asked, finishing his coffee and shaking the cup side to side briefly.

Snapped from his daze, Dipper asked, "Oh, uh… when did you say? Tomorrow? Yeah, I can come over if you want to study together for a couple hours." When he saw Bill was done with his drink, in a large gulp his own had disappeared into the sludge of ice and chocolate-caramel syrup at the bottom. "Thanks for the coffee date, by the way."

"Don't thank me, sugar. You want another one? Looks like you could use it."

Dipper wanted to groan. He guessed he wasn't doing much better than Bill, probably worse considering he hadn't even brushed his hair this morning or straightened his clothes whereas Bill had put in effort. "Likewise."

Sitting in on Bill's class was a less nerve-wracking experience each time he did it, and he divided his attention between the lesson and how Pacifica seemed to be perceiving it by the notes she kept, the texts she sent to her friends, the expressions she made. Dipper was concentrating on that and creating mental observations, marking places in the textbook he'd brought for a later study session. The only complicating factor: Pacifica hadn't agreed to one. She hadn't talked to him since the first time he'd gone to Bill's class, and that had been for a record-breaking five seconds at best, so trying to convince her to do a study session was more of a stretch goal than a feasible plan.

The clock was ticking, bringing them to the last two minutes of today's class, and Bill was currently working on practice problems that'd relate to the assigned reading. All of which Dipper
was familiar with, so he tuned him out until the key words were spoken, "That's it, folks. We're out of time, so I'll see you back here on Thursday. Don't forget to read the chapter, and there may or may not be a pop quiz during our next class."

The students were gathering their things and leaving, a handful lingering to ask Bill additional questions or speak to him about something — Dipper didn't know, but it was generally the same group of overachievers. Not his focus right now. Glancing at Pacifica's spot, she was waiting near her friend's desk and once they were ready, both were walking in step from the room, into the hallway with the chatting and laughter rising above the noise of shuffling. Their pace, walking in sync, was stylishly intimidating and stereotypically appropriate for what little he'd heard of Pacifica and her family.

Dipper collected his backpack and hurried to catch up, falling into a decent stride behind them and wondering how he should do this. Approaching seemed impossible with her friend also present, but following behind two women had a limited lifespan before he'd be labeled a creep, and waiting for the ideal moment would result in never having the conversation at all. Worse yet, the further they walked from the classroom—therefore the class—the more inappropriate it was becoming to grab Pacifica's attention on a physics-related premise since it would imply he'd trailed after her like some sort of weirdo before gathering the guts to interpolate. Except that was exactly what he was doing, and he wanted to facepalm in irritation.

Okay, he could do this. If it crashed and burned, the worst that could happen was not helping Pacifica and hoping she managed to get it together on her own, plus never showing his face in Bill's class again. It'd be salt in the wound if Pacifica reported him to Bill, which Bill would undoubtedly make fun of him over, but he recognized that as an unlikely worst case scenario.

Quickening his steps, Dipper fought to catch up to them and, although he maintained a decent distance, he still felt uncomfortable walking alongside the two. "Hey, uh— Pacifica, was it?" he asked in greeting, smiling anxiously. "Could I talk to you for a second? Just.. really quickly. It won't take long."

Pacifica paused. “Hold on, I think there's a peasant trying to say something. I'll catch up with you in a moment,” she informed her friend before she whirled around, staring at him. “Oh, it’s you.” Dipper's expression fell slightly when he saw the noticeable disappointment on her features, then the withheld disgust like he was dirt on the bottom of her thousand-dollar, diamond-studded shoe. "What do you want?"

"I was hoping I could talk to you," he said but internally sighed as he realized that was sort of rephrasing his earlier statement, providing no further details. "Maybe one-on-one, if that's fine." With that, his gaze flicked to her friend, who shrugged it off and said she'd wait near the doors after a dismissive signal from Pacifica. It was strange, being in the presence of the living embodiment of the media's 'mean girl', he hadn't thought they existed but were a myth of a place approximately thirty-five minutes north of here.

Now that they were in the semi-privacy of the physics building hallway, Dipper's fingers tapped gently against each other, eyes rising toward the plain ceiling. "So… about that class we share, I know the midterm's going to be kind of difficult from what Bi— Mr. Cipher has said about it."

"And? If you're here to chit-chat about class, I have better things to do. My chauffeur is waiting to take me to my private hairdresser."

"Right, uh… I was going to ask if you'd be interested in meeting up to study sometime." At her hesitance, Dipper realized the impression she may have about the proposition and amended it by clarifying, "I was thinking… in the library or even downstairs in this building, where the cafe is? I
could buy you a coffee or something, and we could go over the material."

“Um,” Pacifica’s gaze hadn’t left him, and with every second it was on him, he swore he felt two times as small. “Why would I want to do that?”

Clearing his throat, Dipper struggled to explain, "Because… y'know, it might be mutually beneficial? Like a study group type of deal, where we both can learn from each other and help out." It wasn't the most accurate representation of what he had in mind, which was essentially teaching Pacifica about certain concepts and trying to cover them in greater detail than what Bill did during class, showing her step-by-step how to do specific equations and tackle difficult theories. "Then if questions come up, we could bounce it off of each other." It was another attempt to win her favor, knowing Pacifica hadn't emailed Bill or stopped by during office hours, but still attended class; it caused Dipper to assume she wanted to do well, but she didn't have the courage to confront him directly. It made sense when Bill stood at least six inches taller than them with his muscular form and moderately broad shoulders, a scowl nearly perpetually plastered on his face. (Or what was perceived as one, now Dipper recognized it as his resting face.) So he could understand why Pacifica didn't approach him. He knew the guy was a giant pushover, but Pacifica didn't.

Looking distrustful, Pacifica narrowed her eyes. Still hesitant. “Fine,” she decided after a moment of silence. “But if you try anything weird, you'll regret it. So like, do you want me to email you to arrange a time? I could find your name in the emails Mr. Cipher sends to us.”

Dipper was about to say that would work, but he realized he wasn't a recipient of those emails. "Wait, uh… maybe not. Here, I'll give you my number instead, so we don't have to worry about going through email." After reciting the digits to her and watching Pacifica input it into her phone, Dipper was about to check on how much 'weird' was going to be an issue since he wasn't exactly known for graceful social interactions, but Pacifica was already walking away, ascending the stairs to rejoin her friend.

Oh well, he'd netted a victory. Pacifica had agreed to a tentative study session, and he'd make it worthwhile in hopes of improving her grade.

Hurrying to the grad office with a skip in his step, he was greeted by Ford raising his head and nodding in his direction before returning to his laptop, and Bill still hadn't arrived, perhaps caught up with the students' questions from after class. Dipper claimed his chair again, finding it more comfortable than the spare one at the empty desk, but he didn't have to wait long for Bill.

"Hey," he said with a wide smile, spinning the chair in circles and watching the room rotate, every-so-often seeing Bill filter through his line of sight. "Guess who's tutoring Pacifica?"

“Finally get her to go on a date with you? That’s nice. She’s better than Robbie.” That had his spinning gradually slowing and then stopping with Dipper's elbows resting on Bill's desk, his back against the wood.

"Dude, no," he said with a slight face, "that's not what happened. I caught up with her in the hallway and asked if we could study material for this class together, and she said 'fine!' Isn't that great?"

“She sounds enthusiastic,” he commented dryly. “So eager to study with you.”

Mood dipping, he conceded, "Yeah, I know she's not thrilled, but to be honest, it could be the subject more than it is her new study partner.” It was a cheeky remark, but nevertheless truthful because Dipper felt the same: physics was dreadful, studying the same readings over and over again in hopes it would sink in was enough to bash his head into a wall.
“Hah,” Bill scoffed. “Physics is the best subject. She’s not enthusiastic because she wants to hang out with her friends, not you.”

"Hey, it could be both," he protested huffily but was still smiling, leaning forward in the chair with his chin resting in his palm. "But it doesn't matter, the point is that she's willing to give it a try, and I just hope that I can help her." It was an area of concern now that he had the meeting agreed upon, he didn't know how to teach. Maybe that wouldn't be necessary, though, maybe he could walk her through it as a classmate would, as Bill's lectures weren't getting through to her. He could approach it like a study group. He could prepare ahead of time for questions, he could give a nonchalant explanations of concepts, he could...

“Uh huh. Good luck with that, Pine Tree!”

Most of all, he could do it without Bill's support if he had to.
So far, the study session visit had been incredibly productive and Dipper was proud of his progress over the past two hours, until he remembered his achievements were unrelated to the goal: preparing for midterms. Making dinner for Bill and himself was not part of reviewing for an exam, neither was cleaning the apartment's living room, or reorganizing Bill's desk to facilitate efficiency — there was no possibility of being methodical if he was trying to work through a pile of old papers and misplaced items. Despite the lack of real studying beyond a few minutes here and there, Dipper was glad it would improve Bill's quality of life; his stress levels had to be climbing, as he was starting to skimp on basic care to focus on academics.

The studying itself was boring, and it was getting harder to comprehend the textbook word-vomit that lulled him into micro naps. Nearby, Bill was multitasking between his own studying and making the midterm key for his class.

To avoid drifting off, Dipper closed the physics textbook and set it aside, a low groan escaping him as he stretched. Crammed vocabulary and practice problems still circulated his mind, meanwhile exhaustion from three chapter's worth of work bogged him down, and there were still three more to go.

“Done already?” Bill muttered. “That was a short study session. It’s only been.. wait, has it been two hours already? Stars,” he yawned.

With a glare at the stack of textbooks and homework sheets, he mumbled, "I'm pretty sure if I keep going, I'm going to die a painful death of physics overdose." More realistically, he'd crash and dream of equations, nonsensical theories.

That elicited a scoff from Bill. “An overdose? You can’t be serious. Physics won’t kill you.”

"Maybe it won't kill you, but I haven't developed a tolerance for it,” he joked, deeming it sort of lame but finding amusement in his statement anyway. "I guess by that logic, I could also die of a Bill-overdose, so you should probably keep your distance."

“You can’t fool me,” he told him. “I know you can’t get enough, it's addicting and impossible to overdose.”

"Oh, I see where this is going. Finally, a chance to use the 'how to say no to drugs' speech that we were forced to memorize in middle school. Here we go," Dipper took in a deep breath, "Uh-Uh, no, no, b-bibbity-bopp, kazow, I can't be pressured, no way, no how." After a pause, he grinned. "...I know what you're thinking, and it's true: the education system here in California is very advanced."

“Great cosmos and constellations,” he said in the midst of laughter. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. How did you not get beat up in school?”

"How do you know I didn't?" Dipper shrugged. "But as it turns out, there aren't many shady drug dealers creeping around corners giving out free samples and hoping to pressure me into drugs despite the school's warnings."

“Course not, it’s Cali." Dipper cringed at Bill's usage of the word. "Come to Miami, we’ll show you pressure."

"Yeah, if I came to Miami, you could show me pressure right after we get through the awful traffic and trashy tourists, and I want to bleach my eyes because everyone there is always half-naked and
wearing *bling* jewelry for some reason."

"You hating on our attire, or is your source reality television?"

"Why do you guys think it's okay to literally wear swimsuits everywhere? Around the yard, in the store, at the mall, at a restaurant...? What the heck."

Bill stared at him. "I'm going to start wearing them."

Although he opened his mouth to immediately protest, as he really did not want to see that, it dissolved before he could voice the complaint when he raised his eyes to Bill's. Maybe... running with this joke would be an opportunity to see his soulmark *at last* and put to rest the uncertainty over wondering if it was or wasn't a match to his own. "Would it be possible to start now?"

Flushing, he realized that could be perceived as flirting but brushed away the concern, hoping Bill would understand he wasn't trying to awkwardly put moves on him. He was being supportive of Bill's new lifestyle, getting back to his roots, ulterior motives aside.

Bill recoiled in surprise, and Dipper fidgeted, hoping he didn't make this uncomfortable — he still had studying to do tonight, therefore working in a tense environment wasn't ideal. "Wait. What? I don't know, Pine Tree, can you handle me in shorts?"

"Mm-hmm," he said through a soft exhale, rolling onto his side to fully observe Bill, "I can't get enough, and I've heard it's impossible to overdose." Still not flirting.

"You'll faint," he teased. "A French gal like you can't look at me without swooning."

Puzzled, Dipper blinked at him. "A French—?" he began to echo in confusion, eyebrows furrowed, then his own pose occurred to him. With a sharp inhale, he jolted upright and tucked his legs beneath him, frowning deeply and wishing he could do more than mentally facepalm to berate himself for that.

Shaking off the embarrassment, he wasn't progressing on his quest to convince Bill to remove his undershirt, and he decided he might as well return to studying. Physics coursework didn't appeal to him despite its inevitability, so he sluggishly coaxed himself to his feet, ambling to the desk to flop down on his designated pillow. Dipper squinted at the brightness of his laptop as he navigated to the document containing his screenplay project. Having a completed, ready-to-workshop rough draft was the film class' midterm, and he still had to fill in the missing scenes, then edit.

"I see. You knew you wouldn't be able to handle my naked chest staring at you, so you left."

"I just figured you didn't want to make a habit of taking clothes off around me." And that was a good reason, the implications were through the roof with what people might assume if they walked in on it, and besides, Bill had a weird hangup about his soulmark. Feigning ignorance to that, Dipper snatched the photograph from the side of the other desk and ran his thumb over the frame. "I mean, with you and Wendy being an item and everything." It was part of it, but with how Bill didn't seem to be as invested in the relationship as he should be aside from when he felt he *needed* to be, Dipper didn't think that was the prevailing motivator. If he had to venture a guess, what Wendy would think of the behavior—Bill wearing less clothing than what would usually be acceptable in his presence—hadn't crossed him until now.

"I don't think she'd mind my chest being on display if it got us a third partner in bed."

Laughing at the absurd thought, he placed the picture in its correct spot and commented, "Good one, man." It would probably attract greater interest if Wendy's chest was on display rather than
Bill’s, but he didn't voice that aloud, channeling his focus onto the mystery screenplay spanning seven pages. Three more to go if he was to meet the assignment requirements. The story itself was taking shape, the protagonist searching for evidence to prove his own innocence while uncovering a conspiracy meant to frame him, and although Dipper had made a chunk of progress, there was an intimidating amount to go. "Hey, do we have any coffee left?"

“Think we’re out,” Bill said. “Make more if you want it. Grounds are in the cupboard, but you might have a tough time reaching them.”

"I could reach," he protested the teasing jab but didn't move from where he sat, unwilling to put in the energy to brew another pot or face humiliation if he couldn't reach in all his five-foot-seven glory. Bill would have a heyday with that and make fun of him forever if he had to crawl onto the countertop. Leaning forward to examine the screen as if reminding himself what he should be fretting over, he said, "I guess it doesn't matter. I'll be fine without it."

“You sure?” he asked, Dipper nodded. “Well, alright then. Not long from now, there will be no shame in asking for the Help, sugar.”

"Would you give me 'the help'? And also, why are we saying it like that?" Even if Bill was going to assist him, which might not be necessary as it was, Dipper didn't think he'd take the offer. It would be more shameful to outright admit he couldn't than hoist himself up when Bill wasn't looking.

“Do you not know what the Help is?"

"I don't know. A miracle drug to make me taller?" Dipper hypothesized, spinning in the chair to fold his arms at Bill. "I'm guessing that's what happened to you."

“Uh, no. We have folks who work for us, cheap labor. I plan to implement them here once Residence Life gives me approval. They've been stubborn for the last two years, but I have money. I will overcome adversity and thrive.” The majority of that could be classified as the most ridiculous thing Dipper had ever heard, and he was already laughing partway through the explanation, shaking his head.

"Yeah, they're never going to budge. But seriously, you have… housekeepers? That's— wow.” Dipper would have assumed it'd be uncomfortable, but from how Bill spoke of them, he could imagine he'd never known any different reality.

“I have Help,” Bill said. “Not housekeepers. None of them are keepers.”

Resuming his work on the screenplay because he didn't know how to respond to that, Dipper checked his notes for plot direction and continued where he'd left off, managing to crank out a fuller draft over the course of the next twenty minutes. With Bill doing his own projects and Dipper consumed by this one, minimal exchanges were had, not that he remembered them anyway with how he was thoroughly absorbed in the writing process. Unlike physics, the inspiration seemed to flow and never leave him stuck, grasping at anything to get by, writhing in a pool of self-pity. This was easy, it was... weirdly fun, a freeing experience that he could rely on what he knew; for once, a lifetime of devouring mystery novels and crime series had benefited him.

The screenplay made him wish he never had to read a physics textbook again, aware it wouldn't compare to this. Verbose passages versus vibrant prose, a fast-paced plot versus scientific mumbo-jumbo. This invigorated him, it was a process with a tangible goal, and he actually understood how to achieve it while being excited to try. Instead of blindly groping through a fog, this assignment was more like a stroll in the park on an average sunny day. He could enjoy the scenery without
worrying about every step forward.

Bill's voice broke his concentration, “What’re you doing? You don’t seem to be studying.”

"Hm?" Slowly, the words processed and he said, "Oh, I… I don’t remember if I mentioned it to you, but my midterm for this film studies class is a screenplay. I've been working on that."

“Let me see it.” He leaned over the desk, hovering, trying to catch a glimpse of the screen. A long, drawn-out 'uh' escaped Dipper at that, making a point to shoulder in front of Bill's line of sight in conjunction with turning the laptop away from him.

There were two problems with Bill reading his screenplay: one, it was loosely inspired by the events that'd transpired between him and Bill over 'vandalizing' his car, and two, it was his writing and showing that to him… Dipper gnawed at the inside of his cheek, discomfort igniting. Showing somebody like his sister would be met with nothing but support and padded albeit thoughtful criticism, but Bill… he didn't trust him, was afraid that if his writing was bad, it wouldn't be sugar-coated. Bill would flat out tell him. And quite frankly, with how easily the words poured from his thoughts onto the page, it couldn't be quality work.

Attention snapping to the present, he realized he was still going 'uhhh' and stopped to answer, "No."

“No?” Bill paused, taken aback. “No? You're joking, right?”

Expressionless and without breaking eye contact, Dipper slammed the lid of his laptop.

“What the fuck?"

Flippantly, Dipper said, "Maybe… when it's done." That was a definite nope as well because the polished version would perhaps be more incriminating, but Bill didn't need to know that his chances of seeing it were exactly zero.

However, it didn't seem Bill agreed with that. He lunged, grabbing the laptop and pulling it toward himself while ignoring Dipper's complaint of 'hey!' Reflexively, he snatched it with one hand, the other thrusting himself away from the desk to bring his device to safety.

“I just wanted to see it!” Bill objected, and he followed after Dipper, who quickened his pace. “Give the stupid thing back!”

Dipper placed the laptop on the coffee table and whirled around, protectively between them as he held his ground with no intention of caving. "Back off, man! It's not ready— it's a draft, and I already said you could see it once it was finished!" Never mind the fact that he'd knowingly been a tad dishonest about that.

Bill narrowed his eyes, beginning to go around the table to continue the pursuit, but Dipper remained a wedged barrier. “You said maybe and I want to see it now.”

"Well, you're not going to. So just—" It was cut off because Dipper again moved to block off Bill's path to his laptop, wondering why he was insistent about this. He couldn't have been that interested in a screenplay, and he had a hunch it was more about being told he couldn't rather than the content of the project.

“Let me see it,” he demanded, finally giving up on stealth in favor of looming over him, using blunt force to knock him into the sofa. The unexpected body check had Dipper thrown off balance and in his flailing, he instinctively grabbed the arm closest to steady himself, but that only resulted in both
of them falling in a mess of limbs.

"Dude!" he squeaked out in pain, at first trying to shove Bill off but then realizing he would use this to his advantage. Switching tactics, he squirmed from underneath him to pin Bill, preventing a grab for the laptop. "Why did you—?"

“It almost worked,” he huffed, pushing Dipper aside and leaving him to clumsily flop onto the couch cushion. “Don't be a brat about this.”

He recovered quickly and sprang with a vengeance, now throwing his entire weight atop Bill's side to keep him in place. "You're not going to go for it again, are you?" he asked, fingers scraping uselessly at the fabric, knowing he had very little leverage if Bill tossed him off like a ragdoll again.

Seemingly aware of possessing the upper hand, Bill grinned as he fought against Dipper’s weight, and although he tried to stay steady, it was a losing battle with Bill being taller, stronger, heavier. “I plan on it! What are you going to do, Pine Tree? Stop me?"

Biting his lip, he mustered the strength to stay rooted for a few moments longer, straining with a quiet, involuntary whine when he felt Bill pushing against him. "Please. It's just… it's kind of personal, and it'd be weird if you read it." Physically, he couldn't force Bill not to, so he hoped he'd respect the request.

"Why would it be weird?" he grumbled, and to his relief, he'd stopped trying to dislodge him. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

After seconds of gauging whether Bill was going to betray his trust, Dipper eventually relaxed, and with equal parts embarrassment and shyness responded, "It's really not. Besides, you probably wouldn't like it. It's lame, a mystery screenplay about… crime and conspiracies and that sort of thing."

“That sounds exactly like something I’d want to read,” Bill grumbled. “You’re keeping the good stuff from me.”

A puff of laughter burst from Dipper at the confession, wriggling so he was no longer suspended over Bill but curled in beside him, tucked in his space like they were spooning. "I seriously couldn't imagine you liking any genre of fiction. Do you read crime?" The hopeful spark in his voice was unmistakable, never before knowing anybody with the exception of Ford who could get through that type of novel.

Bill shrugged. “When I can. I don’t have much time to do it anymore.”

"Oh," the hope had faded somewhat but not completely, "that's understandable. I guess… if you want to read my screenplay, like really badly, you could do it after I edit it tonight."

“No, it’s fine.”

Accompanying relief, his expression illustrated surprise with his jaw going slack, rearing back slightly, and the faintest hint of irritated amusement. "You attacked me for it, and now you don't want to? You're the worst." The response was a chuckle, Bill patting him on the back, but Dipper groaned and headbutted his chest. If it could be called that when it was barely more than a rough tap with Dipper lingering there afterward, eyes closed, breathing in the scent of spicy honey.

"Did you just headbutt me?" he grunted softly. “I’ve been assaulted, call the cops and… Oh! What’s that?" Bill's eyes weren't quite contacting his own, gazing north of where they should be,
and Dipper dumbly tried to look too until he noticed Bill's vision followed his forehead.

"What's what?" he asked to stall, self-consciously forcing the words, yet knowing where this was likely going since it always seemed to come up in his relationships. Out of habit, he was trying to shift the strands of fluffy hair into place once more to cover the birthmark.

Bill reached and he flinched, brushing his hair to a side against his meager swatting. “You have an interesting constellation on your forehead. The Big Dipper on such a tiny one.” Blushing deeply at the remark, he almost wished the redness on his cheekbones would extend to his birthmark and hide it via an abashed camouflage.

Once again adjusting his hair to hide the marking, Dipper rolled onto his other side with a huff but was unsure if he was turning away from Bill out of spite or because he genuinely didn't want to hear anything else about his dumb birthmark. Through a mutter, he said, "You know you asked about my nickname, like… a long time ago? Well, that's why."

A chortle overtook Bill. “That’s fucking amazing. I have something similar! Do you want to see it?” Although his intrigue was triggered, Dipper wasn't finished pouting over the fact that Bill had called attention to his birthmark; after eighteen years, he assumed he'd be accustomed to the fawning or jeering, but he wasn't. It was still as humiliating as it had been the first time when it'd been pointed out to him that the Big Dipper was on his head.

Blowing a raspberry to represent his opinion on the matter, he wasn't upset with Bill, honestly, he understood it was natural to want to see it after catching a glimpse, especially as an astrophysics student and professional annoyance. But his contempt was aimed more so at the birthmark itself, wondering why he had to have such an arrangement.

“...Is that a yes?”

"I don't know," he sighed, giving an answer this time. "If you have a birthmark like it, it's not—like, anywhere… um…” his voice quieted until it may as well not exist at all, and Dipper struggled for a way to politely ask if he would want to see it. As in, not on Bill's dick or anywhere else questionable. When Bill didn't seem to know what he was going for, Dipper sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, twisting enough to meet Bill's gaze. "Okay, look at it like this. If I see it, would I have a case against you for sexual misconduct?"

Bill smiled faintly. “I’d hope not. Hold on.” He began to remove his dress shirt, revealing an intricate pattern of blue, gold, black, and white tattooed upon tanned skin. A complex constellation of stars artistically illustrated as if they were looking at the night sky spanned his torso and toned chest, presumably continuing to stretch over his back, the lines thin and insanely creative. Dipper barely registered that he was staring until several seconds had passed, but by then, he'd forgotten what he was looking for in the first place in the midst of captivation at the decorative ink. "Do you like it?"

"Hm?" Snapping from his daze, Dipper assumed he must have looked like the most dopey idiot on the planet because he was tongue-tied and couldn't have formulated coherent thoughts if he'd tried. "I... uh, yeah— it's... nice, which is weird. I don't usually like tattoos." It was fifty-fifty, either cringe or done well, and the instances of the latter didn't make up for the internal discomfort produced by the former. However, Bill's tattoos didn't fit into those categories when it was astonishing, like artwork permanently embedded upon him and the design was so detailed, so whimsically fascinating—

The acknowledgement that he was essentially ogling, utterly moonstruck, at Bill's tattoos had Dipper squeezing his eyes shut and trying to erase the thoughts. "So... you said you had the Big
Dipper?" he prompted, opening his eyes again to scan the skin but this time was careful to avoid getting caught up in the smoothness of the contours, the visual trick that almost made it appear as though the constellations were glittering, the undeniable brawn underneath. It wasn't really a mystery how he threw him back against the sofa so easily now, and that... that was stirring a heat in the pit of his stomach only to be shut down by logic and rationality and an inward, screaming reminder that he wasn't attracted to Bill.

“Can you see it?” Bill pointed to a spot near his lungs. “It’s proportional as if my body was the sky.” That was peculiar but clever, and Dipper tipped his head as he surveyed the Big Dipper marking, brushing a thumb over the connecting stars.

With a breathless laugh, he commented, "That's way better than my birthmark." All of it, not simply the constellation that corresponded to the one on his forehead.

The thought of corresponding markings shared between the two of them had Dipper unbelievably tense in an instant, eyes widening with a sudden, startling epiphany. Bill's shirt was off. His skin was exposed. Heart in his throat, Dipper wondered if he wanted to look at it, if he wanted to see the soulmate marking on his arm because that could mean he'd be finding out tonight. He'd be walking out of Bill's apartment later with the knowledge that either they were or weren't soulmates, nearly two months of questioning for this moment.

Gulping, Dipper's eyes slid toward his arm. In a matter of seconds, his palms had become sweaty, entire body a shaky, shivering mess, but he tried to keep his composure to the best of his ability like he wasn't about to be met with a potentially life-changing answer to the obsession that'd been haunting him. So many nights wondering if he did or didn't want to know, more recently what he'd do if they were soulmates since this wouldn't go away forever.

Dipper's gaze settled on his arm and he blinked, confused as he determined what he was seeing: where a soulmark would be, medical gauze was wrapped tightly around the area, blocking any possibility of viewing what was underneath. That wasn't right. His eyes shot to his other arm, the same gauze wrapped over it. "Did— did you hurt yourself?" he asked quietly, perhaps knowing the answer but nevertheless trailing his fingers over the rough material of his right arm, the presumably soulmarked side. To his disappointment and maybe relief, nothing was visible through the cloth-like wrapping, no way to confirm if his handwriting formed an 'oh my god, it's you' atop his skin.

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t pay attention to it, just a stupid burn I got at work.”

"You were burned? On both arms?" Dipper asked, disbelief edging into his voice, as he didn't know if he should view it as an excuse—Bill wasn't known for showing off his soulmark—or the truth. Whatever the case, he supposed he could work with this and, because Bill generally enjoyed being doted on even when he wasn't injured at all, it might benefit both of them. Bill could feel like the star of his life for ten minutes, and Dipper could finally see his soulmark. "You might want to loosen it a little," he said while he continued to slide the pads of his fingers over the gauze, "since it's kind of tight. You know, it's weird that it's not hurting you."

“Leave it. It’ll be fine.” He pulled his arm back, trying to get it out of Dipper’s grasp, but he held onto his wrist when he recognized what he was doing.

The demands from earlier resounded: let me see it.

"Bill," he started sympathetically, scrambling for what to say, how to convince him to take off the gauze. "Do you want me to look at it? I could put some aloe on for you, or... an antibiotic ointment? Or something." He could take it off himself and hope Bill didn't stop him until it was too late, but that seemed abrasive and like it could potentially damage their relationship for no real
gain. Peace of mind was hit or miss, wholly dependent on what was inscribed on his skin.

“No,” Bill said defensively. “It’s okay if you leave it alone. I’d prefer that.”

“You made me put bandages on your nonexistent wounds before,” he pointed out, grip unrelenting in hopes Bill would give in but it seemed increasingly unlikely, “so now when you're hurt, I can't help you out?”

“I don’t want help, what about that don’t you get?” The harsh snap had him flinching and releasing his wrist, unnerved by the force. Ever since they’d gotten closer, Bill's loudness was often in excitement or playful in nature, not displays of anger anymore.

After the shock of being outright yelled at had worn off, Dipper lowered his gaze and murmured a couple apologies, rubbing his upper arm. It'd been a stupid thing to do, he knew, and he felt awful for pushing the boundaries when it'd been clear that Bill wanted nothing to do with it.

Unsure of how to gracefully move on from this without putting more of a damper on their evening, he first untangled himself from Bill while trying to avoid wincing at the sting in his hips caused by the unfamiliar positioning, then curled inward on the other side of the sofa. Being as small as possible to give Bill space would probably be a good start to showing he was apologetic.

Still unable to meet his gaze, Dipper awkwardly announced, "I'm going to study." And without giving Bill time to reply, he slid the physics textbook into his lap to resume reading.

“What?” Bill shuffled, putting his shirt back on. “Why? I didn’t want my bandage to be fucked with.”

"Oh, that's cool. I just… I still have studying to do," he replied, and while Bill would almost certainly detect the traces of guilt in his tone, it wasn't a lie. He did have studying he needed to do, but it was also the most delicate way he could excuse himself from the situation he'd created. As if to accentuate his point and demonstrate that he was serious about studying, Dipper brought his knees closer to his chest and rested the textbook on them so his face was mere inches from the print.

Bill sighed. “I don’t understand you.”

Mindlessly, he said, "Mm, I guess that's what keeps our relationship fresh and exciting. Gotta maintain the spark somehow." But he couldn't sound more disengaged as he spoke, a perfect representation of where his mind was at: he was desperately immersing himself into the textbook, hoping to forget the previous interaction happened. In retrospect, all of it had been… unbearably inappropriate on his end, from trying to see Bill's soulmark to staring at his naked chest.

The gauze required future consideration.

Bill stifled a yawn, shifting to lean against Dipper. “I guess.”

As the next hour or so dragged them toward midnight, Dipper's form gradually relaxed and unwound from its tightly-curled state, Bill seemingly recovering from the encounter as well because they shifted closer as the clock ticked on. Dipper's attention lingered on his textbook and notes, while Bill's was sifting through data and research that Ford had printed off for him, the source an academic journal. Aside from the occasional comment or complaint, the solitude was peaceful, comfortable, and he didn't feel the need to fill it for once in his life. Only with Mabel had he felt the sense of serenity from solitude, but to know it was extending to Bill may have been reason for alarm if he hadn't been steadily becoming more exhausted, more prone to spacing off in
the intervals after a paragraph, and finally, Dipper had succumbed to the pressing urge and fallen asleep entirely.

Dipper didn't notice, submerged in a gentle slumber against Bill, until he jolted awake five minutes later to the sound of his phone going off and the vibration filling the air. Blinking the sleep from his eyes while stifling a yawn as he unwound their limbs, Dipper plucked his device from the coffee table and audibly gasped — it wasn't five minutes later, not even close. It was approximately three and a half hours later, approaching four in the morning, and... he had no idea how that had happened but looked to Bill in alarm, only to see him still asleep.

"Bill," Dipper said, prodding his side. "Bill, wake up." Bill jerked from his touch, muttering angrily as he opened his eyes.

“What?” it was a demand. “Oh, fuck. What time is it?”

Miserably, Dipper mumbled, "Four."

But he wasn't watching Bill anymore once he knew he was alert, because his focus was on the more important issue: ten texts from Mabel, four missed calls from her, a text from Ford, another single text from Robbie, a few from Wendy, and many missed calls from Stan. Muttering a soft 'oh my god' under his breath, he started to go through them, each message expressing worry for him, wondering where he was, instructing him to call or text to say he was alright.

An immense guilt clawed at Dipper when he realized he'd never come back to the dorm which had understandably induced Mabel's panicking when she saw he wasn't there after returning from work. She'd known he'd be studying at Bill's apartment, but obviously neither could have known that he would pass out on the guy's sofa until the early hours of the morning.

“Holy shit.” Peering at Bill, he had retrieved his phone, browsing the notifications. It was heart-wrenching to watch his expression dropping with each message. “It’s all about you. That’s all they care about.”

"Me?” he questioned and frowned, but had begun to pack his items to leave in a hurry. "What do you mean?” As he asked that, he was already typing and sending a message off to Mabel to reassure that he was okay and would be at the dorm soon, describing how he'd accidentally fallen asleep.

“Yeah, it’s a lot of ‘where is Dipper’, ‘did something happen with him.’” Alarmed, he gawked at Bill, waiting for an explanation, details, something to shed light on the latter part of that. Although he'd tried to ask 'what?', he ultimately mouthed it with a mere squeak since he couldn't seem to produce the word. “Good ol' Stan here thinks I kidnapped you or something.”

"I guess he's kind of overprotective." Overreactive was perhaps a better adjective since nobody else assumed Bill was a villain in this mistake. "I'll let him know I fell asleep, alright? I'm sorry." Dipper couldn't pinpoint why he was compelled to apologize but did so anyway, wanting to fix this mess, still feeling awful for everybody's unnecessary concern.

“Not your fault. Do you want me to give you a lift back?”

"It's across the street."

“It’s also safer,” he winked at him but seemed joyless, “I can’t risk you being kidnapped for real.” While that may otherwise have elicited a smile or a tiny laugh, tonight it compounded Dipper's distress, and all he could do was stare hollowly at Bill until he felt like he should apologize again.
"Thanks," he murmured and zipped his backpack, "but I should probably go. I'm guessing you want to get to bed, not crash on the couch with your shadow-grader."

Bill shrugged. “I enjoyed it while it lasted.”

"Yeah, uh, me too. I think." In the middle of fretting about this, it was hard to determine if he'd enjoyed the nap that landed them in this storm of chaos and apparently had Stan accusing Bill of crossing a legal boundary. It was an illogical worry, but Dipper knew Bill wasn't brushing it off, not if the traces of hurt in his eyes had anything to say about it. It'd been dreadful, observing Bill's happiness when he thought he was being contacted by his friends and then the same happiness dissolving into anguish when he read the messages.

Pausing near the door of the apartment, Dipper reached for the handle and dared to glance over his shoulder at Bill, who was watching him, slowly rising from the couch. "I'm… going to take off. Goodnight."

“Goodnight, Pine Tree.”

Worrying the inside of his cheek, Dipper stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him, sighing heavily, running a hand through his hair. Dipper looked through their text conversation history, starting with the message he'd sent several minutes ago:

(3:56 AM) I'm so so sorry.

(3:56 AM) I don't know if you're still awake, but I fell asleep at Bill's. I'll be at our dorm in a few.

(3:58 AM) DIPPER

(3:59 AM) Hey I'm the worst, I'm sorry.

(3:59 AM) Don't be!! I'm so glad that you're safe and everything's alright. I came back from work and you were gone, which was weird af because you never stay out this late.

The many crying-face emojis at the end of the text had the ends of his mouth wavering.

(3:59 AM) I was super worried. I can't wait to see you. <3

Returning to Mabel with Bill being alone, so deeply upset too, seemed wrong, but he didn't know how to shake the feeling.

(4:02 AM) I know I said I'd be back in a few minutes, but maybe…

(4:02 AM) You could bring our overnight bag and come here?

(4:03 AM) If you don't mind staying with Bill.. He seems sad.

(4:03 AM) And alone. I'm pretty sure it was the worst thing I've ever seen, his face when I left.

(4:03 AM) What's going on with Bill?

(4:04 AM) Lonely, I think? He got a bunch of texts and calls, and he seemed happy about it at first.

(4:04 AM) But it was everyone looking for me.

(4:04 AM) That's really awful. I was asking our friends if they knew where you were, but I didn't
think they'd spam Bill.

(4:04 AM) Sorry.

(4:04 AM) I don't want him to be lonely. Are you still down for a sleepover? Nobody feels alone at one of those, and I can get our things together real quick.

(4:04 AM) Yeah, you're the best. Just pajamas and clothes for tomorrow, and tooth brush and stuff.

(4:05 AM) Oh. I should probably see if this is okay with Bill. Hold on a sec.

Turning around, Dipper closed his eyes briefly to regain his composure, though he remained flustered from the flurry of anxiety, and he opened them again to knock on the door. Dipper leaned against the wooden frame and quietly called out Bill's name, hoping to urge him to come to the door while not disrupting the other tenants of university housing.

Somehow more disheveled than he remembered in the span of a couple minutes, Bill appeared, a very fitting bottle of Arrogant Bastard Ale in his hand. “What?” his voice was mellow, teetering. “Come to tell me you’re leaving again?”

The corners of Dipper's lips twitched downward, and he leaned against the doorframe to gather his thoughts, an activity he probably should've done before beginning this interaction. It felt like there was a lump in his throat. "Do you want me to?" he asked. "Because I— I was wondering if, maybe… I could stay with you."

The look he received from Bill was a combination of confusion and caution. “You want to stay with me? What happened to going home?”

The words caught, unsure if he should bring attention to Bill's evident loneliness. The bottle hanging in his grasp spoke to that loudly enough, and he didn't want to upset him, ruining his chances at staying and leaving them both unhappy for the evening. "Yeah," he said, "I thought it'd be nice, if you didn't mind. I mean, like you said, it was enjoyable while it lasted, right?"

“Yes, but..” he frowned, glancing away. “Everyone’s worried about you, I thought you’d rather go be with them.”

"Go be with…? Bill, I'm not going to stay with them," he refuted with an empty smile, wishing he could be amused but the scene was simply too dismal with Bill feeling inadequate, isolated. "I'll tell them I'm alright, so they don't worry. I asked Mabel to bring our things here because I thought we could be together, all of us, for tonight. But if that's not okay…”

“It’s fine.” Bill turned his back to him, stepping into his apartment which left the space open for him to follow, but Dipper hesitated. “Make yourself at home.” It did nothing to reassure him that Bill wanted this, a point of confusion because he sounded so melancholy, it was difficult to determine his true feelings on the matter. Despite himself, he entered the apartment again and fired a text to Mabel that gave her the green light to pack their things and come over, also providing the apartment number. Pocketing his phone, he ensured his backpack was placed in an unobtrusive spot before wandering into the living room a bit aimlessly, standing in the middle of it. It was like their first meeting, he felt out of place and awkward.

Bill was on the couch, sitting back as he chugged his bottle of ale, to Dipper's visible discontent. “I still don’t get you,” he breathed as he finished the bottle, setting it on the coffee table. “You have better people to be with.”
"I can't believe you did that." The comment was directed at the now-emptied bottle of alcohol, and Dipper snagged it from him with intentions of cleaning it and the rest of Bill's piled-up dishes tomorrow morning.

Trying to think about what Bill had said to him about having better people to be with, he didn't see it: he'd be spending the night with Mabel, his absolute favorite person, and Bill was a decent… friend, somehow, not that he knew when that'd happened. "I don't know, I guess," he conceded with a halfhearted shrug. "If you actually believe that, I thought it'd mean more that I'm choosing to be with you."

"It does," he said. "But I don't like that it feels like you're only here because of me. Not because you want to be here."

"What are you talking about? It's not like I came here for Marigold," she wasn't around, Bill had taken her to his permanent residence quite some time ago, "so of course I'm here because of you."

It was with a pinch of discomfort in his thighs that he remembered he was still standing in the middle of the floor, spatially clueless, so he set down the bottle and joined Bill on the sofa. He stayed near the opposite end, fingers sweeping through his hair. "If I didn't want to be with you, I wouldn't have come once tonight, much less twice." Wait. "Um."

"Kinky."

Flustered and still trying to backpedal, a manly squeal involuntarily spilled from him. "Bill."

"Stars, you're moaning my name."

A whine turned shrill at that with irritation and embarrassment, the hand that'd been in his hair was now over his face to shield him from Miami's biggest douchebag. "God, I really hate you," he said, voice cracking over the words, but he wasn't too upset beyond being a little mortified at himself and the clumsy wording. At least Bill had seemed to discover some entertainment in his flubbing of the English language, a distraction from the previous conversation.

"You hate me, but you love me so fucking much." He winked, yet Dipper merely wanted to punch him in the stomach, or redirect that violence toward himself because that would be a valid reason to be choked up, sputtering, and red in the face.

When a knock on the door shook him from this moment, Dipper shot up and was across the room before slowing, opening the door to reveal Mabel and a bag presumably with their overnight items. "Oh, hey," he greeted with a grin, stepping aside to let her in. Tiredly and with eyes still sunken by worry, Mabel grinned back at him as she entered and must have seen his backpack because she set their bag down alongside it. "Thanks for getting our stuff. Did walking over here go okay?"

"Yeah, it went fine. I'm glad to see you Dipper."

Bringing her into a tight hug, Dipper stayed there and relaxed into her warmth and comfort, internally apologizing again for everything tonight- for worrying her, for falling asleep. In the background, he heard Bill speak but barely registered it. "Shooting Star," Bill greeted. "It's nice to see you."

"You too, Bill." She turned back to Dipper, and he noticed she was stifling a yawn. It didn't surprise him when an admission of exhaustion came, "Hey, I’m beat. How’re you doing?"

"Tired too," he confessed. "If you want to sleep…” he motioned toward their bag, "we might as well try to get as much as we can. It's just getting later, and I have classes in the morning. Bill has
to be at the grad office in… what, five or six hours? And he downed a partial bottle of alcohol,” Dipper said pointedly while sparing Bill a sideways glance, ”so I'm guessing he could use the rest too.”

“I’m not tired,” Bill said, annoyed. “And don’t drink shame me.” Mabel shook her head, moving to their bag and pulling out his pajamas first to hand them over, then located her own. Matching pine tree printed- it was kind of silly but that’d been her idea, and he couldn't have said no even if he wanted to.

“Guess who's ready to get some snoozin' done? I feel like I've been up for way too long.” She hummed, then paused to sweep her eyes over the apartment, presumably looking for the bathroom to swap clothes. “I have to work tomorrow, and… I know it was dumb to be so upset about it since it was unlikely that anything bad happened, but I was too worried about you to sleep.”

"It's not dumb," he protested in an attempt to be soothing, reaching for Mabel's wrist to stop her. Guilt coloring his voice, he went on, "I'm still sorry about that, seriously. It won't be an issue again, I promise, so you won't need to worry or sound the alarm to everybody we know.” The last part was more affectionately teasing as he brushed his thumb over her palm, then loosened his grip so she could walk away if she wished. "I can't believe I had a text from Robbie, of all people." It was brief and succinct, but nevertheless there.

“Robbie texted you? Outside of the group chat?” she asked over her shoulder, and Dipper nodded. “That’s great. I knew you two would hit it off.” After she spoke, she headed into the bathroom with her pajamas and toothbrush in hand, closing the door behind her with a promise that she'd be returning in a couple minutes.

Bill huffed, moving from the couch to head into one of his other rooms. Probably his bedroom. “He fucking sucks.”

Scuffing his foot on the carpet with his hands clasped behind his back, Dipper lamely joked, "I mean, I wouldn't ask him to, but I guess that's nice to know if we might be going on a date." From the way Bill tensed with his hand outstretched toward the doorknob and stared him down, Dipper wondered if it was too soon to be making playful remarks about it. “I can’t fucking believe you. Going on a date with *him*. It’s fucking horrible.”

"Nobody else is lining up to take one for the team," he said, tone light. Dropping the teasing inflection, he said, "Look, don't freak out. I still don't know if I'm going to." “No. You shouldn’t go on a date with him. Ever. He’s a bitch.”

Dipper rolled his eyes but was already turning away, walking toward the sofa to settle in for the remainder of the night. "Your suggestion of an alternate is currently seeing somebody." He remembered when he'd asked who it should be in lieu of Robbie, Bill had proudly declared himself — egotistical, and far from serious.

“Why are you so eager to fucking go on a date with him?” About to refute that, Dipper wanted to correct him and say he wasn't *eager*, but interested in the possibility of having another person in his life minimally as a friend since Robbie seemed to be a decent guy, Bill's claims aside. He'd befriended both Wendy and Mabel, and that was good enough for him. "...that asshole stealing you away from me.”

Any previous thoughts were dashed by that, and Dipper let out a surprised scoff, eyebrows hitched and expression one of disbelief. *That* was Bill's issue with this? He was jealous, likely of the time
he'd be spending with somebody else? Not only was the fear irrational and unfounded, but he didn't know why Bill—barely his friend—thought he was entitled to his spare time and company. Although being with Bill had recently been relaxing and fun, mostly enjoyable considering his usual attempts at socialization outside his familial ties were flops, thoughts like that were dangerous and ended in him echoing his soulmark: 'what the hell is wrong with you?' Bill was still a huge jerk, as moments like these were sharp reminders of, and a distant friendship was already pushing it.

“Are you going to answer me?” It was a demand, and when Dipper didn’t, Bill slammed the bedroom door behind him hard enough to rattle the framed pictures on his wall.

Letting it go, Dipper supposed he could figure out that mess in the morning with Mabel's help at navigating social situations but for now, he was content to wait until she'd returned with pajamas on. Curled up on the couch with her, it was cozy and comfortable, easy to drift off since they were both extremely drained and needed the rest after a trying day. He rested partially on her side while Mabel faced the cushions, tightly wound into a ball while her stomach rose and fell in a rhythmic time to her drawn-out breaths. Snuggled in their matching pajamas, they were a Pines pile on Bill's sofa captured in a peaceful sleep.
Chapter 15

Rest came much easier than he thought it would considering this was a strange position in a strange environment, but he wasn't fidgety, nor did he wake. The only time he stirred was when he felt the couch shifting despite Mabel's stillness, the sensation foreign enough to draw him into a semi-alert state, and he raised his head to blink wearily toward the other end of the sofa.

Through a bleary gaze, he saw Bill on the armrest and although it may have otherwise been startling, right now it was puzzling. "Bill?" he murmured roughly, keeping his voice down to avoid disturbing Mabel. Squinting, he scanned Bill for irregularities to confirm it was a dream because it seemed so wildly odd when the last interaction was an angry stomp into his room, and he expected to wake for real in a state of deliriousness any second.

"Hey." Bill leaned his head back, placing it on the cushion. "Did I wake you? I didn't mean to, but I didn't want to be alone in my room anymore."

That… did sound convincingly like Bill, but he supposed he knew him well enough to manufacture that trait into dream Bill too. With a groggy noise, Dipper hauled himself the rest of the way up but in a sleep-induced clumsiness was falling forward again and caught himself precariously closely to crashing into Bill's thigh.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Dipper leaned on his haunches and examined Bill, noting the irritating gauze on his arms and plain shirt, boxers. Lean muscle on his legs implied that he exercised, but he halted that mental scenario. "I don't know how you handle a normal night here if you can't be," a yawn interrupted him, "alone in your own bedroom."

"I want to be with someone."

Eyes still glassy from sleep, Dipper laid back and jokingly murmured, "I don't think there's room for all of us, so if you'll carry me, I'll join you. If not, you'll have to fight Mabel for the spot."

"Will do." Before Dipper could react, Bill was scooping him up.

"Holy shit," he squeaked, gripping handfuls of his cotton shirt in search of purchase as they entered the bedroom, leaving him drenched in darkness but unable to make out anything specific except the outlines of furniture. Bed, mirror, wardrobe, a door, windows. Beyond that, it was indistinguishable. "I… I guess I can stay with you for a while, but I didn't think you'd actually carry me." Then again, this was Bill - rising to the challenge was the default.

"You love it," Bill teased, dropping him on his bed and while Dipper momentarily melted into the plush sheets, the bed was too huge to be alone in. Bill's loneliness obtained a new clarity, and Dipper was pulling him to his level while a sound of surprise threw off his classic nonchalant, nothing-can-faze me aura. But he was quick to recover and snuggle in, arms wrapping around his frame tightly, and Dipper discovered he enjoyed the strength holding him in place, the weight bigger than his own pushing him down, grounding him. Dipper's senses were flooded with the overwhelming, intoxicating scent of spicy honey, which had to be some kind of soap from how it lingered on Bill's skin. And that was when he realized his nose was essentially pressed to Bill's neck, drinking him in, feeling his pulse drum against his jaw, letting himself get swept away when he shouldn't be doing any of this.

Simultaneously, it was serene, and he wished he'd allowed himself this comfort sooner. As long as Bill didn't pull back to see the warmth that'd collected on his cheeks, he decided he could have this,
indulge himself under the pretense of 'never again.'

Bill nuzzled him, his body pressed close as he sighed. "This is nice."

God, he so desperately wanted to agree with that and it'd be nothing but truthful, but pride prevented the avowal. But seconds later, he faced regret when something infinitely more awkward escaped: "You're really... big," he mumbled, raising one hand to brush over Bill's back, across his spine. He could feel the heat radiating through the thin fabric of his shirt and the outline of the bone, and being trapped underneath him... Dipper dragged an inhale through his lungs, a staggered breath, closing his eyes in bliss.

“I’m big, huh?” Bill shifted, his chin gently resting against the soft of Dipper’s shoulder. He exhaled his agreement through a lazy 'mm-hmm, mostly tall' and relaxed beneath him, the surrounding of Bill's body strong but not uncomfortable. “Sounds pretty gay.”

Lacking conviction, he swatted at his shoulder blade as if to demonstrate his discontent with that but... it wasn't screaming heterosexual to be cuddling in bed during the earliest hours of the morning with light barely beginning to peep through the windows. At his comment, Dipper whined out a sweet protest, "Bill..." and it was hard to get through that without succumbing to a little fit of elated laughter because it resembled the 'moan' from earlier- intentional, but nevertheless amusing to him.

“Super fucking gay,” Bill corrected his earlier statement, grinning. “Already moaning for me, sugar? That didn’t take long.”

"Is that what does it for you, you big narcissist?” Dipper asked playfully, breathless. His fingers twitched as they skimmed over Bill's back again, and he tried to memorize each dip and contour and every muscle because it felt nice, worlds different than previous snuggling experiences. "Also, I could be way gayer." Jokingly, he clamped his nails into the skin and whispered exaggeratedly, "Ooh, Bill. Take me."

“Don’t tempt me,” he huffed. “I have lube nearby.”

"I have a sister nearby."

“I was hoping we could do this without her, sweethea— hey!” Bill recoiled from being flicked on the cheek.

“You know that's not what I meant." Dipper's lips quirked into a smile, knowing Bill wouldn't take it further. He wouldn't act on this, and through a rumbling murmur, he reminded him of such, "You wouldn't anyway." With that, he released his stubby nails' grip on Bill's shirt and the skin underneath, languidly stroking the expanse of his chest. Not the most platonic thing he'd ever done, and he was aware it set the mood for a humiliating recollection later, but Bill seemed to be enjoying it as much as he was, this lazy exploration of a temporary cuddle partner.

Pulling back and angling his head, deciding he didn't care if Bill saw his cheeks burning brightly because nobody could persuade him to miss this, he took the opportunity to admire Bill's handsomeness. The chiseled jawline, the defined and high cheekbones, thin lips, blond hair tickling sides of his angular face, affection deeply embedded in his gaze and that was enough to automatically have Dipper inhaling with a start, but it felt like it left him more short of breath than before.

To his absolute astonishment, Bill seemed to be pushing the boundaries because he ghosted his tongue over his lips and was inching closer, eyes on his mouth — the target was obvious, and
Dipper's pupils widened. Closing the distance, Bill rolled his weight forward, but the motion pressured Dipper's upper thigh, the connection to his waist, resulting in a burst of severe pain that had him crying out in a keening howl. Knees jolting inward to reduce the pain jammed into Bill's side. Bill immediately jerked away with a yelp as he hunched, but Dipper hardly noticed in the midst of trying to regulate his breathing and recover from strained wheezes and squeaks.

“What the fuck?”

Dipper's entire body was trembling, still coursing with the aftershocks of discomfort, breaking out in a slight sweat over his lean figure, and he moaned lowly again as if that would alleviate some of the uncontrollably awful pain.

When he could focus on more than the basic response of hurting, Dipper gradually uncurled and was glad the noise didn't carry since Mabel wasn't checking on them, but his gaze slid to Bill… And he wanted to moan again, this time existentially as he remembered everything that'd just happened. First, he supposed an explanation was overdue considering Bill still appeared confused and angrily betrayed, a pinch of distant sadness looming on him.

"Bill, I…" his throat was dry, and he averted his eyes downward, "I'm— it was, where your weight was, it was on my hip-thigh area, whatever, and… it hurt. I freaked out."

"You kneed me. I was kneed. Ow." Despite blurting a heartfelt apology, Bill shrank back, rubbing his sore spot. "I thought we were having a good time."

Oh. And that was another thing, but he'd kind of been hoping Bill would pretend that moment never existed. Dipper sucked in a deep breath and let his head roll back, eyelids fluttering open to stare at the ceiling. "Yeah," he said, "but I don't think you should… y'know."

"Why?"

Although he bit his tongue, he wanted to ask 'really?' because he couldn't tell if Bill genuinely didn't see the problem or was being obtuse. "Bill, w-we shouldn't," he stammered dumbly, then pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "You were… going to kiss me," it was still riddled with bewilderment, like he couldn't believe it yet it'd been less than two minutes ago, "and you're — what about Wendy?"

“I can break up with her. She sucks.”

Panic gripped Dipper. "What? No way, you can't do that." But the words had shockingly minimal power when Bill could most certainly do that if he wished, and he couldn't lift a finger to stop him. "You can't break up with your long-term girlfriend over this, it… it's not like we're—" in love, but he shook his head. Any attraction toward Bill was purely physical, that wasn't grounds for a relationship.

“I want to break up with her, and…” he leaned in, "Pine Tree? I want you.” As the words sunk in, Dipper was paralyzed, hefty desire gripping him because Jesus Christ, he wanted that too, wanted Bill, at least for a split second before he noticed his train of thought and put an abrupt end to it. Gods above, he was so ashamed of himself. Any relationship would end in a burning, messy disaster; they didn't know one another well enough, were supposed to have a working relationship, a professional one- that was a bitter joke as he was splayed on Bill's bed and a few encouragements from tossing restraint and making out with him until the sun rose in the sky.

Still, he reminded himself, physical attraction and nothing more didn't equal a solid romantic relationship.
"Bill, no," he said gently, slowly like he was trying to articulate himself to an obstinate child. "This... we can't do this. You're with Wendy, and— you guys aren't unhappy, so..." He swallowed. "Don't ruin it over the last five minutes, we're both super tired and probably not thinking this through."

“I know what I want,” Bill insisted. “Why are you treating me like I don’t? I don’t like Wendy. I don’t love her.”

"You don't love me either," he pointed out, not seeing how this arrangement would be better. "Look, I still don't think this— us," he motioned between them, "is a good idea, but... if that's seriously how you feel about Wendy, you have to tell her."

“I’ll break it off with her, then we can be with each other. It’s perfect, sugar.”

"No," he sighed again, then hesitated, "I... I don't know. Let's talk about it in the morning or something, when you're not buzzed and we're not overwhelmingly sleep-deprived."

“I’m not sleep-deprived or buzzed. Let’s talk now.”

"I'm sleep-deprived, and you definitely are buzzed." Shaking his head to move on, Dipper pressed, "Tomorrow morning, if you still want to." They'd be more clear-headed and while his answer wouldn't change from a self-loathing 'no', he could avoid temptation - besides, he had a feeling Bill wouldn't be as desperate for contact once the effects of the alcohol wore off.

Forcing himself upright and ignoring the dizzying sting of pain, Dipper lingered with his legs hanging over the edge of the bed and murmured a quiet confession, "I just... don't think you should end what you have, not over this. You've worked extremely hard on that relationship, and we— Jesus, Bill. We wouldn't be a good idea."

A growl of frustration formed in Bill's throat. “Why are you being difficult?”

"Why do you want to... I don't know, date me?" he asked, throwing his hands to demonstrate how perplexing this was, though he wasn't directly facing Bill. Dipper had thought their friendship was already shaky, but to jump to Bill wanting to be more involved...

“Why won’t you let me date you?” he demanded. “I'm sick of all this dancing.” Groaning, Dipper's hands covered his face, and after a moment, he flopped onto the bed sheets to spread his arms out in exasperation.

"I don't want to ruin your actual relationship! Anything between us would be a total disaster, Bill. I don't know how you don't see that, and... and why you're so willing to give up on Wendy after you both obviously want to be with each other, otherwise you wouldn't keep getting together."

“I told you I don’t want to fucking be with her. Why aren’t you listening to me? I thought we were friends.”

"If you didn't want to be with her, I doubt you'd be figuring that out now. That seems too... convenient." The word was scalding. "Right after you almost kissed me? You didn't seem interested before this, so... yeah, no. I'm going to sleep by Mabel."

“What the fuck.” Bill tried to keep him nearby with an arm draped over his side, but it dropped when he sat up. “Don’t leave.”

The broken tone, his harrowing expression... Dipper was scrambling to retain a resolve begging to crumble. "Okay," he said with a hand sweeping through his hair, "if you're serious about this...
then, tomorrow. Like I said, we'll talk about it tomorrow, and you'll have to decide what you want to do. That's kind of messed up if you actually don't care about your relationship anymore. Don't drag it out, y'know?"

“I’m not dragging it out,” he grumbled, but went silent as he crept in to wind arms around his waist, and Dipper's urges were telling him to scoot away, do anything but stay there and permit Bill to cuddle him. So of course, he didn't move at all because he was a logical guy.

"Kind of seems like you only want to end things if you have it all lined up with me. That shouldn't matter if you're unhappily in a relationship."

“I don’t like being alone, why are you bothered by me wanting to be with you? I don’t like the thought of not having someone. That’s the only reason I’m still with that fucking bitch.”

“Dude.” Bill's serial monogamist habits were concerning, and he bit the inside of his cheek, gathering his thoughts. "Bill, that's… I— I'm not interested in a relationship to cure loneliness, and I don't think you should be either since that seems like it'll result in, well, situations like this." Where Bill's feelings for the other individual were nonexistent.

"It’s not a cure, and why are you so resistant? You wanted to go on a date, here’s a guy interested. We work well together."

"You're taken," Dipper reminded him through gritted teeth, "and I don't want you to mess up a relationship that actually has a chance at a future." He and Bill, they didn't have that. They had lust, possible soulmarks, and jokingly flirty comments. "All because you have this wild idea that we would somehow make a great couple, but I don't know—"

"Not for long." He squeezed Dipper, who exhaled a shudder and wished he could say he didn't fall against Bill slightly, leaning into the comfort. “The taken part, not the future.”

Trying to ramp up the confidence to push away, leave Bill's warmth, break out of his embrace, he shook his head and felt the press of Bill's collarbone on his head. "No, I'm not negotiating this with you. I'm... I'm going to sleep by Mabel,” he repeated to reaffirm, “and we'll talk about this later.”

“Don’t leave,” his earlier plea resounded as he tightened his grasp, though he hadn't moved to shuffle from the bed yet, didn't have that kind of self-motivation. “Please.” Bill's broken request wasn't helping with his already-waning desire to leave, he didn't want to force him to be alone in this state but felt he had to. There was no way around that: they both needed to rest, especially Bill because he'd be at work in three hours and had to be clear-headed enough to do his job.

Rising from the bed, the creak of the mattress told him Bill had done the same. Daring to look, Bill took it as an invitation to step closer, and Dipper was worried he was going to restart the kiss attempt until he... he simply hugged him.

It was amazing how he could muster the mental gymnastics to convince himself it was a solid plan to weave his arms over Bill's shoulders to return the hug, an act of reassurance, then pretend like that'd be it. But here he was, essentially trapped in a lingering embrace.

Bill nuzzled into his neck, lips lightly brushing the column of his throat where a protesting whine was quelled. “Are you leaving?”

"I, uh, yeah," he murmured and melted into Bill, who at this point may as well have been holding him up with how much of a puddle he'd become, shivers racing down his spine from the sensation of Bill's nuzzle. "Eventually." The internal screaming to vanish, to forget this happened and let life
resume as usual was still trying to reach him, but the intoxicating nature of Bill had it drowned out.

Bill huffed, displeased. “You’re not allowed to, you can’t leave me. I don’t want to be alone.”

The entitlement snapped him into reality again, the daze quickly fading to be replaced by a reminder that this was still Bill Cipher, his friend and Wendy’s boyfriend and… Dipper broke the hug and squirmed out of his grasp, deflating as he ran a hand through his hair. Although a reminder they could have this discussion tomorrow was on the tip of his tongue, he held it back, uncertain, he didn't know if he wanted to talk about this in case Bill actually decided to go through with his threat to leave Wendy after a confession of disinterest. A few deep breaths later, Dipper felt his shaky composure rebuild, and he started to leave.

“Pine Tree, no, you said–” And there he went, scrambling after Dipper. “Don’t leave. Why are you leaving?”

Pausing against his better judgment, Dipper waited with the back of his knees to Bill's bed, trying to keep himself from faltering. Slipping up would only spell trouble. "Because we shouldn't," he said softly, "not when you're… still— taken." And also, not when Bill was intoxicated or expected this to turn into a full-fledged relationship; they'd need to be clear on what it was, and it wasn't romantic. If Dipper had to choose a label, it'd be reckless desire.

“Pine Tree, please. This is fine, don’t leave because of her.” Bill moved again, appearing at Dipper’s side.

"Um… okay," he rocked on his heels, "so can I leave because you seem to want a romantic relationship that I'm not ready for?"

“No, you’re looking too far into this. Stay. Sleep with me.”

A taut squeak-turned-sigh escaped him, and he dodged eye contact. He knew seeing the distress across his features at the prospect of being alone would be enough to shatter him, coax him into staying. All he could do was was mutter a "sorry" and shouldered past Bill but was grabbed by a hand. “Stop! Please. Please.”

"I seriously can't stay with you," he said, fighting to keep his voice even. "If I do, we'll..." Trailing off was the single finish to that sentence. There was no way in hell he'd detail what could happen, or rather what he was afraid might aside from falling asleep cuddling. Scuffing his foot on the carpet, he asked, "Why don't you sleep in your armchair, or something?" The answer was blatant: it wasn't the same as snuggling with somebody else.

“I want to stay with you, not on a stupid chair alone.” There were many possible replies for that, most consisting of pointing out Bill’s inability to be grateful for this when it was the sole offer he could make. Staying wasn't an option.

Shrugging his hand off of his shoulder, he said, "Get some sleep, Bill."

“I won’t be able to. Not without you.”

"Goodnight." This was a finalized attempt, and he skirted Bill to cross the room in the darkness, watching his step since he lacked the light to see anything.

As he exited the room, he could hear Bill’s discontented growl, and the door slammed behind him with a BANG!

Aside from Mabel waking to ask what the noise was and Dipper reassuring that it wasn't anything
important, just Bill having a tantrum, the night went smoothly and to his shock, the morning was better. Mabel and Bill were cheerfully whipping together a hasty breakfast before it'd be time to leave, and when they went their separate ways with Mabel going to the dorm, Dipper to his classes, and Bill to his office, there'd been no mention of the events that'd transpired.

Which, quite frankly, he preferred. He wouldn't have known what to say to Bill about it, not when 'hey, I was tired and not thinking straight (insert a nervous laugh at the dumb joke)' likely wouldn't satisfy any questions at all.

As it turned out, Bill didn't break up with Wendy and from what he could gather, things couldn't be better between them in the days following from what each said about the other. They were riding the high of a relationship that'd seemingly never been fractured, especially not by an almost-kiss on one partner's end or demands to stay the night.

Dipper felt like he could breathe again, he'd managed to evade the sticky situation unscathed since Bill hadn't truly been unfaithful—he wasn't going to count outlandish confessions of adoration against him when he'd been overtired and buzzed and warped by loneliness, and they hadn't done anything to warrant physical cheating. With Wendy and Bill's relationship ongoing, unharmed, it allowed Dipper to move on from the encounter and similarly pretend it hadn't occurred to begin with.

It was nice, being able to hang out with Mabel and Wendy and study together for their course midterms while engaging in some casual conversation. It kept him awake sufficiently, and it was a lot more peaceful than being clung to by Bill.

Tucking his physics homework away for the moment and digging out his film studies assignment, he inquired, "Hey Mabel, how was Drama Club tonight? I know you said they were going to be announcing the roles for that play." Directly after the club meeting, she had joined him and Wendy in the student union, where they currently remained stationed at a table within the lounge area among many other students doing the same: dreading midterms but cramming as much as possible. He remembered when Mabel strode over to them, Dipper was semi-surprised that Bill didn't accompany her in hopes of being his irritating self among the group, but he was beginning to suspect Bill was either avoiding him, avoiding him and Wendy together, or too caught up in his own coursework to socialize. Considering the Drama Club met in one of the upstairs rooms of the union and Bill didn't stop to say hello, there was a good chance it'd been an active decision not to talk with them.

"Drama Club was great," she said. "I got the role of the daughter. Which I guess is a little weird, Bill’s the dad.." Dipper didn't know whether that was his cue to laugh or cringe, though Wendy chose the former, "but it’s still fun. I even have a couple of lines. I’ve been trying to memorize them, I don’t want to get all flubby and tongue-tied in front of people."

Wendy flashed a quick smile before returning to the stack of trigonometry assignments and study guides. "Damn, dude. Relatable. That's why I couldn't do any of that theater-drama stuff."

"Wow, it's awesome that you got a part in the play," Dipper said encouragingly. "When is it? Is it open to everyone or just members of the Drama Club?"

“Everyone’s invited,” Mabel said. “It’s in the upstairs theater, and it’s free with your student ID. I don’t know the exact date yet, it’s a bit early.”

Dipper nodded. "Whenever it is, I'll try to make it. It'd be great to see you perform again, I haven't since… like, a year ago? For our high school's musical?"
"If you're coming, want me to save you a seat, man?" Wendy asked. "I have to go, or Bill will probably throw a fit over it. Not that I don't like the plays, but I've already been to ten of those things, I swear."

"Yeah, that'd be great." He brightened. "Thanks."

“If you have time,” Mabel threw in, and Dipper raised his eyebrows because he'd definitely have time, and he wouldn't think of missing it. Supporting Mabel was his favorite duty of being a twin brother. “You’ve been studying so hard, I’d be amazed if you didn’t fall asleep during it. You look like hell.” Smile wavering, he wondered if he looked that bad, as he had fallen asleep a few times during class over the past week or so with staying up late to study and complete assignments.

"I wouldn't fall asleep," he protested, but it was light. "If it's in a couple weeks, midterms will be over, and I'll probably be caught up on rest." Rubbing at his upper arm, he glanced away, training his eyes on the cheap plastic of a cluster of lounge chairs occupied by another set of students, "But do you really think I look that bad?"

“No,” she reassured him, giving his wrist a squeeze. “I’ve seen worse. Everyone looks like hell this time of year. Even that cute guy in my class has shown up in pajama bottoms for the last week.”

While he knew it was meant to pacify him, it'd given him the impression that he didn't look good but supposedly didn't have to worry about it because relatively speaking, he wasn't the worst of the bunch. "Oh, great. I feel a lot better now."

"Don't worry about it," Wendy laughed and nudged him. "She's right. None of us look good as we're trying to shove in this last minute studying crap. What is trigonometry even good for? I'm not going to graduate into a triangle." There was a slight pause, and then Wendy's eyes lit. "Hey, you guys are still on board for camping, right? Better not be backing out on me."

“I want to go! Are we still doing that? When can we go? I really want to camp, it's been a long time.”

"Should probably get this done first," Dipper reminded her, motioning to their homework splayed over the table in overlapping papers to represent the layers of hell. "But then… I don't know, it's kind of up to Wendy since she promised to take us."

"Whenever you want." She shrugged. "I'm not picky. Name a weekend and I'll let you tag along."

Mabel shot a glare at the assignments strewn about the table. “I wish we didn’t have work to do, we could’ve gone this weekend. Then the next.”

"Maybe sometime in November before the break," she suggested. "Then it won't be as hot during the day, we can actually go out and do stuff. You and Dipper will love hiking around the area, it's pretty cool during the sunset."

At first, the idea sounded excellent, and then his mood dimmed as he remembered it wasn't that simple for him. It appeared Mabel had arrived at that realization faster because she was dragging a painted nail over her textbook, worry etched into her expression, and Dipper grimaced. "I mean, I don't know if I can. You and Mabel could check it out, but I can't walk that far."

"What, you allergic to exercise or something?" she asked, teasing.

"Uh, medical condition. Actually."

Unlike when he told others, Wendy didn't miss a beat, didn't sputter awkward apologies, didn't
stare at him in sympathy. She nodded, mentally recalculating. "Oh, got it. We'll camp closer to the spots I had in mind, hike a bit, and then take breaks if you need them. No problem."

"This is so exciting," Mabel said. "We can go camping and everyone can have a good time."

"It'll be nice to go camping with somebody else for a change," Wendy commented over the click of Dipper's pen hitting his teeth while he chewed. "It's hard to get my friends to go— y'know Robbie, Nate, Lee… Tambry. They're usually too swamped with work or school. Life sucks like that in college."

"It does," she agreed, then added playfully: "I'll go camping with you all the time, Wendy. You don't need those responsible adults with their busyness."

"Yeah, it's kind of lame, we used to go all the time as a group back in high school."

"You guys went to the same high school?" Dipper asked, a rarity if that was true since the standard life cycle of high school friendships met fizzled demises after high school even with social media artificially extending its lifespan.

"Crazy, right?" Wendy chuckled. "Yeah, we all somehow got accepted into this place, but I was talking about me and Robbie when we were dating forever ago. We'd go camping pretty frequently."

The mention of Robbie had him curious, and he tacked on another question in hopes he wasn't being too intrusive, "Are you and Robbie actual soulmates? I think Bill said you were, but…" the sentence faded there with Dipper peering from his homework to Wendy expectantly, fingers fanning on his assignment.

"He told you? But we are," she said with a grin and hiked up a plaid sleeve to show the soulmark that read, 'Not much, want to see my sweet moves?' in handwritten script that almost looked similar to his own soulmark but neater, thinner, not as wonky. "He had this whole guitar phase, if you're wondering. I think his says, 'What's up? You look bored' or something, I don't remember. He wears those hoodies with the hearts all the time, so it's not like I see it."

"Oh, wow," he said after examining the mark with a laugh, "that's kind of cool, though. That you guys are soulmates, I mean? But you're not forcing anything." Going against the grain of society by refusing a romantic relationship with a soulmate wasn't unheard of, but it wasn't approved of either in traditional circles, yet how Wendy handled the connection to Robbie was inspiring considering his own situation.

Mabel leaned to hover over his arm, their shoulders brushing. "Doesn't it kinda look like the handwriting on yours, Dipper?"

Grasping his sleeve, he didn't pull it back and let his fingers rest there, sort of thumbing at the fabric in contemplation. "Mine's more… all over the place, but yeah, I guess the script is similar."

"Well, let's see it, dude. Who's this Robbie-twin?" It never had before, but attention called to his soulmark now had an effect on him that introduced a flurry of emotions, most of the stressed variety encapsulating uncertainty and worry, and Dipper paused, hesitated, bit his lip. But he complied regardless, shimmying his sleeve in near unison as Wendy returned hers to its normal position— then, there it was. The oddly-spaced lettering that moved like a mini rollercoaster across his arm in jet black lines that varied in thickness, "What the hell is wrong with you?" Wendy whistled lowly, questioning, "Any idea who that is? The handwriting looks—"
The blood was rushing in his ears, harder with each word, terrified of what the end of that sentence would be and was so grateful when Mabel coolly interjected, "He doesn't know yet."

"Yeah, and it's, uh… not like I'm proactively searching. I'm not into the soulmate stuff." The sentence was punctuated by a shrug, Dipper's eyes averted from both of them while he worked to settle his coursing, conflicting thoughts on it.

"I feel that, man. It's such a load of bull, the whole 'you have to be together' spiel, but some people actually believe that— have you ever met Bill's parents? They're by-the-books, pushing him hard to meet his soulmate, and that's why he keeps his covered, doesn't like people seeing it. That and he really hates the thing. Like, its appearance."

"Have you seen his soulmark?" Mabel asked, but Wendy shook her head. "I don’t know how someone could hate it. Soulmarks are cool. I wish mine was longer, it’s one word."

"They're overrated," she said. "Find somebody you like to be with instead of relying on some stupid marking that nobody knows the meaning of. It's all this pressure for no reason."

"I want to find who I was paired with," she told her. "The universe must’ve had a reason to put us together. Like you and Robbie."

"He's a great friend, I give it that," she said with a glance toward her now-covered soulmark. "So even if you don't get a significant other, maybe a friend or a heterosexual life partner, who knows." Or possibly some quasi-friend weirdo who'd tried to kiss him, in Dipper's case, because he didn't understand Bill but had come to appreciate his presence at times. That was something.

As Wendy and Mabel moved from the discussion of soulmates and onto new topics, Dipper occasionally added in a chuckle or a comment, sometimes a shrug, but it was a struggle to focus on anything, homework and studying included, when he was finding it unusually difficult to banish thoughts of Bill and soulmarks from his mind.
Chapter 16

Immense amounts of studying and examinations finally faded into midterm purgatory, the period in which he awaited his scores and tried not to chew an entire pack of pens in the process. Grading for Bill was a welcome change, the activity proving more relaxing than usual as he sat in his pillowed chair at the spare desk, scribbling atop students' assignments. Academics aside, life had improved after the testing: attending the Environment Club meeting, this month's therapy, heading home over the weekend with Mabel to spend time with family and his beloved cockatiels, and contacting Pacifica to arrange their first session.

But for now, he was content to pour his attention into students' worksheets and semester reflections while Bill shuffled around in the background, oddly busy for a Thursday evening.

As it turned out, he wasn't avoiding him nor was he upset over what'd happened. His theory, the 'Bill is too busy with work and academics to do anything except survive' panned out to presumably be the correct one because with midterms done, he'd invited him over. Things were normal between them- or, as normal as expected since he was a mess of social awkwardness and Bill was the social butterfly who was also pretty damn weird. The sole difference was how tired Bill looked in comparison to before. From how his eyes were lifeless and dull, dark around the edges, he could assume he hadn't enjoyed a decent night's sleep in days. Evidence pointed to Bill joining him on the give-up-on-appearance train, as he didn't bother fixing his messy hair, nor did he even unwrinkle his formal clothes. His bowtie was crooked and sloppily tied, he was the walking embodiment of sleep deprivation.

Beside him, Bill briefly came into his line of sight to snatch his wallet from the desk to pocket it, and Dipper raised his head to stare at him skeptically. "What are you doing?" Then it became more confounding because Bill's clothes… didn't match. They were the same yellow-black color scheme but the patterns were ridiculous, clashing with each other, and Bill never did that.

“What do you mean?” Bill asked, confused. “I’m getting my wallet.”

"Okay." Once again, his eyes swept over Bill and narrowed at the mismatching attire. "What are you wearing?"

“Clothes, probably. I’m wearing clothes, right? I thought I put some on earlier but everything’s a blur.”

Humming his concern, he sat back in the chair to fully survey Bill. His clothes were wrong, he had his wallet, and he wasn't trying to pester him. Something was up. "Are you feeling alright?" It was the last question he could ask unless Bill caved, uncertain how to approach this puzzling chain of events. Maybe there was an impromptu Drama Club meeting tonight. Bill sometimes dressed a bit more wildly for those, and it'd explain collecting his wallet if he was about to leave.

“Am I?” he questioned. “I need more coffee. I know midterms are over, but it’s been a rough few nights. Hard to sleep much.”

"Well, uh…” he could infer from the general behavior that it was probably a lack of sleep, so the obvious suggestion was, "Go to bed early? I don't mind locking your apartment, I can slip the key under the door if you want to rest now."

“No, I’m good. Gotta go out to dinner. I’m already running late, can you believe it?”
"Wait, you're going to dinner?" Dipper asked, cracking a lopsided smile. "Wow, way to get me to do your work while you go have fun." But he wasn't upset, didn't mind at all because this was their arrangement, and a quiet night in was appealing after an insanely stressful week. Flicking his eyes to Bill again, he was about to speak but stopped short, closed his mouth, then frowned. "If you're going to dinner, you can't go like that. Unless it's… a mismatch, 'wear whatever' outing." That wasn't even touching on the state of the clothing, the tired lines decorating his face, or his hair that couldn't have been more fiercely fluffed.

“What's wrong with my clothes? They look fine to me.”

"No, man. They don't match." He gestured to the vest and slacks. "The patterns? And you have two different blacks." Bill couldn't claim to have zero fashion sense either, not when he'd demonstrated he knew better every single time he'd seen him before.

Bill grumbled, "When did you become the fashion queen?"

That was worthy of a deadpan look. Dipper's default was cargo pants or jeans in some neutral color paired with any hue of plaid. Fashion queen indeed, but it was ultra ironic in the presence of Bill who actually dressed to impress. "Seriously, Bill. Do you have a different vest to wear? That might fix it."

“I don’t know, you’d need to check my closet.”

"Bring different options for a shirt and vest," he instructed with a nod toward Bill's room. "Then we'll fix… that, whatever you're trying to pull off."

“I was hoping you’d do it for me.” While that would be a dandy request, it required going into Bill's bedroom, and Dipper had deep reservations about breaching that boundary after being in Bill's bedroom for a quick cuddle session had almost escalated.

Dipper's jaw set, his head shook. "You can do that on your own. Don't worry," he said with a wry smile, "after I give you the okay for the new vest and undershirt, you can still strip to show off your tattoos in front of me."

“Yeah, you can admire the portrait of yourself plastered on my chest.” He winked at him but disappeared into his bedroom, returning moments later with a couple of vests and undershirts, and Dipper inspected them as Bill held them up, motioning to the acceptable choices.

"If you put those on, you'll at least look somewhat…" his mouth curved into a grimace at the lingering disheveled appearance, "decent. Hey, I don't know when you're going to leave for your dinner or whatever it was, but do you have time for a shower? I know you said you were late."

"That was before I realized I read the clock wrong, so yes, I have time." Dipper was relieved, still unconvinced Bill was anywhere near 'going out' level of hygiene. “So a shower, huh? What, are you going to make me?”

"Sure, I'll 'make' you. You only have six inches and fifty pounds on me." Scoffing at the notion, he rolled his eyes. "Get in the shower."

“Or what?” he teased. “What are you going to do if I don’t?”

"I don't know, make fun of you?" he mused, smile returning as he reclined in his chair and examined Bill, sympathy tugging at him. "More than usual, I mean. You look pretty bad, man, and you're kind of stealing my thunder for the least skilled in personal grooming."
“Ouch.” Bill shook his head. “You’re jealous I’m more handsome than you are.”

Bill was movie-star handsome with a smirk that’d dazzle all of Hollywood, he didn’t know how he could compete with that. Feeling a little tongue-tied as he gazed at Bill, Dipper’s expression softened, and he shifted his weight to resume grading. "Shower. If you don't, your rugged allure might distract me from finishing your students' papers."

“Fine, I’ll be back shortly. Don’t swoon too much when I come back.”

Soon after, the sound of running water filled the silence of the apartment.

Although Dipper absorbed himself in the remaining work, it took a few minutes for Bill to emerge, his blond hair damp and flattened to his head, only attire his pair of black and yellow boxers. And that damn medical gauze, this time a different color to suggest Bill actively changed it. The dedication to keep his soulmark private was astounding.

But still, he was undeniably attractive with brighter, shining eyes, seemingly refreshed from showering and his tattooed chest and back, something Dipper hadn't noticed before, no clothes to hide the muscular regions that flowed over smooth, damp skin. Dipper wondered what his skin would feel like again, if he'd smell stronger of spicy honey now that he'd washed himself, if.. if his skin would be burning to the touch and he could trail his hands over the expanse of his inked arms and back—

Realizing he'd been watching, awestruck, Dipper was fast to amend that. "This… is totally not getting dressed. I'm pretty sure this is closer to the opening of a cheesy porn video."

“This can either be the best porno you’ve ever seen, or you can dress me. Your call, sugar.”

"We don't have time to make the best porno ever, unless you..." The implication was low and fiery, but he didn't elaborate. Already, Dipper had left the pillowed chair behind and was advancing toward Bill, scooping up his new set of clothing in the process.

Bill raised his eyebrow at him. “Unless I what? Make you cum in two seconds? I can do that easily, doll.”

"Ha," he huffed at Bill, shoving his slacks at him because with that kind of mouth, he wasn't getting assistance. "I could outlast you." From what he'd seen of Bill, he had the self-control of a fucking toddler, and despite his inexperience, Dipper liked to think he wasn't awful at keeping himself in check. Edging wasn't his style, but he was a master at occupying himself with other thoughts.

“You think you could outlast me?” Bill challenged. “I could make you cum in a heartbeat.”

"Thanks for the offer, I'll keep you in mind for the next time I need to jack it. Let's say... um," Dipper tilted his head in thought, cheeky, "January-ish?"

After Bill had stepped into his slacks and adjusted them, Dipper smoothed down the dress shirt to remove the wrinkles before coaxing it over Bill's head and through his arms, watching the fabric settle on his lean frame. “What’s that supposed to mean? Saving yourself for another few months?”

In the process of selecting the new vest, Dipper paused to blink at Bill. "...Saving myself?"

“Yeah. I can’t imagine you not being a virgin, you’re always so stiff.” Dipper would put money on being more flexible than Bill, but he held his tongue, clicking it instead in intrigue. It wasn't that Bill was wrong about that, being a virgin, however he didn't approve of the pseudoscience; any
supposed stiffness aside, the age of consent was eighteen in California, and his birthday had been two months ago.

With the vest unbuttoned, he slid it over Bill's shoulders and took an extra second to brush his fingertips over the muscle, then reminded, "Might want to tuck in your shirt. I don't know how formal the occasion is, but you might as well look flawless."

“You’re not going to tuck it in for me? You can feel around if you want, I’m sure you’ll like what you find.”

"Oh, gross," Dipper huffed and bit a smile that threatened to widen. Assessing the situation, he guessed he could attempt it and probably wouldn't have to get too handsy with Bill either. Besides, shying away from an obvious challenge seemed pitiful in comparison to tucking a shirt in, so he diligently worked in the tails, careful to avoid an accidental grope.

Trying to avoid breaking into laughter, Dipper announced, "Well, your shirt's tucked in. Also, why are you acting so entitled today? Asking me to dress you, having me tuck your shirt in..." Entitled, loosely being code for insufferably 'flirty'.

“You're letting me. Besides, it’s my birthday. I deserve special treatment.” At that, his eyebrows raised, and he deliberated for a second or two, wondering if this was a joke or a sincere moment, eventually deciding on sincerity since Bill didn't falter or give that signature smirk.

"Whoa, seriously?" Dipper asked. "Nice, dude. You're twenty-three?" Then, it clicked: the special outing was likely his birthday celebration.

“I am,” Bill grinned, though it faded. “Are you going to give me special treatment now?”

"This is your special treatment," he replied and wove the ribbon of the bowtie around his neck. "I'm pretty sure I'll never be dressing you again, so enjoy it while it lasts." Fastening the bowtie, he stepped backward, "Aaand it's over. Have to say, you're looking a lot better though."

“I’m a little disappointed by the lack of attention.” Bill tsked, shaking his head, drawing Dipper's eyes to the mess of strands still tangled there. “I don’t feel better, the lack of human contact is overwhelming.”

"Mm-hmm, this must be a very hard time for you," he said idly, uninterested. "Do you have anything to slick your hair...? It's kind of—" Dipper tried to demonstrate with a hand motion but ended up gesturing to his own hair, "messy."

Bill's eyebrow hitched. “What, are you going to style it for me?"

"Uh," his gaze flicked to the corner of his vision, suddenly fascinated by Bill's carpeted floor, "that'd be a no. I don't know how, so unless you want to look like a Flock of Seagulls reject..." Bill should be aware of that, given the state of his attire and appearance: any effort that went into it would go unnoticed anyway, so he'd stopped trying before he even started.

“They were a good band,” Bill objected. “Nothing wrong with rocking an eighties hairstyle.”

"Oh my god. You're really— you would let me...?" he asked, taken aback and a touch suspicious. "You have to go to dinner after this, remember?" The style wouldn't be appropriate for any setting whatsoever.

“Are you going to fuck up my hair if you style it?” Bill asked. “I can own a Flock of Seagulls hairstyle, Pine Tree. Shit, I should make you come with me, so if you do fuck up I can make you
"I don't think I've styled hair before." Except his own, and that hadn't been a success the few times he'd tried. "You should stick to slicking it back, makes you look handsome and sleek." The emphasis on 'handsome' was accompanied by a slight roll forward on his feet, a playful almost sing-song tone to it to exemplify the teasing nature of the comment.

“I am fucking handsome, and you know it.” Bill smirked. “You should do something nice for me, doll. Continue to make me feel special on my special day.”

"I already tucked in your shirt, and that's as close as my hands are getting to your dick, but I'm open to suggestions if you have them."

"Fine, fine, no hands, but how about your mou—?"

Sensing where this was headed, he cut Bill off with, "No way."

Dipper stood back to admire his work and was glad Bill looked more alert, more… alive than he had a while ago. "But honestly, you look good." Black and yellow attire with a perfectly straight bowtie, formal and as attractive as ever. The clothing style definitely made him look tall. Well, he was tall, but it made him appear lean as well, built. The color choice was understandable, flashy enough to make it 'Bill' and the black-yellow scheme brought out the gold and amber of his eyes. Squinting, he noticed the tiny blue dot in there, hard to distinguish among the rest. "Have you ever considered wearing blue?"

Bill stiffened, bristling at the question. "Why would I wear blue? Blue isn't my fucking thing."

"What's wrong with blue?" he questioned, motioning toward himself, his blue plaid shirt. "I think you'd look even nicer in it. Mixing it up, y'know?"

“No, I don’t know. Is this about my fucking eye? I don’t want people fucking talking about it."

Dipper tensed, caught. He didn't know where he'd went wrong, if it was the staring or the suggestion or Bill's sensitivity about it. "Bill," he murmured, an attempt to calm him to avoid an escalation, "I thought you'd look good." Averting his gaze, he tried to feign ignorance but to an extent, was fishing for information, curious about his apparent dislike of the feature. "And uh, what do you mean? About your eye?"

“What the fuck do you think I mean? About the blue? Don't play stupid with me, Pine Tree."

"I seriously have no idea why you don't like it," he insisted. This was quickly spiraling out of control judging by the raise in Bill's voice, the upward curve of his shoulders to suggest they were tensed, the deepening scowl on his face. "It's stunning. Kind of charming and uniquely 'you', I guess."

“I fucking hate it. I don’t know why you brought attention to it.”

"I didn't. You did. I said blue would be a good color for you."

“You fucking brought up blue and how 'it looks good.' Fuck you. Stop trying to turn this on ME when YOU'RE the fucking one who started it.”

"What's wrong with telling you that I like it? It's pretty." Did he not believe him? "And I still didn't say anything about your eye until you went off on a tangent," he defensively replied, crossing his arms. Quelling Bill had been unsuccessful, so he supposed they'd see where this went if Bill was
determined to take them on a path of loathing against his own dichromatic eye.

“It’s fucking horrible and I hate that you brought this up. You’re a fucking dick.”

"Hey! What the heck, man?" Dipper blurted, voice cracking over the force of the words. "You don't need to call me names when all I've done is help you today."

“Help me? All you’ve done is bring attention to my fucking shitty eye.”

"With grading, with..." he flicked a hand toward Bill, "looking presentable for whatever you’re doing. Yeah, I'd say I helped you today. But I'm a dick, for complimenting you and using my spare time to be here with you?"

“Fuck you, you didn’t compliment me. You wanted to stir shit up like an asshole, is that it?”

Fists clenching at his sides, in that moment the tiny splotch of blue in Bill's eye was a target instead of an exquisite feature, a place to aim his fist so Bill could attend dinner with a purple-blue bruise on his face. Although he wanted to, he really wanted to, he knew he shouldn't. Couldn't. Violence wasn't his go-to even with the appeal under these circumstances, and he expelled air as he forced his shoulders down, his fingers uncurling.

The corner of his mouth twitched as he said, "I don't know if you were joking about making me come with earlier, but if you weren't, I think I have plans tonight. Sorry, man. Enjoy your birthday dinner."

“What the fuck is wrong with you? First you're a dick about my eye, now you're not coming?” The anger consumed Bill's demands, voice climbing to a shout. “I can’t fucking believe you ‘have plans’ tonight. But that’s fucking fine, I didn’t want you or your crippledness ruining the fun anyway.”

His stomach dropped. Dipper had to replay that in his mind a few times because he couldn't believe Bill had actually said that, had gone there— called him crippled. Like he had some kind of disease, like that was the only way Bill saw him, or like he didn't work his fucking ass off everyday for the past three years to try to maintain some semblance of normalcy. Years of emotional pain, two types of therapy, daily physical discomfort, endless stress and turmoil for that.

Unsure of where to begin, he wished he could feel a wave of rage so he could work up that little voice telling him to hit Bill in his eye or on that stupid smirk or do something that would inflict a fraction of what he’d been through. But it never would, and it was such a defeating, helpless thought paired with how Bill said...

Unwilling to let himself relive it since once had been enough, the disbelief transformed into a realization that he’d been wordlessly shaking his head in slight movements, jaw working, hot tears streaming down his face. Dipper didn't know what to say to him, but he wasn't going to stand around and wait for another verbal blow to shatter every bit of confidence that he’d conjured, meticulously put in place to rebuild what he'd lost that day— what had been ripped away from him.

Sniffling, Dipper turned away from him and wiped the tears with his sleeve, trying to navigate through blurred vision and collect his backpack so he could leave and hopefully never see Bill again because his mere presence had his stomach in tight, painful knots. Acutely, he was aware of his gait for the first time in about two years, the one giveaway that he'd previously been unable to control to an extent but intensive physical therapy had erased the self-consciousness by restoring it to normal; now, he didn't know what to think, fearful it was obvious again.
“Where are you going?” Bill snarled, but Dipper didn't speak, or look at him, or acknowledge him as he continued past like a ghost. Being so careful too, trying desperately to keep his walking in check. “You’re still leaving? Why are you so insistent on leaving me? Hey. HEY. Fucking pay attention to ME.”

Resting his forehead against the door of Bill's apartment, he paused there and wiped the tears again. Although he'd been ready to mentally cheerlead himself to face Bill again, it was surprisingly one of the easiest confrontations in his life because he realized he simply didn't care. "Please, just—" he inhaled a shuddering breath, feeling so damn broken it was a miracle that he didn't fall apart here and now. "Tell me what you want so I can leave."

“What do I want? All I fucking wanted was to go out and have a good time with you, and you decided to blow me off for no reason and be a dick, and the second I say anything back because it fucking hurt, you— you do this shit. I don’t fucking get it. Why act remotely interested if you don’t want to be around me?”

Most of it sounded like white noise to Dipper's ears still rushing with blood, the humiliation burning at him. He couldn't register that beyond the first few words or anything else while he was operating purely on survival mode, the default when it felt like everything was crashing down around him, and he wanted to collapse. Or die.

Mostly die.

Because he couldn't remember what Bill said anymore despite it being moments ago, Dipper simply mumbled a "happy birthday" along with a couple words of parting as he closed in on the door and brushed out of the apartment.

(6:48 PM) Come home.

Dipper couldn't be alone, didn't trust himself. He'd been crying so long that his face felt numb but somehow hurt like his sinuses were three times their standard size, but comfort wasn't what he had in mind when he'd texted Mabel in desperation. It was a sinking anxiety that he needed the presence of another person because he couldn't take it anymore.

And luckily, Mabel had come through and didn't ask questions, arriving at their dorm in record time in spite of the complexities of an emergency leave from work. She had walked in and taken charge, settling beside him in bed and holding him in a commandingly affectionate embrace that lasted for several more rounds of sobbing, as Dipper was unable to utter a word or think about the experience without breaking down again.

“Dipper,” she murmured his name as she squeezed him. “I’m here, okay?” Swallowing, Dipper nuzzled closer to her and wanted to disappear in the hug. He didn't think or speak but let himself feel, crying into her shoulder until he'd run out of tears and merely took ragged breaths. Other gentle reminders from Mabel, promising that she would listen to him if he wanted to talk and be there no matter what, were given with some managing to comfort while the remainder bled through him.

When he finally had calmed, his mind was fuzzy and his body was wracked by pangs of soreness that went ignored, such as the headache or the overwhelming stiffness in his thigh muscles. "What time…?" he croaked in acknowledgment of the darkness that'd crept into the dorm room, but he stopped short and frowned at how his voice was husky and tired.

"Late."
"Oh." That was how things stayed for a few moments between them with Mabel soothingly rubbing his back and Dipper trying to unscramble his thoughts to replay it to her, what'd happened to bring him to this state of pathetic.

"Was Bill," he stated softly, voice shaking, and he begged it not to crack regardless of its dangerous wavering. "Went… when I— went to grade, I don't remember, I think…” his telling of events was a jumbled mess, and he sighed. "I think it was an argument, I'm… not sure. I guess I said something that pissed him off about his eye, a-and he kind of—" Oh god, he couldn't do it. He couldn't say it. Feeling like he was about to be sick, he was frozen, unable to make the word. "Called… me," Dipper trudged on, forcing himself but sounding off like he was merely forming syllables and stringing them together instead of using coherent sentence structure, "crippled.”

Feeling her tense, Mabel gasped in shock and resentment, furiously pulling him closer. “I can't believe that asshole!”

"Yeah," he said and tried for a laugh to cheer himself up, pretend it wasn't a big deal and he hadn't just cried over it for five hours, but it was weak and joyless. "It made me feel… I don't even know. I guess it kind of brought me back.” Although it remained unsaid, he knew Mabel would keenly understand what he was referring to; she'd been there, she lived through it and had the mental scars to prove her strength. Dipper had a broken body that hated him, but the feeling was mutual since he was pretty sure he hated himself.

"I'm here for you," she told him sincerely. “And I hope you don’t take what he said personally.” Taking it personally was all he could do, there was no way it wasn't meant to wallop him in the face and it did, as much as he loathed its effectiveness. It shouldn't mean anything, shouldn't bother him but it did. It hurt so badly, a knife through his chest that'd twisted and turned until he was fully gutted.

Mabel drew him from his thoughts by tightening the embrace. "He’s a stinky jerk, a real bitter type that brings people down when he feels insecure.”

The adjective had him laughing another small whimper of a laugh that may as well have been a sob with how awfully miserable it was. "Smells nice, actually," he mumbled into her shirt. "Spicy honey— fuck." The quiet indication was peevish, then he was being gutted all over again since he recalled various positive memories alongside the glaringly dreadful. "Fuck. I can’t—I don’t… know why I thought— why maybe he'd be better than that.” Dipper couldn't believe how senseless he'd been, trusting against his better judgment. When Bill had shown his true colors, he should've believed him the first time.

“His personality’s stinky,” she corrected her previous statement. “Still, Dippy. I know he's been nice to us sometimes, but a friend wouldn't hurt you like that, and you deserve better. You’re the best bro-bro.” A choked snifflle was muffled by fabric, and Dipper felt himself breaking apart again, overwhelmed by the display of kindness while he felt like the most useless waste of space, an embarrassment—

"I can't believe it," he admitted, eyes fluttering closed as the small pools gathered in the corners spilled down his cheeks. "I thought he was… okay, I guess. That I had to get to know him, give him a chance, but…” he stopped there, sighing and deflating until he couldn't define where he ended and Mabel began, pressed into the warmth of her body.

"Is…” Fear had him hesitating, unsure if he wanted to know, but he shoved it aside to warble through a tremor, "Is that how people see me?”

Mabel shook her head. “Of course not. No one sees you like that.”
Dipper wanted to point out that, upon further introspection, the question had been flawed because Mabel wouldn't tell him if the answer was affirmative, discerning how painful the subject was for him. Unable to voice his doubt, he said, "Right. It's... just hard. Hearing that." From somebody he was beginning to trust and see as a companion, the same somebody who he'd opened up to in the past and mutually shared personal details about their lives.

“I know it is,” she squeezed him, and he grunted from her grip, but it didn't hurt. The pressure was nice. “You're awesome, though, Dipper. I swear, everyone thinks so. Don’t listen to his bullcrap.”

"I know I shouldn't," he confessed, chewing his lower lip. While he knew he was repeating himself and probably sounding like a broken record at this point, all he could say was, "Just is hard." Because Bill aside, it'd rattled his self-esteem, and he didn't think he could be resilient, not if he was worrying about how he looked, how he perhaps hadn't made as much of a recovery as everyone assured. It was disheartening to think Bill had been speaking a truth that nobody else dared to under the guise of politeness.

Mabel nuzzled him, and that elicited a watery smile as he burrowed into her. “I still can’t believe he did that during a fight, that isn't an excuse to be a big, mean jerk. You deserve so much better.”

Despite the remnants of devastation, Dipper was grateful for this, her support- taking time to be with him and reserving judgment in favor of picking up the pieces. Mabel was his favorite for a reason.

"Guess we're back to calling him Richard," said Dipper, and Mabel broke into giggles. He noted they were slightly cheerful, but carried an element of sadness within, and his heart wrenched.

“What a big fat Richard.”

"Thanks for... staying with me, getting off of work early, by the way," Dipper said tenderly, somber. "What I meant by that—saying it's... hard—was it sort of reminded me of when... Right afterward, I guess. When I was pretty sure my life was over, and I—" _wanted to make that happen._ He couldn't bring himself to say it, there was no point when it'd deliver unnecessary heartache. They went through it once before. "I'm glad you could be here.”

“I'll always be here for you, Dipper.” She offered him a sorrowful smile. “Don’t leave me, okay?”

"I'm not going to leave you,” he promised evenly, seeking out her hand within the sheets to curl his fingers around it, squeezing her to reassure that he meant it. "I won't." They'd gone years without _this_ coming up, an unspoken agreement, and he was waging on time hopefully easing the sting, talking him down — again.

Mabel squeezed his hand in return. “You better not. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Honestly, she would do better without him from what he could gather. Some part of him knew it wasn't true, that it was merely his damaged view of himself talking, but other times he wasn't so sure. "I don't know," he said, his softer. "I don't know what I’d do without you either." It was a weighted statement: Mabel was the one who'd always been there for him, never failed to raise his spirits and dust him off, not once questioned it when he needed her. Instead, she was just there, the constant in his life and his rock. More shakily, he added, "And I don't know what I'm going to do about this.”

The thought of Bill had his stomach churning painfully, that knife edging deeper into his guts to eviscerate him while the statement resounded in his ears. He didn't think they could be around each other.
Cutting Bill from his life was the temporary, extreme solution, Ford acting as the middleman to Bill's papers awaiting a grade. Keeping his mind preoccupied was manageable when there were a million things to take his place, like tutoring Pacifica.

Beyond the awkwardness of meeting in the coffee shop, offering some uncertain greetings, and small talk, the first study session wasn't going that badly. At least not as badly as the other aspects of his life that had crashed and burned, so he was willing to count this one as a win because it wasn't sitting among the flaming wreckage of a friendship.

When they'd gotten to studying, Pacifica started off independently and read the book, did the homework. He didn't prod or quiz her, but observed her progress and silently noted the errors. Chatter between them consisted of a few quick questions here and there, then they got into the deeper material as she seemingly became more comfortable with his presence.

Dipper did his best. He aimed to maintain a patient demeanor and relied on his advanced knowledge of physics, pointing to the textbook where she could look up the information for herself. But nevertheless, he elaborated on the why and how and the practicality of the concepts so she would have a better understanding of it in full context, something the textbook was notoriously awful at.

Then, with the foundations forming, they were able to move onto her homework. Dipper hoped he wasn't damaging her confidence to mention when an answer was wrong, helping her get the correct answer. At this rate, she wasn't as lost as she had been in the beginning of the meeting, so that was tallied as a second win.

However, Pacifica seemed suspicious of the breadth of his intellect on the subject but didn't pry, which he was thankful for since he wouldn't know what to say about it. That he was an overachiever? Maybe a transfer from Ford's section and could claim Ford worked them a lot harder.

"I don't get it," Pacifica said, drawing a questioning hum from Dipper as he gazed from his own work to hers, but didn't see anything on the page requiring his attention. "I attend every class and I still can't get this right without help. You haven't attended most of them, and you're doing far better. Maybe I should, like, skip because I could be doing my nails."

"I, uh, I don't know if skipping would help," he supplied, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know we've mostly been using the textbook, but you seem to be learning a lot from Mr. Cipher too."

"If I was learning a lot from him, my grade wouldn't be terrible."

"Look at these." He pressed a fingertip to her homework sheet, the pad dancing over equations written neatly on the assignment. "I think you learned them from Mr. Cipher? I remember he did examples in class, so it's not like you aren't learning anything. It's just... a process." Pacifica let out an angry mutter, pulling her paper away.

"It doesn't feel like it," she said. "My exam results definitely don't show it."

"I know," he replied and could sympathize, similar in the sense that even when homework didn't elude him, the exams generally came with poor marks. Trying to be encouraging, he said, "I think you'll be able to work up to that. It's why we're studying, I mean... This session seems like it's been decently successful, we've gotten through the homework and most of the chapter. Do you feel like you're getting it?"
“A little? It feels like I’m doing it incorrectly though. Not like my fashion classes where I can totally see if it's right or not, I don't have to wonder.”

"It's sort of hard to get the hang of. Do you want to go over the section again, or maybe we could go through these equations…?" Dipper asked while he fiddled with his pen, alternating between rolling and chewing it, but the suggestions were to gauge where Pacifica's concerns were.

“Okay, sure.” She was hesitant. “We can try the equations?”

Dipper nodded and began flipping through the textbook to find the relevant information, then found the same section in Pacifica's notes. Despite struggling in the course, she was surprisingly dutiful about trying to keep up with the lectures, yet it was clear from the writing that she didn't register what was happening at times.

As they delved into the more advanced problems, Pacifica was gradually getting better and better at them over the course of the session. It wasn't anything major, but the small improvements were enough: taking what she'd learned from a previous answer and applying it to the next, realizing when she had made an error and fixing it herself. It was pointing toward progress, a decent feat.

Plus, the occasional conversation was pretty nice. He didn't think he'd enjoy talking to Pacifica, but he found himself smiling at a few of her comments, asking questions, and for once he didn't overthink it. It was easy to bond when they had a shared problem, a misunderstanding and struggle of physics, even if their problems were several academic courses apart.

"What do you think?" he asked suddenly, checking over their work and comparing her totals to his own answers, written on a sheet of notebook paper since he hadn't been able to get spare assignments from Bill if he wasn't even on speaking terms with the guy. "I hope that chapter makes more sense, and uh, you're getting fast with the equations. It's cool that you caught one of my wrong answers."

“I know! I'm getting uh-mazing.” Pacifica had brightened from her earlier slump. “Some of the nerd-talk makes, like, a lot more sense now.”

"Oh, that's good. Y'know, this is going to get easier because most of it's understanding the equations and vocabulary." That was the beauty of lower level physics courses. It was the higher division ones that introduced complex concepts that were a steep learning curve, and that was where he was floundering, though it was familiar and comfortable to brush up on what he already knew.

Pacifica nodded. "So, is this all for this session? Are we meeting up again?"

"Yeah, I think this might be all. We've already been here for, uh," he glanced at the clock, "an hour and a half or something? Maybe two hours? And I don't want to burn you out on it with class tomorrow. I hope you feel more prepared..?" It was a half-question that he let linger there, but Pacifica's response was less than affirmative, so he cleared his throat and continued. "We can meet up again soon, maybe Monday around noon? We can go over the chapters, if you think that helped."

“That sounds good." Pacifica was gathering her items, placing them onto the coffee shop's table. "How much money do you want for this? Twenty? Fifty?"

At the proposition, he let out a surprised chuckle and blurted, "What?" It occurred to him that Pacifica wasn't joking as she already leaned over to thumb through her purse, and he caught her hand, quickly letting go as he determined he probably shouldn't have done that. "Why? We're
studying together, like… a study group. You don't have to pay me.”

“All my other study groups expected payment. Was that a fifty?”

"It's— I was thinking this would be free, something we did every week or so," he explained with a shrug.

Pacifica sounded out the word, “Free..? I don’t understand that. What, you only want five dollars for this?”

"More like… you don't give me money, or anything at all for this. Show up when we schedule a study session, then we part." For the sake of absolute clarity, he added, "Without any money being exchanged."

“You don’t want money,” she repeated. “What is wrong with you?”

After a pause, he said hesitantly, "It's not that I don't want it. It seems weird to take it and turn this into a business transaction when we're students taking the course and trying to figure out what that wacky Mr. Cipher guy is talking about most of the time."

“Everything should be treated like a business transaction,” she informed him. “People who don’t live by that are gross and uncultured.”

Faking a wince, Dipper shrugged it off and supposed he'd have to come to terms with being gross and uncultured if it meant omitting money from this. "I enjoyed this, I guess? I don't need to get paid, but I appreciate the offer," he said, hoping that would be final and changing the subject to reassert that. "So, next week?"

“Yeah,” she smiled, "that works.”
Life without Bill was life on autopilot, nothing to mix up tedious days of studying or provide a change of scenery. The sole notable events were a second session with Pacifica, a Stan-sponsored night at the comedy club to watch Soos do a routine (while ignoring Bill's insistent gaze), and seeing the Drama Club's play in collaboration with the theater department, an enjoyable performance since Mabel was an absolute superstar on stage. Bill was also there as he knew he would be, but what he hadn't known was Bill would approach him after the play's conclusion, an attempt thwarted by Mabel ushering him away and Wendy redirecting Bill to his visible discontent. Dipper, on the other hand, was grateful for the ladies' interception.

It wasn’t long after Mabel left for work that the dorm room erupted with knocking, and Dipper waited, wondering if an information sheet or flyer would be slipped under the door since that was standard protocol. When no paper came but the knocking resounded, he mumbled a "coming" and cast his phone aside, hauling himself out of bed.

Answering the door, the irritation was immediate when Bill stood there, proud and neat and looking leaps and bounds better than he did. Feeling ill, Dipper staggered back a step and subconsciously brought his shoulders inward to a defensive position, as if shielding himself from an impending attack.

But the "attack" was Bill's grating voice and gut-twisting smile, giving the appearance of genuine excitement instead of the usual antagonizing tone.

“Pine Tree!” Bill’s foot darted, wedging between the door and the frame before Dipper could slam it closed on him, which he may have otherwise considered if the option had been available. “It’s been forever! I’ve missed you, sugar. It’s been quite lonesome.”

That delivered a particularly sharp pang, and Dipper might've commiserated the sentiment if he could think about Bill for more than a minute without becoming nauseated. "Wow… I'm, uh, not the only thing you're missing. Ever heard of a 'hint'?” he asked, fighting the warble of his voice as he kicked at the carpeted flooring where his line of sight rested. Tentatively, it flicked to Bill, whose smile was losing confidence.

“Well, yes. But I don’t know why you’d be hinting anything to me, Pine Tree. I know everyone’s been playing ‘keep away’ with us, reminiscent of Tony and Maria if you'd like my take— but I thought seeing you again would be nice.”

"I… I don't—" Somehow, the more appropriate end to the sentence seemed like 'know what to say', but that hadn't been his aim. More suitably, an admission that his self-confidence crumbled in Bill's presence because the hurtful remark had transformed him into the walking, talking reminder of a despised chapter in his life that he couldn't bear to be associated with, especially ambushed by.

And he'd thought Bill was his friend.

"Bill," Dipper tried, "I think maybe— it'd be best if you left unless you have something to say to me. If this is about your students' papers, they'll be done by Thursday because Ford's dropping them off tonight."
“Whoa, are you kicking me out? Come on, it’s been like two weeks. Can’t we talk? Why do you want me gone so badly?”

"No, I was asking you to leave." Kicking him out, making him leave wasn't part of that when he would allow Bill to capitalize on the general decency of deciding to remove himself. But since he wasn't, Dipper sighed and paced to his desk, perching himself on the creaking wood. Carefully, he used his leg to nudge the chair, now habitable if Bill desired. "But okay," he motioned to the seat. "Talk, I guess."

They had to get this over with. It'd happen eventually considering the neglected texts, attempts at seeking him out for a meeting, and he was internally calculating how to end this visit on a note that suggested it was the last.

“You never answered my question. You haven’t answered any of my ‘why’s. You keep.. ignoring me, cutting me off, I don’t get it.”

Bill hadn't actually entered the room but was standing in the door, intent to have some passerby awkwardly catch a piece of their conversation, and Dipper frowned as he focused his weight on his hands, taking comfort in the smooth coolness of the desk. "You're not coming in, then?"

“Answer my question.”

After giving him a piercing look, Dipper chewed his lip and gathered his thoughts. "You— you don't know?” When it seemed he was clueless, he supposed that forced him to be blunt. "You called me crippled. That, uh, really hurt and was messed up, man, and I can't be around you without thinking about it.” He'd meant to insert more conviction, sound twice as strong as he felt, but it was a breathless confession that tightened his throat and clenched his jaw hard enough to ache.

"Is that what this is about?” Bill seemed perplexed. “I didn’t think that would be a huge deal—" "It is."

"I didn’t know! No one ever talked to me. Everyone started ghosting me or avoiding me, and I thought that was unrelated. I had no idea it was that serious." Dipper's heart dropped, feeling that was minimizing the source of his unrelenting thoughts of low self-worth. "I was trying to get back at you for being a dick about my eye.”

"I wasn't being a dick, I complimented it." A weighted silence engulfed the room, marred by restless taps against his desk drawer that produced a thump-thump-thump noise when the wood connected against the back. "But good job, I guess?"

“I’m sorry.”

He didn't know how to respond to that when obvious answers like 'it's okay' and 'you're forgiven’ were too foreign for this moment, not quite applicable or honest, so he tried to revisit a different aspect of what Bill said. "You were ghosted? Stan and Ford said— I thought… they were hanging out with you."

“Stan got angry with me, and Fordsy is keeping things professional. It sucks.”

"Yeah? I heard you went with Stan for drinks and pool a few nights ago." And he worked with Ford every day, though he imagined professional Ford was exceedingly colder than normal.

“He spent more time shooting me these looks than shooting pool,” Bill said. “Like, the ‘I want to
punch your throat out’ look.”

"I mean, in Stan's defense…" his mouth curved into a humorless smile, "you kind of bring out that look in everyone." Although he didn't laugh, it was funny to him, an internal joke and reminder of the near-violent confrontation in which he'd wanted to punch Bill and in hindsight, that had been the correct choice.

“When have I ever done that?” he demanded softly. “I don’t tempt people into violence. Usually.”

Dipper's gaze settled on something beyond Bill because the urge to hit his stupid smirk had rekindled, yet it manifested in his throat and chest tightening and he was afraid he'd cry again if he stared at him any longer. He refused to do either, there was no way he'd be showing that vulnerability. When he replied, he sounded as distant as he felt with a simple, "Okay."

“What does that mean?” Displeasure painted the question, but Dipper shrugged and reassured himself that he didn't owe the guy anything.

After silent deliberation and his fingers curling and uncurling over the knee of his skinny jeans, Dipper switched topics. "So what are you doing here?" The word 'still' was hard to avoid slipping in. "If it's about Stan and Ford, I'll tell them—"

“I wanted to spend time with you. I’ve missed your company, and it sucks that you want nothing to do with me now.”

Their bond had been severely damaged, even if he missed their banter and friendship too. But he couldn't get his mind off of it, couldn't move on because it'd affected him deeply and left an emotional scar layering betrayal over the flippancy. "Whenever I remember what you said to me, I —” there was the choked feeling, so he set his jaw taut, pausing. "I don't know how we could hang out again, if that's seriously how you think of me."

“I told you I was sorry.” Dipper wasn't impressed, a bitter taste in his mouth. "And nothing will keep us apart! Get this, I broke up with Red earlier, right before coming to visit my favorite cutie.”

"What?” he asked, startled, fingertips digging into the desk's edge hard enough to indent his skin. "Why would you do that? Wendy wasn't keeping us apart. I was actively avoiding you, in case you didn't get that. I feel like shit whenever I see you, and apologizing and breaking up with your girlfriend doesn't change that."

“I don’t love her,” he said. “Why did you take it so personally?”

"Because, Bill." Despite the stress placed on the words, he knew this required a lengthy explanation. "Because you brought attention to the thing I hate most about myself, the aspect of me that I'm super self-conscious about and have literally wanted to kill myself over, the darkest fucking part of my life, and you..." Drained of emotion, Dipper sighed and brushed a hand through his hair roughly, the strands in disarray. "You- took all of the progress that I made toward not... making it my defining feature, trying to make it as unnoticeable as possible, and totally disregarded that."

“I don’t think you're listening to me,” Bill muttered, and Dipper gawked, unbelieving until he registered that Bill genuinely thought this was about him. A surge of regret stabbed him, he knew he overshared- he shouldn't have said anything. “I’m leaving. It was nice trying to talk to you.”

A bitter gesture at the door, inviting him to it, was all the goodbye Bill was going to get.
Midterms were handed back and graded, the segue into a crestfallen afternoon as he moped about how most were C's, one B-. The only acceptable grade was an A from his film studies course, but with a caveat: according to the professor, he needed a subplot in the final draft that'd double as a final for the course. Nothing mystery, thriller, or suspense, but a fresh genre to round the narrative.

But that wasn't physics and therefore meant it'd be useless to future employers if he could even get to graduation. "Academic career" was synonymous with "massive shitshow" at this point, and he dreaded seeing what those marks had done to his overall grades in the course.

It'd taken the majority of his afternoon and several hours of internal strife to build up to this, logging on to the portal to check. But when he saw the grades, his insides froze into icy slabs.

They were As.

All of them, every single one a perfect mark on his record. Six As that he didn't earn, never came close to earning considering his record in the courses, and he had no idea how that happened, his first thought being a mistake in the system until his eyes narrowed, a past conversation about changing grades flashing through his mind while a chilling shock climbed his spine—

It wasn't a mistake in the system, it had to be Bill. Fucking Bill, the mistake in his life.

The coldness of the realization was instantly replaced by a burning hatred, such furious contempt that he couldn't do anything but grind his teeth, clench his fists, and storm over to Bill's apartment for an explanation. Each step was invigorated by previous offenses: his entitled, dickwad attitude over a damn car that didn't need paint, getting so needlessly pissed off about minor incidents, breaking a glass like a spoiled child, kicking Robbie from the comedy club, calling him a cripple.

Although once forgiven with the stipulation that it wouldn't occur again, all of it had pushed Dipper to his limit, a wrathful hurricane brewing within and threatening to destroy.

And now there was this, swapping his grades so Bill could be the 'hero' of this story and win a place in his life that he'd forfeited by acting like a complete asshole. Dipper had never felt more compelled to wreck someone.

Dipper rapped on the door, his knock more of a demanding slam against the wood than a request for entry.

The door slowly pulled open, Bill peeking through the crack before he perked up. “Pine Tree! Or should I say ‘Acing It Tree’? I knew you'd come to me eventually.” That cocky smirk, his eyebrows lowered in what Dipper perceived as a challenge. He'd waited long enough, hesitated too many times, exercised restraint and forgave without retribution. Not anymore.

Swinging his fist at Bill, the accumulation of his strength and rage and raw hurt made the impact ten times as goddamn glorious.

Bill’s head jolted back, confusion etched across his face as his hand reached to touch where he’d been hit. “The fuck?” But Dipper wasn't hearing it with blood rushing in his ears and fire in his veins, the knowledge that it'd felt so inconceivably good after wanting this for too long, and he was riding an adrenaline rush that had him flinging subsequent punches.

The sudden pummeling broke Bill from his daze, and then he was catching his fists, saying words that Dipper didn't register. It became a rapid sequence of throwing a punch and Bill grabbing his hand or wrist only to have it jerked from his grasp, the cycle repeating while another wave of fury built on Dipper's end.
"What? You're not going to— to fight?" Dipper snapped between breaths, voice a sharp snarl as he captured Bill's face in a flurry of attacks that were blocked and caught. "Thought you—" another punch, this one striking its mark, "would want to, you patronizing son of a bitch!" But the pleasure of the fight was dwindling with Bill's uncooperative behavior, defensive and trying to defuse.

"You've already attacked me," Bill growled as his hand closed around his fist, but Dipper elbowed it away from him. "Are you that desperate that you have to resort to name calling?"

Riding the state of blind savagery directed at Bill's stupid face with that sickening sneer, Dipper talked over him loudly, "Is it 'cause I'm crippled— is that why? You fucking asshole— fight!"

A noise of frustration escaped Bill, but he didn't oblige, trying to evade the nonstop assault. "Too rich? Too gentlemanly? Maybe— maybe you want to pay someone, or— it's you so, extort someone into doing it for you."

That seemed to strike a nerve, and Bill retaliated, surprising Dipper by socking him squarely in the face, but the contact generated a euphoric sort of pain. This was what he'd come here for, not for Bill to play defense, but for this: a rough and gnarly albeit essential outlet for every negative emotion Bill had dealt him.

A broken warcry-esque noise ripping from him, Dipper's fist connected with Bill's dichromatic eye and, as if he wanted to add fuel to the fire, truly make sure he had Bill angry enough to sustain this altercation, he snarked out a previously unvoiced thought, "The blue is like an innate target."

If Bill was going to bring his least-liked feature into the spotlight, he'd return the favor.

"What the fuck did you say, you fucking bitch?" Bill struck him again, and again, and he knocked him to the ground to continue. With Bill's weight on him, landing punches was significantly harder between trying to dodge and block the ones flying at him with increased speed and power. "Is this what you fucking wanted? I could fuck you up so fucking badly, you asshole."

That actually sounded like what he wanted, to be punished, to release this tension that he couldn't keep under him anymore but Bill's battering was bringing it to the surface. It was cathartic— strange to say when his pulse was hammering uncontrollably and his mind was racing—to be pelting Bill with the same vigor but less successfully now that he was pinned.

It didn't stop him from trying, wriggling wildly as he threw messy punches, kneed Bill's stomach. "Bring it, Two Colors!" He'd unearthed a weakness, and he was sure as hell going to exploit it, even if it reduced him to awful insults.

"I fucking will, Cries-Out-In-Pain all the fucking time!"

Or maybe Bill's were worse, nevertheless concluding they were both lame.

Dipper landed a blow on Bill's jaw, but he was losing steam as quickly as it'd come to him. Bill let out an angry sound and took advantage of his halt, forcibly pinning his arms above his head. Dipper shuffled, and suddenly the world was spinning and flipped before his eyes as he was manhandled onto his stomach. "I fucking hate you. You're an asshole."

"Hate you too," he breathed, struggling to escape but it was in vain, Bill's grip too strong and tightening painfully with his attempts. As he was winding down, he was more aware of the ache in not only his legs but his face. Eyes, jaw, cheekbones, everything was sore from the fistfight, and there was a thin trail of blood trickling from his nose.
“All I wanted to do was surprise you with something nice,” Bill complained. “And all I get is you assaulting me. I should have you arrested.”

“You forged my grades,” Dipper said, the accusation biting. “All that work I did— you fucking made it meaningless because you got it in your head that I needed to be rescued or some stupid shit, but in reality it's just your selfish goddamn ego unable to take it when I don't want to see you again.”

“If you didn’t want to see me again, why the fuck did you come to me?”

“To beat your dumbass face in, you prick.”

“That’s what cousins are for,” he snapped. “Also, you did a shit job of that. You’re the one pinned like a fuckhead.”

“My cousins? You mean— Stan and Ford?” He laughed bitterly. "Not sure if they would, but I wanted to hit you myself. Kind of takes away the satisfaction if I have someone else do it."

“If you wanted to assault me, you can’t bitch about not wanting to see me.”

Once again, he squirmed underneath Bill's weight but was held fast, the influx of pressure a reminder that he was going absolutely nowhere. "I'll bitch about whatever I please because you keep messing up my life. Change my grades back, dude."

“I improved your life, asshat. Don’t fucking tell me what to do.”

"Yeah? How?” he asked, spitting blood onto the carpet as it dragged over the lines of his mouth. "Where in the narcissism, the demanding attitude, the entitlement… the mood swings, did you improve my life?"

“Everything I’ve done has been to improve your life. Including changing your grades. You’re a fucking ungrateful brat. Do you want your grades to be fucking failures? I can arrange that.”

Truth was, he was already preparing for a semester of impending failure and having that set in stone two months before finals would save him a lot of short-term headaches with useless studying on the hope that he could change an inevitable fate. Knowing he would flunk regardless, it'd free him to do something else. Defeatedly, he said, "I... I don't care, do what you want. Just let me up."

“So you can attack me? I don’t think so.”

"Fine,” he said, scrunching his nose and hissing from the new ache. It'd felt amazing to unleash that upon Bill and to receive it, to have that hard-hitting contact that disciplined him when he desperately wanted to feel it, but he was beginning to realize there'd be consequences in the days following. His face hurt, swelling and bruising in the aftermath. "Have fun getting the blood out of your carpet."

“You have no fucking idea how badly I want to murder you right now.”

"Weird, I had the same feeling five minutes ago toward you.”

But his irritation was over a stupid carpet— a carpet that belonged to the university housing system, so he likely wouldn't even be fined, and Dipper's had been concerning his future. Feeling drained when it wouldn't be the end of the world if Bill acted on the threat, a noncommittal hum formed in his throat, and he rested his cheek onto the flooring. If Bill wanted to murder him, he had the green light.
Bill growled, hitting his back before he pushed himself off, and Dipper heard his footsteps distancing. “Get the fuck out of my apartment before I call the police.” Although he wanted to once again request his grades be altered to their originals, he didn't bother, sitting up and brushing himself off, taking a moment to regain his bearings enough to leave. Light-headed and dizzy from the pure rush of exchanging blows, he swayed as he rose to his feet but walked to the door.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Bill ordered. “You’re not supposed to fucking leave.”

"Don't want a run-in with the police," he mumbled but paused to lean against the wall, finally getting a decent look at Bill. Clothes rumpled, black eye forming, a bruise on his jaw, split lip with blood welling at the wound— he hadn't done too badly for his first actual fist fight, but the sight didn't yield pride.

Emotionally exhausted, he was feeling at peace with himself and oddly enough, Bill as well, though the grades were a point of contention. It was as if this had been precisely what he'd needed to express his frustrations and the reciprocation was equally satisfying.

“I'm not going to call the stupid pigs. Come over here.”

"Going to beat the hell out of me again if I don't?” But despite the challenge, there was a smile hiding in the corner of his mouth and he complied without further complaint, striding over to investigate why he was called.

“If I have to,” Bill said, though not serious. “Your nose looks like shit. We’re going to fix it up.”

A nose-exhale laugh had a splatter of tiny blood droplets going everywhere, and Dipper brought a hand to his face in frustration but flinched from his own touch as the sensitivity shot mild pain through him. "God, sorry," he muttered. "And honestly, I'm kind of impressed you managed to say that without making a gay joke."

“I can’t see you as the type to rim.” Bill grabbed his hand, hauling him into the bathroom and ignoring his sarcastic 'are you calling me a pillow princess?' inquiry regarding his supposed type. “Stars above, stop bleeding on my fucking carpet. Here,” he grabbed a washcloth and turned the sink on, dampening the fabric before handing it to Dipper, who pressed it to his nose and wiped the blood from his face and mouth. “Let’s get some of that off.”

He kept the washcloth against his nose, pinching the bridge to stop the bleeding, and luckily it wasn't long until it'd ceased. "Thanks, I guess." Deciding to be more specific, Dipper added as if tasting the words on his tongue, "For belting me in the nose and then fixing it.”

“Yeah, well. You were getting blood everywhere. Is there anything else bleeding?”

"My ego." Bill had really slugged him, not that he pretended for a moment that he hadn't been near-begging him to. Anything thrown at him, he'd deserved. "Could you spare some of yours? You have plenty, last I checked." 

“No, it’s mine. It’s too good for you.” Bill turned, grabbing an extra cloth and groaning lowly in pain as he began to wipe his own face. “Can’t fucking believe you.”

"What, didn't think I could give you a black eye?” Dipper asked, brushing his fingers against Bill's jaw to encourage his head to tilt, but that killed his joy completely as he saw the purple-blue tint under Bill's skin. "Oh, two black eyes. Jesus Christ, man. I'm sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”
"I don't know. Maybe not." It was peculiar to apologize for it when fighting Bill had filled him with a blissful glee that freed their past baggage. It was like smashing a reset button to demolish the resentment. "I guess I'm sorry I did more… damage than I thought I did."

"I don’t care. My eyes hurt, I want to lay down. They’re going to swell up like fucking balloons, and I don’t want to be alive to see it."

"Wait." The request was soft, genuine, and he faltered a bit. Dipper rocked on his heels under Bill's gaze, inhaling shakily. "I did want to apologize for something— like, for real, not just…" he waved a hand as if indicating the other apology, more from guilt than remorse. "I said some things about your eye, and I— I didn't mean it. I was trying to get you to hit me, so yeah. That was super out of line."

"It doesn’t matter." Bill’s voice stiffened. “I’d rather you drop that subject.” As if to demonstrate, Bill himself moved on, adding more tenderly: “I’m sorry for calling you an ungrateful brat," Dipper's nose wrinkled as he grimaced, "and.. insinuating you’re unable to succeed without me. You were doing fine. I wanted your attention.”

"It's not that, it's... how I've worked my butt off this semester, and for these midterms, and changing my grade made that effort totally pointless." With a sigh, he brushed a hand through his matted hair and slumped against the wall of the bathroom, the agitation dripping from his body along with his fiery determination. A tiny, wistful smile played on his lips as he said, "Don't apologize for the 'ungrateful brat' thing, though. I am an ungrateful brat."

"I will change your grades back," he told him. “They’ll be normal in the morning."

Eyebrows furrowing, he asked, "Do you remember what they are?... Um, were? I know my midterms weren't good enough to have all As, but I'm not sure what they would've been."

“Don’t worry, I have them copied on my laptop for this very situation.” Bill winked at him, and Dipper noticed it was his intention all along, the "improved" grades were never intended to stay.

With a leveling stare and Bill's unflinching gaze to meet it, he finally gave in. "Okay."

The diner was quiet, save for the bell's chime as he and Bill walked in, and the bustle of service staff cleaning. It was the ideal time to get 'make up shakes' as Bill called them, and Dipper hadn't been able to disagree when he'd all but ushered him to his fancy golden convertible. Plus, a free shake and an opportunity to chat with Mabel would be ridiculous to pass up.

"Do you want to sit on the stools?" Dipper asked, peering to Bill and becoming aware of the ache in his face as he spoke. The bruises weren't going to be pretty, if they hadn't already formed. "I might get sore sitting after a while, but since we're here for shakes, we might as well live up the fake 50s theme."

“Sure, sugar.” With Dipper in tow, Bill headed to the stools, plopping onto one with a frivolous spin. “If we’re living up to the theme, I ought to get you a dress. A little lady like yourself can’t go around clothed like a man.”

"Don't forget the makeup and high heels," he commented and perched atop the stool, elbows resting on the fake-marble counter. Teasingly, he went on, "And in the spirit of living up to the theme, I expect you to buy me nice things, including whatever we're having here. I'm pretty materialistic," not at all, truthfully, "so good luck upholding your end of the deal, breadwinner."

“Of course, doll. But you have to do the household chores and care for the kids.”
"The kids?" His eyebrows raised at the idea, dubiously shaking his head. "No way, man. I'm dangerously child-free, and I don't know about you, but kids aren't in my future."

Amusement inspired a beam. "Hey, that can be something we have our husband-and-wife fights about."

"You don’t want kids?" Bill frowned at him, and Dipper paused, debating if he was immersing himself within the role or if he was actually disappointed. “Honey, it’s your duty to have them. We’ll need to make heirs for the family fortune.”

"Child-free," he repeated more definitively, and he would have continued but was stopped by a very Mabelish squeal - to his surprise, not one of excitement but verging on horror as she approached with a quickening pace. Her eyes were glued to his, but he couldn't figure out what was so awful. "Mabel? What's wrong?"

“What happened to you?” she demanded, and it dawned on him: the physical evidence of their fight, only to be confirmed by Mabel. “Your face is swollen, your nose is bloody.. your eye is black. Dipper. Who did– what the frickle-frackle, did Bill attack you?”

“He attacked me.”

“You changed my grades,” Dipper countered, "making all the work I did meaningless, just so you could get me to talk to you.” It'd worked, kind of. Probably with more fists involved than Bill had originally accounted for.

“You have no proof,” Bill objected, and Dipper scoffed at the notion because he had outright admitted it and knew what his grades were before he'd said a word. “Besides, I’m going to be changing them back.”

“You changed his grades?” Mabel questioned. “How is that possible?”

Feigning ignorance and wanting him to spell it out so Mabel could be in the loop, he prompted, "Yeah, Bill. How is that possible?"

"Why does it matter?” Bill glanced at Mabel, then turned to Dipper. “It’s in the past, don’t worry about it.” Skeptical at the non-response, Dipper leaned over and unceremoniously flicked Bill on the nose. Probably should have waited until after the tab was paid by Bill, but the reaction was worth it: “What the fuck was that for?” Bill growled, jolting.

"I wouldn't worry about it if I were you,” he said nonchalantly, "since it's in the past."

“I’ll show you what’s in the past when I—”

“Stop that,” Mabel snapped, hushing them both immediately. “I don't know what's up with you two, but it's not happening in here.”

“He’s asking for it,” he grumbled, and Mabel's expression darkened, displeasure sparking within her gaze whenever Bill spoke. It was evident that she still held it against him, and Dipper didn't blame her; although he'd made amends through physical pain and release, he wasn't sure how comfortable he felt with Bill. It wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before their confrontation, but self-consciousness—related to Bill's statement but unrelated to Bill himself—created doubt in his mind.

"You guys can't fight in the diner," she said curtly. "I don't want you fighting at all, but it seems like it might be too late for that."
"Sorry," Dipper murmured and drummed his fingertips on the diner's counter. "We, uh, we'll keep it under control. But yeah, we had a fight earlier and honestly— I did start it, I guess. I don't think Bill wanted to fight me." It was a recollection of events riddled with shame since he knew he shouldn't have done that, even if expressing the pent-up aggression had been relieving.

“I didn’t. I tried to stop you from punching me, and you wouldn’t.”

Mabel stared at them. “I don’t care, keep it out of the diner. And Dipper,” as she addressed him, he shrunk down, “fighting? You never do that!” From her tone, it was clear she was worried about him first, but secondly disappointed in his actions, and he swallowed while his gaze fell.

“Hah!” Bill grinned, apparently tuning into the implication. “You’ve been shamed, Pine Tree.” The gloating developed a rippling of sourness, but he was too distressed by what Mabel had said to acknowledge the flare of irritation.

"Yeah, sorry," he repeated but found it was more to Mabel than Bill. He wasn't apologizing for the fight, but he was apologizing over how she had believed he was mature, settled conflict calmly, and he'd dashed that expectation by getting coaxed into a fight by his fury.

“Are you okay?” she asked again, scanning him, and Dipper nodded that he was with an appreciative glance. “You look rough.”

The appreciation died slightly, but that was a fair observation because in the car, he'd seen black and blue puffiness taking over various spots of his face, and it'd likely become worse while sitting here. "At least I only have one black eye." But there'd been a bloody nose, so maybe it evened out.

“My eyes have more of a personality than your eye and your nose,” Bill retorted.

"More colorful doesn't always mean more personality."

“Hey, fuck off. My eyes don’t need more of your abuse.”

There was a cough and a rather displeased stare courtesy of Mabel, effectively putting a stop to the bickering. “Are you two going to order,” she interrupted, “or do I need to kick you out? I don’t want to, but it’s customers only, and we have to prepare for the dinner rush.”

"Sure, uh…” Dipper's gaze slid to Bill questioningly, waiting for him since he'd been the one to propose this outing.

“We’re getting two shakes,” Bill announced. “The most expensive ones you’ve got.”

"Are you serious?" It was tempting to tell Bill that advertising his wealth wasn't necessary, but to Mabel, he offered a correction, "A chocolate milkshake is fine."

“Four of them.”

"W-what? What are you doing?" he sputtered, blinking. Mabel appeared similarly uncertain after he searched her expression for an indicator that he wasn't the strange one here. "We don't need four."

“Make it six, Pine Tree’s thirsty.”

"Dude, stop. Just get two of them like a normal person."

“Scratch it! A round of milkshakes for everyone here.”
Craning his neck, Dipper's gaze swept the room and noted a very problematic element of this idea. "There's nobody here anymore." When they'd walked in, there were a couple customers in the booths, but the space was cleared out, cleaned and prepared for later.

Bill gave him a pointed look, then beckoned toward Mabel and her co-workers. “Are they not people to you?”

"That's what you meant?" he asked. "Yeah, they're definitely people. But 'a round of milkshakes for everyone here' typically would mean the patrons." However, this had extended beyond its welcome, and Mabel seemed like she was considering having them removed anyway, so he simply mumbled to do what he wanted.

“Drinks for everyone,” Bill insisted until she wrote the order and disappeared into the back.

"You're a huge dork."

“I am the Milkshake God.”

Stifling his amusement was a futile effort as he cracked into laughs, grinning as his gaze settled on Bill again. "You're the Milkshake God?" he repeated in disbelief, biting his tongue to avoid another round of giggling. "That's amazing. I'm not sure if I should be embarrassed or honored that I got my ass kicked by the Milkshake God." Thinking about the encounter, the exchange of blows and verbal insults, he cringed as he remembered. "I can't believe I called you 'Two Colors.' That... was really stupid."

Bill shifted. “Let’s not talk about that one, Pine Tree.”

"Yours wasn't any better. 'Cries-Out-In-Pain'? Wow, we suck." It was overall a dumb fight over a serious matter, but he wasn't sure he regretted settling it the way they did; it was carnal and barbaric, but it'd eased some of the pain of the past.

Poking fun at their past selves fell flat when Bill said, “I'd rather move on from it, sugar.”

"Okay. Let's, uh, move on from it then."

No amount of make up milkshakes and half-hearted banter could convince him that it was entirely resolved and everything was in place once more, not quite. The pieces didn't align perfectly within their relationship and suggested the fracture was as present as ever, lingering beneath the surface and waiting for a chance to break them apart again, but maybe... the edges were softer, they weren't cutting themselves on razors of their own making whenever they interacted. There was an unspoken promise that Bill would be better from now on, no more hurtful comments for the sake of inflicting as much damage as possible, and it fueled Dipper with hope that they were leaving the traces of hurt behind them to start anew.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the latest installment of the two nerds and their hot mess of a relationship. Thank you for continuing to read this fic! <3
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

(2:02 PM) Hey.

(2:05 PM) sup

(2:05 PM) Are you busy?

(2:05 PM) nah

(2:06 PM) bored at work, and my coworkers basically expect me to slack off

(2:06 PM) wouldn't want to disappoint, right?

(2:06 PM) I was hoping to talk to you about something.

(2:06 PM) damn dude, makin me nervous

(2:07 PM) giving me the 'i wanna talk' and not using our group chat

(2:07 PM) must be serious lol

(2:07 PM) u okay?

(2:07 PM) Yeah, I'm fine. And it's not a big deal or anything.

(2:08 PM) I guess I wanted to make sure you were alright, since I heard you and Bill broke up.

(2:08 PM) omg it was so stupid

(2:08 PM) remember that day we were supposed to all go out together? something must've pissed him off because he barely talked to me except to cancel

(2:08 PM) I seriously don't remember that.

(2:09 PM) over two weeks ago

(2:09 PM) for his birthday?

(2:09 PM) Oh. Got it.

(2:10 PM) Yeah, I know he was going out to dinner. I didn't know you knew I was invited since he didn't formally invite me.

(2:10 PM) Also I didn't know he canceled.

(2:10 PM) oh shit sorry

(2:11 PM) No, it's cool. I was sort of invited, then got uninvited like five minutes later.
(2:11 PM) still dude

(2:11 PM) i thought you were because he planned this thing like a month in advance

(2:11 PM) and said you were coming

(2:12 PM) you got lucky though, getting uninvited

(2:12 PM) since he canceled anyway AND you didn't have to sit through him being an ass about it after

(2:12 PM) Wow, sorry to hear that, and about the breakup.

(2:12 PM) it's no big deal honestly

(2:12 PM) like it sucks but it's bill so

(2:12 PM) he'll move on, get over it and then he'll want to get back together again

(2:13 PM) miss talking to him, which is weird because his million daily texts were pretty annoying when we were dating

(2:13 PM) Wait, you guys aren't talking?

(2:13 PM) he'll text when he gets lonely

(2:14 PM) I'm not really surprised by that, but I guess I was surprised he broke things off.

(2:14 PM) lol why?

(2:14 PM) things were sorta lame with us

(2:14 PM) we were always this awesomely hot couple but the last month has been totally dry

(2:14 PM) Like… sexually?

(2:15 PM) literally everything man

(2:15 PM) it's like he became allergic to me

(2:16 PM) Oh. I had no idea things went downhill with you two.

(2:16 PM) it's whatever, i'm letting him have his time

(2:16 PM) hey are you still down for camping this weekend?

(2:16 PM) Yeah, totally. We're still on for that.

(2:17 PM) you and mabel are gonna be like

(2:17 PM) mind. blown.

(2:17 PM) nature is rad as hell
"Would you two like a cup of coffee, or will that lead to further fighting like mindless animals?" Ford asked, tone curt, as he regarded him and Bill. They were on the sofa at Stan and Ford's apartment, Bill's arm slung over his shoulders, but it wasn't uncomfortable when it felt natural for them, a rekindling of their companionship after a violent explosion. Tonight, they'd started on opposite ends of the sofa, awkwardness eased by Stan and Ford's presence. Passing comments led to drawing closer, holding idle conversation. Then, with playful remarks exchanged and the banter resumed, it was easy to fall into place, which seemed to be under Bill's arm in this case.

But he couldn't be bothered to move. Waiting for Mabel's shift to end was dull, and intermittently marveling at Bill's moviestar handsomeness was the adrenaline rush he needed.

Noting the slight shake of Bill's head, Dipper gazed to Ford who was seated at his desk and hunched over his laptop. "I think we're good," he said but pointed out, "and also, we're not fighting anymore."

Ford was dubious. "Not this second."

"You're not fighting, but I can't trust Bill to keep his fists off ya." It was evident Stan still hadn't budged on his opinion of Bill. When they'd walked in, he'd blamed Bill for the fight and, despite Dipper's protests, continued to see him as the aggressor. The only aggressor, at that. "That asshole attacked you. I should fuck him up."

"Stan, I'm right here." Bill was somewhere between amused and annoyed. "And your 'precious cousin' is a fucking terror. He attacked me!" Unconvinced, Stan snorted.

"Hey, I'm delightful," Dipper objected with a warm nudge, a low flutter knotting his stomach as his eyes swept over Bill, his lax posture, the charismatic smirk. It would have been a perfect sight, but a pang of guilt hit him upon seeing the bruises surrounding Bill's eyes. However, it made their colors more vivid and striking than usual, a detail he definitely did not notice. "The most agreeable ungrateful brat that you know."

"Yeah, a huge ungrateful brat who assaulted me in my apartment. Stan, if you're going to beat anyone up, it should be him."

"Noo," he said through a laugh, "Stan might actually be good enough to hurt me." It was a teasing comment, but there was an element of truth in it because Stan was burly and strong— and Bill was tall, built, but not a bulldozer like Stan. From the disapproving tales that Ford divulged, he was quite skilled in a fistfight. "Stan would have me on the ground, unconscious, in less than half of the time it took you. So..."

"I had you on the ground submitting to me!" Bill protested as Dipper laughed harder, and Stan grumbled. Even Ford had caught enough of the conversation to cast a wary glance in the direction of him and Bill, an eyebrow raised, but he didn't ask.

"You beat Dipper into submission? You sick fuck."

A devious idea came to him, an innocent remark hatching in his mind. Leaning over to whisper in
Bill’s ear, Dipper cupped his hands and murmured, "Besides, that was a lot of work if all you wanted was my submission." And oh, it was hard to say without snickering, nothing meant by it but the reaction was worth the fabricated sultriness.

Bill made a choked noise, coughing and sputtering as he took on a wild, wide-eyed look. “What? You- what? What?” To witness Bill lose his composure after holding it together for the most part to watch it crumble due to a factor beyond his control was a rarity, and Dipper was relishing in this experience.

Confused, Stan leaned forward in his seat. “What did ya say to him, kid?” Then to Bill, "Cat got your tongue?"

"Yeah, weird," he said, a hint of slyness inching in. "I don't know what’s going on with that.” The sheer satisfaction from reducing Bill, the picture of cool confidence, to a flustered mess was a feeling he wouldn't be forgetting soon.

Bill cleared his throat, gaze averted. “Nothing. I’m stellar. Fuck off.” And like that, his outward presentation was rebuilt and left no sign that it’d cracked in the first place.

“Don’t be a little bitch, Bill. And leave the kid alone, he doesn’t deserve to deal with you attackin’ him.”

Bill’s protest rang over his own, “For the last fucking time, I didn’t attack him. Your cousin is a demon when he wants to be.”

"Dipper, really?” Ford prompted, and Dipper silently gauged how much of the conversation he’d been listening into.

"I did attack him, but I'm not a demon," he contested, unsure if he was entertained or betrayed by Bill's apparent view of him. Bringing that into question, he inquired while not-so-skillfully feigning hurt, "Is that how you think of me? A faithful follower of the devil?"

“Hail Satan, Hail Satan. Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done–” With a disputing squeak, Dipper lightly shoved him in the shoulder, successfully stopping… whatever that was, a Satanic chant? “What was that for?” Bill complained.

"An impromptu exorcism. I'm pretty sure my diabolic qualities were rubbing off on you."

“Are you seeing this?” Bill demanded to the others, but Ford didn't acknowledge him, too busy in his work or simply pretending to be. “He hit me. What a monster.”

“He barely touched ya, get over it.”

Expression softening, Dipper stretched his legs below the coffee table to ease the ache and slumped into Bill as he relaxed. "Are you okay?" he asked, quieter to prevent overhearing. "If I hurt you, I wasn't trying to. I could take your earlier advice and y'know, 'fuck off' if you want.”

“Don’t belittle me. I’m fine.” Bill paused. "You don’t have to go anywhere."

"Well, yeah, I know that. I meant if it'd be more comfortable for you." As it was, this was a funny position to force themselves into: squishing together on the sofa while he was damn near on Bill's lap. The rest of the cushions were vacant, as the brothers were seated on different pieces of furniture: Stan in his armchair, Ford at his desk.

“This is fine,” he told him. “What, don’t think I can handle you being on my lap?”
For the sake of being difficult, he obstinately observed, "I'm mostly on the couch." If they were going to be precise about this, he wasn't on top of Bill at all but was leaning into him while his leg crossed over Bill's. "You're the one with your arm around me. I had no idea fistfights were the fast track to seduction with you."

"Hey, I like my ladies fiery."

A smile quirked his lips upwards, and he responded, "I think I'd be too much for you. Dealing with me as a friend is one thing, but as your girlfriend? Hope you're ready to bring me flowers and chocolates whenever you visit, and tell me I'm the prettiest."

Bill chuckled. "We'll see about those flowers and chocolates, but you are the prettiest." Honestly, that should not have sent a jolt of electricity through him. "A doll like you belongs in my lap. Do a dance for me, sugar."

"If you stuff dollar bills into my boxers, I'm going to punch you again." Sinking into Bill, he liked the warmth on his side, the arm possessively holding him close; it produced an odd feeling of safeness, which even he could admit was outlandish considering it was Bill. "But seriously, I'm not — I don't dance. Not well, I mean." Voice dropping, he mumbled, "Will a high libido make up for it?"

Bill inhaled sharply, tensing. "What was that?"

Biting his lip, Dipper shook his head to indicate he wouldn't repeat himself because he didn't think he could get through it without blushing this time. "It wasn't important, just dumb."

"Damn sugar, if I'd known you had such a high libido I would've propositioned you months ago."

The disbelief seeping into each word had Dipper wondering if he'd crossed a line, but he couldn't pinpoint if Bill was merely stunned or uncomfortable with the topic. Regardless, he guessed it would be better to let Bill decide if they'd pick it up, as he probably had been too forward with his less-than-serious flirting.

Shrugging off Bill's hand, he squirmed from under the arm and wriggled to the edge of the sofa. "I'm… going to the kitchen, do you want anything?" He would have extended the offer to Stan, but he appeared zoned out, engrossed in his soap opera. A few minutes in the kitchen would allot him time for a glass of water and to recollect his thoughts, then provide Bill ample opportunity to restore his shaking bravado. Loosening it was an accomplishment, but he hadn't envisioned pushing this far.

"I'm good, thanks."

Dipper hauled himself to his feet and halted, frozen in place. A sudden burst of self-consciousness ignited in him as he remembered he had to walk in front of Bill, within Bill's line of sight, to reach the kitchen, and that had thoughts of inadequacy tugging at him, yelling that he shouldn't have volunteered himself for such humiliation.

Rationally, he knew Bill wouldn't comment, but he was worried about what he thought, if he still believed he was… crippled, if his gait was stilted in Bill's eyes. God, he hated himself sometimes, and the burn of uneasiness grew into an unstoppable blaze every painful step toward the kitchen, overly aware of his walk.

Once in the kitchen, he could ease off his guard. Let his shoulders drop. And breathe. Although Bill was perfectly respectful and hadn't said anything about it after that, the damage was done.
Thinking about it would ruin his night, and he distracted himself with a glass of water, sitting at the table to blankly examine the patterns in the red-checkered tablecloth partially stretched over tattered wood. Underneath, his fingers brushed along the handwritten engraving that read 'STAN PIES', a lack of planning on Stan's part by engraving too close to the edge, then claiming he "could fix it" and that it'd be "good enough."

Onto the next topic to overthink, he fretted about the possibility of unwinding the progress he and Bill made, contemplating if he'd incited awkwardness like Stan had done so long ago with his throwaway joke about dating Bill. Flirting was the language of their friendship, it was what they tended to slip into despite attempts to be professional or distant, but Dipper determined that if there was a limit, he'd found it. Internally, he swore he wouldn't push the boundary and shouldn't act like that toward him anyway; from now on he'd let Bill set it first, then act accordingly.

Movement in his peripherals caught his attention, and he raised his eyes to Bill peeking around the corner, visibly searching until settling on him. “Hey, Pine Tree. Did you miss me?”

"Oh, hey.” Resting his head on his hand, he said, "It's been like, a minute or two, but sure, why not."

“I missed you too. It sucks being with Stan and Ford. Stan's brain dead, and Ford has his nose stuffed into a lousy textbook.”

"I figured they wouldn't be the best company tonight. I'm here to wait for Mabel's shift to end because I didn't want to be alone in a dorm room with a black eye, talk about pathetic."

“Hang out with me. Let’s ditch this place. Have some fun.”

Eyebrows raising, Dipper's fingers tapped on the side of the glass, and he swallowed. "Uh, well…” he peeked at the clock, "I would, but it won't be long until she's done assuming Robbie isn't there. He’s a slow closer, I guess."

“Are you going to leave with her when she’s done?” Bill asked, and Dipper shrugged, though that was basically what his plan had been. “I wanted to spend more time with you, Pine Tree. Do you not want to?”

Dipper slid the chair beside him and flicked his eyes from Bill to the spot, which he claimed after a second. "Yeah, I want to, but we shouldn't leave unless you had something specific in mind.” He'd have to keep Mabel updated on his whereabouts, but she was usually quite encouraging since he didn't get out much as it was.

"About… before," he started, trying to be casual. "I hope I didn't make it weird or anything."

“It didn’t make it weird,” he told him. “I was enjoying your company. That’s all.”

"I was enjoying your company too, I… didn't want to overstep anything. I know you're not seeing anyone, but I'm glad it didn't.”

“You, overstep something?” Bill laughed briskly. Relieved, Dipper took a victory drink of the water as Bill seemed to understand. “That’s a good joke. Pine Tree, I don’t think you can.”

"Mm,” he exhaled, "I couldn't tell. I mean, you— how you reacted…” What'd followed didn't scream approval, but Dipper was merely thankful that he didn't seem upset.

“Come on, some teasing isn’t going to bother me that much, cutie. You’re flattering yourself.”
"You seemed kind of bothered," he mused, once again in his comfort zone, "and I know Stan and Ford aren't paying attention, but I'll behave from now on. Besides, if Wendy knew I was trying to take her place as your girlfriend, she would probably cut me down and yell 'timber.' When are you two getting back together, by the way?"

"Wow, you’ve stooped to insulting her lumberjack heritage?"

"Think she'll send me to the logging camp?"

"You’re an ass," he said, but it was light. “And we’re not getting back together.”

Dipper's joy waned instantly, all humor draining from the situation. "Oh… Seriously? Sorry, I just thought… because you two always get together." Stumbling over his words sparked frustration and a pinch of embarrassment, so he buried his face into one of his hands. "What happened? Is— is it because of me? I know you said something about that and if it is, I don't think—"

"Don’t worry about it, it’s not about you. And it’s not your fault. We weren't getting along.”

"Wendy and I have been texting and I'm pretty sure…” About to give his take, logic won out. This wasn't his business. "She's not upset with you, dude. You don't have to get back together, but you could be friends?” he suggested, debating if he should fish his phone from his pocket and show Bill the various instances of Wendy admitting she missed their chats.

"We'll see about that,” Bill replied, “but I wouldn’t get attached to the idea. We got into a nasty fight because I changed dinner plans. Good riddance, she was exhausting.”

While curiosity chewed at him and yielded a stack of questions, he busied himself by drinking from the glass of water and leaning back to the sound of a creaking chair, fingers scraping over the plastic surface of the tablecloth. "Well, I hope you're able to get it sorted. I, uh… I'm still sorry."

Bill appeared puzzled. “I don’t get why you're apologizing,” he said before he reached over to steal his glass of water, and that earned him a pointed look.

Nonchalantly, he returned the glass to its rightful owner, himself, sliding it further from Bill. "It's unfortunate that you broke up." Bill extended across the table, might as well have bellyflop on it since he was stretching his body to grasp the cup, then brought it to his lips.

"Hey," he complained, smiling in spite of himself, "I didn't know you were that thirsty."

“I’m not.”

"If you're flirting with me, I'm pretty sure you're thirsty beyond the point of help," he said with an easy laugh but retrieved the glass. "Do you want me to refill this, or get you a glass of water that you can call your own?"

Bill snatched the glass with surprising grace and stood up. “I’ll refill it. Then keep it from you. It’s my water glass now.”

"Why don’t you get a new glass? Are you that eager to combine our genetic material?" Upon hearing himself and the unmistakable implication, Dipper coughed and blushed faintly, preparing for the worst reaction imaginable since flirting, even the unintentional sort, was questionable after finding out he’d possibly lost his steady relationship. "Not… like that, but yeah."

Bill was filling the cup by the time he addressed him. “You realize sharing the same glass doesn’t necessarily equate to sharing our genetic material, right?”
Although relieved, Dipper faked irritation at his obtuse take on it. "Fine. We can both jack off into it, then drink it like it's some sort of messed up cult initiation. Is that better?"

"Sure. I’ll start."

"Bill."

While Bill took a drink, his other hand drifted dangerously near the zipper of his slacks, slowly pulling downward.

"Oh my god, dude." Cheeks flaring with color, he fanned his fingers to cover his eyes, deciding he really shouldn't see anything else if this continued but was nevertheless tempted to: first, sneak a glimpse, and second, cry for Stan and Ford because he was fairly certain jacking off in someone's kitchen wasn't proper visitor etiquette.

“What? I thought you wanted this. You seemed to be into it.”

"When I uncover my eyes, you better still have pants on, fastened properly." If a single phrase could possibly summarize their relationship, Dipper supposed it would be that.

Bill chuckled, and he could hear the zipper move, prompting him to peek an inquisitive eye open to see if the coast was clear. When he determined Stan and Ford weren't required since he was behaving, Dipper uncurled himself only for Bill to add, “No promises.”

Opening his mouth to respond, a text vibrated his phone, and he mumbled a "hold on" as he retrieved it to read:

(11:43 PM) Guess who's going to be closing with me?

(11:43 PM) Robbie? Yikes.

(11:43 PM) Yeah, I like the guy a lot but seriously he's gotta pick up the pace!

(11:44 PM) It's gonna be a while before I get home

(11:44 PM) Okay, thanks for the heads up.

(11:44 PM) Anytime, bro!

(11:44 PM) Want me to stay awake and wait for you?

(11:44 PM) Nah, get some sleep! Thanks though. <3

"I guess Mabel probably won't be coming since she's caught up at work," he said as he scrolled through the messages, then pocketed his phone. "And it's getting late, so I should get to the dorm. Are you sleeping here tonight?"

“No.” Bill deflated. “I don’t have much reason to. I thought you didn’t want to be in the dorm alone?”

That caused him to crack a grin, unsure if he was curious or genuinely cared, but he didn't dwell on it. "I don't, but I'm going to bed. Mabel won't be here until two in the morning or something obscene like that, so I can't wait up for her with classes tomorrow."

Bill brightened. “You can stay with me tonight. We can share my bed, I’ll take you to your classes
As much as he knew he should be treading carefully, the proposition was appealing regardless of its feasibility. He determined that he'd rather enjoy a night spent cuddling at Bill's place, the cherry on top being the ride to his classes. Unfortunately, he also could determine it wouldn't be a good idea to bring to fruition.

"She's going to notice if I'm not in bed."

"Tell her you're with me."

"No way, man. That's super suspicious." Mabel would be asking him why he chose to stay over considering the rocky-ish terms of their relationship, and he didn't want her to suspect there was anything going on between them. Because there wasn't.

"How?" Bill cocked his head. "We're working on assignments together. Studying. Being good Christian boys."

"Oh, what a relief," he replied dryly. "When you said we'd be sharing your bed, I had no clue it was a Christian sleepover. That changes everything. I'm sure Mabel will understand if I want to stay over and read our favorite passages from the bible, reflect on our recent church visits, and then build a wall of pillows between us when we're ready to sleep."

"Or, we could cuddle like normal people without a wall of pillows between us."

Struggling to maintain an aghast expression, he reminded Bill, "Cuddling—physical contact—is putting ourselves in the path of temptation, you naughty sinner."

"Sweetheart, cuddling doesn't lead to temptation." It was agreeable since they technically had cuddled before, though arguable when the cuddling escalated to near-kissing while Bill had been with Wendy. "We'd both be in hell right now if it did."

"Are you saying that us having sex would make our lives hell?"

"No, I'm saying, as good Christian boys, having sex before marriage is sinful. Let's get married."

The fact that their union went directly against the wishes of most religious organizations was lost on Bill, as far as he knew. Yet if their soulmarks matched, it would be encouraged and outright expected of them.

"Wow, what an amazing proposal," he said, amused, lingering on the idea of their soulmarks. "You know, we can't get married unless you're willing to show your soulmark to whoever is officiating since they document it."

Bill shifted, stepping away. "On the other hand, let's remain the best of guy friends."

"Yeah," he agreed and discarded the topic. The silence didn't let him forget the clock was ticking, night marching forward, but conversations with Bill seemed to make time faster. "I should head home. Be a guy friend and give me a lift to the dorm? I think we've established that we won't be cuddling tonight."

"Sure," he said. "Do I get a kiss for my efforts?"

Dipper stared dumbly. "A kiss?"

"I was joking."

"Oh, oh! Okay. That— uh, that makes sense. I wasn't sure if that was our new form of currency
since you weren't with Wendy anymore and…" he trailed off with a nervous laugh, rubbing his arm, but internally wanted to cringe at himself. Before Bill could say anything, he said, "Let's tell Stan and Ford that we're leaving."

“Do we have to?”

"Yes, Bill, we do have to tell our hosts we're leaving. We're polite guests, you and I. From wealthy and upstanding families, well-mannered, good Christian boys."

In the car, Dipper's eyes were closed, head leaned into the headrest while he drummed his fingers on the fabric of his skinny jeans in time to the low music in the background, Bill never passing up a chance to have his favorite old hits accompanying their drive.

Reviewing their discussion, a point of interest snagged him, and he opened an eye to ask, "So, your soulmark... What's the deal with it? Why do you hate it so much?"

To his dismay, Bill froze, immediately guarded. “Why do you care?” he questioned. “My soulmark doesn’t matter, it’s unimportant. Forget about it. I don’t have one.”

Ignoring the claim, he emitted a hum of contemplation as he regarded Bill, eyes dancing to where the marking might be: right arm, an inch or two past the elbow. "I'm just curious and would like to see it," he said and determined it wasn't a lie, because he genuinely was… but for reasons beyond simple curiosity.

“No. It’s not for anyone’s eyes.” His grip around the steering wheel tightened, turning his knuckles white. “Stop asking about it.”

Intrigue continued to flame within, but that was a definitive answer that confirmed Bill didn't like seeing it, didn't like others seeing it, and he wouldn't be the exception to the rule. The urge to keep pressing was muted by the verdict that it was an issue to undertake when Bill wasn't already worked up. "Alright."

“Will you?” he growled, which caused Dipper's once-casual posture to go rigid with unease. “You seemed really intent on asking, Pine Tree.”

Measuring his response carefully, he said, "I don't understand why you have reservations," that was an understatement, "about it, and I figured maybe… instead of oohing and awing over them, and the pressure to show people, that you might prefer a chance to describe why you don't like your mark."

Bill shot him a glare. "It's an inscription on my arm that won’t go away no matter how many times I've tried to remove it.”

"If it's any condolence, I've tried scratching mine off too. But uh, be nice to yourself, y'know? It's not like it helps, trying to remove it…" he mumbled, restlessly tapping the side of his knee against the passenger door. "We don't have to talk about this, I thought it would be interesting since that's a part of you that I don't know much about.”

“I wish I could cut it off,” Bill commented. “Remove the mark from my body permanently.”

"Jesus Christ," he cursed under his breath, leaning over the console to brush his fingers over where he imagined the mark to be. Bill's arm jerked as if Dipper’s touch singed him, and he tucked it close to himself. There was undoubtedly gauze blocking it under the long sleeves of Bill's blazer, but he pondered if it was his handwriting, his stupid 'oh my god, it's you' inscribed on his skin.
"You don't have to show me, but what does it say?"

"None of your business, that’s what.”

Sensing this was climbing to an argument, Dipper sighed in frustration, giving up. "Okay. Okay, fine."

“It better be fine,” he grumbled. “I don’t want anyone asking about it.”

"I'm not—"

“You did.”

"Then you were kind of a jerk about the whole thing, so I'm done now. Let's forget it and move on."

“I wasn't being a jerk,” he objected, causing Dipper to jump from the unexpected volume of the snarl. “I expressed discomfort about it before, and you kept fucking pushing me.”

Throat tighter than it was several seconds ago, there was a clunk as he rested his forehead to the window and murmured, "Sorry." He wanted to drop it, but Bill was right. He'd known the signs were there, it was evident that Bill didn't enjoy the topic of his soulmark, but curiosity had blinded him to basic social conduct.

Bill's eyebrows were furrowed in displeasure, his attention on the road. It was a few moments before he spoke. “Hey, Pine Tree?”

Hesitation struck, and he paused before inquiring what he wanted with a noncommittal noise, but he didn't stop watching the campus buildings through the window. Whatever Bill wanted to talk about, it'd have to be brief because they'd be at the destination shortly.

“I liked this better when we weren't tense.”

"Oh, right. My bad," he apologized, testing if that was what Bill sought— another confession that he shouldn't have nudged the boundary that’d been clear to him from the beginning, which resulted in this stiff silence that left them far less comfortable than they'd been an hour ago. "I know it was a dick move to pry."

Bill made an exasperated sound. “I don’t want you to apologize, I want us to be okay.”

"We are okay, man. It's not a problem." The aversion to soulmark-related discussion was underscored, and they were less than a minute from being at the dorm, which would conclude the ride with Dipper leaving to sleep and Bill presumably returning to his apartment. The air of discomfort persisted, but he wasn't fretting. It'd fade with time; by their next visit, it'd be normal.

“Are we?” he questioned. “Are we? Because it doesn’t feel like it. Pine Tree, do we need counseling?”

"I'm not going to couples' therapy with you," Dipper said, eyebrow quirked. "I don't need to spend an hour of my life hearing Karen and Kyle talk about their beloved Sneuxflayk while you try to feel up my thigh under the table."

“But the thigh touches might save our marriage, sugar!”

"Thigh touches? I think you mean doting and gifting mystery novels to me." Flashing a lopsided
grin in Bill's direction, he was glad to see he was no longer looking like a stormcloud about to burst after the chat regarding soulmarks. "Also, you don't need to be lukewarm about it. I don't know how your previous relationships went, but thigh touches under the table would suck in comparison to having sex."

"Okay, but thigh touches that lead to sex."

Expression becoming critical, he teased, "Wow, Bill. You're confident in your thigh touching ability."

"I'll make your thighs excited in my mere presence."

"I— oh, we're here." The comment was a little on the Captain Obvious side as they rolled into the parking lot of the dorm, and Dipper's hand hovered near the door handle. "I appreciate the ride. It, uh… helps." With that, he gestured toward his legs but couldn't make eye contact as he said it, the familiar welling of displaced humiliation over his circumstances.

In an instant, Bill’s mood seemed to plummet. “Can I at least withdraw some of our new form of currency before you go?”

"Huh?"

“A kiss. Remember?”

When it occurred to him, Dipper chuckled at the memory but surveyed Bill, observing in fascination. "Honestly, I forgot we talked about that. I thought you were joking…?" Mostly because, well, Bill had said he was kidding about it, and the subject had been forgotten.

“There’s no harm in one kiss on the cheek. Humor me, sugar.”

Dipper chose to ignore the twinge of disenchantment and pretend it never existed in the first place, but he couldn't ignore the feeling of self-hatred that followed for actually, maybe, wanting to kiss Bill. After what a mess their entire relationship had been, he couldn't believe that desire had existed, if only for a second or two. "That's all you want? Jeez, the breakup must be hitting you harder than I thought."

“I mean, if you want some lip action I won’t stop you."

The wink sent shivers up his spine and flushed his cheeks, grateful for the darkness of the vehicle because it plausibly could go unnoticed, therefore robbing Bill of a chance to inflate his ego. Dipper's response was a breezy laugh as he unclipped the seatbelt, leaning over the console to cup Bill's jaw in one hand, pressing a fleeting kiss to the other side before pulling away. And his thoughts certainly weren't jammed on how strong Bill's jawbone had felt under his lips or how he'd shamelessly complied to the request.

Bill coughed, startled and stunned. “You did it? You did it.”

"Well, yeah," he said. "What kind of prude do you think I am? Are face-kisses before marriage too much for the good Christian boy?"

“They’re not too much for me. It’s. wow. Wow.”

Stifling his laughter as he fought to appear serious, he said, "Look, I get it. It was a bigger step than what we were ready for, and I think we can dial it down to some eye contact. We could even wear protection, if that's what you need to be comfortable while avoiding sin."
"We’re not having sex yet, cutie."

"We might as well be, with all the premarital eye contact going on."

“Stars, you’re really into that, huh? Is being a good Christian boy your kink?”

Retorts diminishing, a "sure" fell from him as he flopped into his own seat, then glanced toward the dorm. "Should probably go," he mumbled but didn't move to enact the statement, subtly hoping Bill would give him reason to stay, one that wasn't impractical aspirations of cuddle-sleepovers.

“We’ll talk tonight, don’t worry. I can’t wait to spend tomorrow with you.”

"You're spending tomorrow with me? I can't, I have to study." And before, he had been willing to foster the illusion of productivity with Bill; however, time had shown that it would be a miserable failure that didn't result in getting much work done. "Maybe… soon, or something. Later this week, or I could stop by the physics department to chat for a while. I don't know."

“I’ll study with you. And, we can spend the week together and chat in the physics department.”

"See, the issue is, we wouldn't be studying, and I need to get my grades together or I won't pass this semester because I'm not a cheating jackass who is going to falsify grades in the system, Bill," Dipper spoke pointedly, then beamed. "But we can see about this week sometime, that might be nice."

Disappointment flickered on Bill's features. “Okay.”

"I'll see you soon, alright?" he promised and squeezed Bill's hand, then left the vehicle to disappear into the residence hall.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Wendy, Mabel, and Dipper enjoy a weekend of camping and braving the wilderness.

While Bill and Robbie are also there, but too distracted with dick-measuring contests to do anything useful.
As promised, it's the super long camping adventure. Chapter length will return to normal after this.

When envisioning their camping trip, Dipper pictured Mabel, Wendy, and himself stationed around a roaring, crackling campfire with the occasional owl's hoot and the noise of undergrowth swishing. The air would carry the unique scent of burning wood, smoke tendrils climbing to the moon high in the sky. They'd share tales of wonderment and joy, roasting marshmallows into the deep of night.

Those hopes were as good as gone when Wendy proposed Bill tagging along, a subject he'd steered clear of in consciousness of their breakup, but it seemed they'd reconnected recently over a series of light-hearted chats. Tentative agreement had a devious caveat: that Robbie could join them as well.

Wendy's exact reply had been a shrug and, "Sure, that sounds fun."

It was how Dipper ended up in the passenger seat of Bill's golden vehicle, while Mabel, Robbie, and Wendy trailblazed to the campgrounds in an RV loaned to them by Wendy's father.

"We're almost there, and not a Stan in sight. Amazing," Dipper commented dryly, "considering you said he would demand to go with."

“Don’t jinx us,” Bill grumbled, yet Dipper laughed. “He has the ears and eyes of a bat. He’ll find us if we talk too loudly.”

"What, you don't think Stan would make a nice addition to this trip? You guys could get wasted and talk shit about your coworkers." Jesting aside, he sobered up and brushed a thumb over Bill's hand resting on the console. They'd unconsciously drifted closer over the drive. "It's probably a good thing. I wouldn't want you two drunkenly stumbling around."

“Camping and drinking don't mix. Do you know how dangerous that is? How dangerous this all is? Camping’s a bad idea, cutie.” Danger had never bothered Bill before, so he chalked it up to reaching for an excuse, any excuse, that'd stick.

Threading their fingers, he coaxed, "Come on, relax. You decided to go with us, so give nature a chance and if you still don't want to be here, you could always leave."

“I don’t want to be alone,” he complained. “And I don’t want stupid nature, what has it done for me? Nothing good.”

"So, let me get this straight: you're not giving nature her due in your sexual exploits?"

“I’m already planning on fucking a Pine Tree, I think nature’s getting enough action. Let’s fuck in here.”

Although he made a face at the scenario, he brushed it off after a second or two because he felt
inclined to pry, "You can actually do that?"

Bill seemed taken aback. "Yeah, people fuck in cars. How do you not know that?"

Dipper stared at him, deadpan. "Not—like, generally. I mean you you, logistically. Aren't you too tall to be comfortable?" And he couldn't think of a position in which it'd be nice for both of them with room to spare, but maybe he did it with the top down.

"No. Why would I be?" Bill huffed. "I’m not too tall for anything."

"Uh, look. You don't have to answer this if it's too personal, but have you done anything in this car? If so, how?" He motioned to the interior, perplexed but undeniably curious. "Where?"

Smirking, he said, "Always in the back. I’ll show you later."

Approaching the campsite, he ignored Bill's grouchy remarks about gravel pavement to drink in their surroundings. There was a firepit, a picnic table, and a couple stone blocks to indicate parking spots, but other than that, it was empty of human touch; nature prevailed with a clearing of grass, towering trees, and a nearby pool of water, muddy and dried. "I think that's where we're setting up? Mabel's excited, she's been texting me the entire drive about using this tent we got a few years back."

"Gross," Bill's complaints resumed. "Look, it’s filthy out there. We should go back home, away from all that dirt."

"It doesn't look filthy. Let's get out and help unpack everything."

Unloading was synonymous with Bill whining every step of the way, and Robbie shooting him variations of the same 'kill me now' glare since there wasn't a moment in which Bill was silent. Even as the tent was pitched, their items were in place, and the cooler was stocked, Bill was there to complain.

"Pine Tree," he said. "Are you hearing this? This stupid hiking trip is going to get dirt all over my nice shoes, and they don’t give a fuck."

"Okay, here's an idea. Don't come hiking with us…?" Dipper suggested good-naturedly, brushing against Bill as he passed him to join Mabel, Robbie, and Wendy, who were preparing their packs. "You can stay here, get some food ready for when we come back."

"With what, the fire? That’s a hazard, honey. And let’s not forget, it’s dangerous to be alone in these woods." Bill quickened his pace to catch up. "Must be full of savages."

"Wait in your car with the doors locked if you're worried, but you'll be fine. Nobody will bother you." Dipper paused as he collected his bag and began trailing after the three. "Are you coming or sulking here?"

"I’m coming with," Bill told him, "but I won’t like it."

Walking through the forest was peaceful, despite his plethora of objections. It started small with a mention of the "awful weather", being too warm and too cold and how he didn’t like the wind against his clothing. Then it grew: he didn’t like the birds chattering, the leaves crunching, or how the branches cracked. "We’re being followed by the savages," he said. "They’re going to jump us. We should leave."

"They aren't following you now, and they weren't following you a few months ago during the first
time I took you camping either," Wendy called from the front.

“You don’t know that!” Bill yelled back. “They are watching us. I can feel it. Can’t you?”

Wendy said, "I think all we're feeling is that you don't want to be here, Bill."

“Yeah,” Robbie echoed, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. “Who invited him, anyway? He’s being a buzzkill.”

"I did, dude." Wendy's reply extinguished any protest.

When he was alongside Mabel, Dipper turned to her with a quizzical expression and darted his gaze toward where Bill was bringing up the rear of their hiking party. "What about you? Do you feel anything?" he asked, dubious of the claims. "I think he's paranoid, or… bored."

“He must be bored,” Mabel said. “There’s no way someone’s following us out here.”

“That’s only because you’re not paying attention,” Bill argued, appearing beside them. “Open your eyes. Your beloved, beautiful nature is out to get you.”

“Man, your complaining is about to get to us.” Robbie sounded annoyed.

Bill spewed gloom and doom, however their surroundings were quite lovely. They'd passed a tiny stream of clear water rushing over smoothed stones, and an overlook with an impressive view of a valley below and the sky reaching for miles. While Dipper imagined what it might be like to stargaze there, he'd been interrupted by Mabel's announcement that she'd tripped on a rock that looked like a face.

The birds' chirping calls faded as it drew closer to evening, but the rustle of the underbrush and trees swaying in a breeze remained. Bill could say what he wanted, but nothing was five seconds from killing them.

When the sun was sinking lower in a dusty sky, the pain began to reappear and wasn't swayed by the five minute breaks that'd staved it off until now. "Want to head back to the campsite?" Wendy asked when he'd transitioned to an inelegant gait, keeping his eyes far from Bill's in fear of seeing the potential pity there after that comment. "It's going to get dark soon anyway."

"Yeah, that'd be nice. I'm kind of getting sore."

Mabel nodded. "I'm kind of getting hungry."

“I’m kind of picking Pine Tree up.” Before he could register that, Bill had scooped him into his arms. “Hi, cutie.” Dipper's reaction was more pliant than the first time he'd been carried by Bill, and he relaxed in his grip, comfortable. With how his legs were aching and spasming internally, this was a relieving adjustment that he was grateful for.

"Hey," he greeted, pressing his forehead to the crook of Bill's chest before he jolted back. The ladies seemed distracted by leading and weren't in their immediate line of sight, but he wasn't risking it with Robbie casting glances their way, then falling into step beside them.

“Hey, man, are you doing okay? ...Is he hurting you?”

"I'm fine, really. Just.. my legs get sore, so this helps," he explained. A wave of distress bubbled in him as he came to realize an inevitable reality: hanging around Robbie would likely require transparency about his injury.
“Fuck off, Valentine. I didn’t hurt a hair on his head.”

"Are you two playing nice back there?" Wendy asked over her shoulder.

“Of course we are, Red. I’m putting Edgelord in his place.” Bill didn't acknowledge the scorching look that Dipper gave.

Scoffing, Robbie rolled his eyes and retorted, “You wish, Cipher. I’m making sure my friend is alright, what are you doing?”

"Yeah, nope," Wendy said and slowed her pace to let them catch up, "that isn't playing nice, guys. You're being sort of lame right now, so can you both chill?"

Defensive, Bill argued, “I'm not lame. You guys are lame, traipsing through these woods like maniacs while one of your own is hurting.”

Dipper could have groaned. "I'm okay— is this going to be a problem? Because I can walk." If it would be less drama than what it'd sparked between Robbie and Bill, he would do it in a heartbeat.

“No,” Bill and Robbie replied together, glowers exchanged. “You’re staying in my arms, Pine Tree.”

Displeased with the palpable tension, Dipper squirmed in Bill's grasp to be released, and he took a few painful, quick strides forward. "I feel better," he lied, "so I'm, uh, I think I'll walk to camp." Hopefully, this arrangement would quell further disputes and if anything, redirect them at himself.

“What are you doing?” Bill was on his heels with Robbie at his side, hands teetering on the edge of grabbing him, but Dipper kept ahead. “Get back here.”

Managing to evade Bill and reach Mabel, he was glad when she slung an arm over his shoulder and shifted the topic. "What should we have to eat? Marshmallows? Chocolates? Graham crackers?" Mabel listed, counting on her fingers. "Oh, maybe all of those together! Plus… I brought a bunch of chips. We're going to be eating good tonight, it'll be a campfire feast."

"Sure, we have plenty to snack on," Wendy supplied. "And if we run out, my dad taught me how to ingest bark. Wild, right?"

“Our dads should meet up,” Mabel said excitedly. “Your dad sounds awesome.”

"Should they…?" Dipper questioned, fringing on uncertain. "I mean, Wendy's dad is super cool and everything but… our dad appreciates nature, her dad dominates nature. Those are vastly different approaches."

“They're perfect for each other! One loves nature, the other fights nature. What could possibly go wrong?”

"Everything, Mabel. The answer is everything."

Bill interrupted them, “Can we pick up the pace? I don’t want the savages to jump us because we’re moving like fucking turtles in this filthy wilderness.” It would have been concerning if not for a pertinent detail: the savages didn't exist. They were on the trail to the campsite, he didn't know what else Bill could want from them.

“Man, do you have an ‘off’ switch? I think everybody would appreciate one," came a mutter from Robbie.
"Don't worry," Dipper said, puffing his chest valiantly for show, "I'll protect you, Bill. You don't have to be afraid." And it wouldn't be hard, considering there was nothing to defend him against. If there was actual danger, he wouldn't have thrown himself in harm's way with legs deeply submerged in the throes of fatigued pain.

“I don’t know if you can protect anyone, sugar. Those savages are crazy, they’ll take out Wendy’s dad. ...You’re not taking me seriously, are you? Who will protect us all from the savages when they raid the camp, hm?”

"I don't know. Robbie? My sister? Probably Wendy, to be honest," he played along while Mabel and Wendy discussed the hike, snippets of their dialogue suggesting they were mapping a trail for tomorrow, an excursion he'd pass on. "Maybe you? You seem to know a lot about them."

“Of course I do, Red always wants to go on this stupid trip, ignoring the dangers around us.” Bill shook his head. “I can’t wait to be in my apartment.”

"You could go back tonight, if you didn't want to stay with us." The idea to end Bill's side of the journey early tended to always be met with resistance on the grounds that he didn't want to be alone, so now it was more a purely joking offer. "No savages will get you there." Unless they were including substance abuse and loneliness. "After dinner, if you still absolutely hate it, I can help you pack your things…. and I'll go with you."

“Fine, whatever you want, Pine Tree."

Tired of fighting him on this, Dipper let Bill fume through dinner as most of his own attention was devoted to the much livelier, friendlier conversation with the others as they consumed melty marshmallows and chocolate slathered between graham crackers.

Dinner transformed into telling their funniest stories around the campfire, paired with their scariest ones. Tales of staircases in the woods, missing persons, and wild beasts filled the air, along with exaggerated gasps and shrieks at the climax of the fictional recollections. Even Bill told a story about a monster in the woods, a hairless creature associated with cannibalism and disappearances. And it ate campers, of course.

When it was time to sleep, the arrangements were wonky, ultimately by gender: Mabel wanted to use her new tent, and Wendy preferred sleeping outside instead of in the RV. Which was fine, since Dipper felt the polar opposite, and that landed him in the RV with Robbie and Bill, the couch and bed to be divided among them.

To stir things a bit, Dipper jokingly announced as he stepped in, "Hey guys, I think I'll sleep on the couch."

“Fuck that,” Bill said.””You’re not sleeping alone.”

Robbie scoffed. “No? Is it because you can’t handle knowing your boyfriend,” Dipper made a dissenting noise, "is in bed with someone else? Must be a blow to your massive ego."

"We're," he motioned between him and Bill, "not dating, and I was kidding about the couch." On the tip of his tongue was a proposition to give Robbie the couch, meanwhile he and Bill could have the bed because they'd cuddled before, but he refrained from voicing it. Admitting they'd been previously intertwined seemed… odd after refuting the 'boyfriend' claim.

“If you were kidding about the couch,” Bill said with glee, “we can sleep together.”

“Fat chance,” Robbie said. “It’s you. You’re not sleeping with him.” A disgusted pout scrawled
over his features. "Unless he’s cool with that. Are you?"

"Yeah, it's okay," Dipper confirmed, shoulders lifting in an insouciant shrug. "We don't have many options."

"If you're sure," he mumbled. But to Bill, his words were more guarded, "We're switching if you do anything creepy, man."

By the time he was in bed, Dipper had shed his cargo pants and unbuttoned his plaid shirt in preparation for the heat of the night; the daytime was hazy, the night was going to be unbearable, too hot for his pajamas. Bill was joining him in bed, pausing at the sight of his boxers. "Those’re really gay, sugar."

"What's gay about it?" he asked, scrutinizing the multi-colored heart pattern dotting his boxers. Eyes flicking from Bill's gauze to his golden-starred boxers, he pointed out, "In that case, yours are pretty gay too." Though, Robbie's pajama pants with its dreary theme of grim reapers and tombstones may have been the most creative.

"Only gay for you," Bill told him, winking. "But nothing is gayer than your heart pattern."

With a sigh, he rolled away from Bill and said, "My legs hurt like hell." So he was going to take advantage of every ounce of rest he could receive and hope his lower half didn't ache as if he'd jogged ten miles. Bill moved closer, putting his arms around him, and he stiffened but didn't squirm from the contact. It would get too hot to cuddle like this because the RV would trap the warmth of three bodies, but until then he supposed he didn't mind the feeling of being surrounded by Bill. It was different, being the little spoon and wrapped in another's embrace, secure and safe. "Can't believe you're snuggling me and still think my boxers are what's gay about this."

"The boxers are the gayest thing in here."

"Because your raging flamboyant attitude doesn't fit inside the RV?"

"Buzz off, I’m not the gay one here. You’re gay."

Dipper laughed through his response of "just half" and then quieted, ready to sleep. "Let's not keep Robbie awake with this dumb conversation." If Bill truly wanted, they could continue the "you're gay, no you" fest tomorrow.

Bill nuzzled him, breath tickling the nape of his neck. "Goodnight, sugar. Our conversation isn’t dumb. You’re super gay."

"You're the one spooning me."

"You’re letting me spoon you."

"Dude, sleep," he said, "and it's not gay unless we get awkward boners." And then they jerked each other off, that would be fairly gay as well.

Tiredness setting in, Dipper let his eyelids droop, body relaxing into the semi-comfortable bed. He was careful to avoid moving his legs too much, afraid the awful cramping would restart and keep him awake for hours to come, so he remained still and tried to drift off.

The heat of the night caught up to him, and Dipper woke pressed against Bill, this time sweaty and uncomfortable, unbelievably sore and unable to return to sleep. Untangling himself from the sheets
and Bill's arms, he groggily staggered out of the RV, instantly cooled by the air. It was still hot, but he wasn't trapped against another body in an enclosed space under bed sheets, so it was a definite improvement.

As he stretched, he noticed Mabel and Wendy's tent was dark as expected, meanwhile everything was peaceful among crickets chirping and a gentle swooshing of leaves in the breeze.

"Hey, man." A sudden voice caused him to jump. "Are you sleepwalking? You should be in bed." It was Robbie speaking, but there was no Robbie. He squinted into the darkness, tempted to check around the other side of the RV because he sounded close, yet nobody was in sight.

About to start unturning rocks, he asked, "Where are you?" Confused, he kept his volume lowered to ensure it wouldn't disturb the others.

"Wallowing up here."

That was when he spotted Robbie on top of the RV, and seconds of consideration passed as he wondered how he managed to scale it. A tree branch hung over the roof, but he wouldn't dare when his legs could hardly maintain an upright position without collapsing under him. Luckily, he noticed the ladder on the RV's side and inwardly facepalmed at the obvious answer.

Joining him, Dipper saw that Robbie sat cross-legged, leaned back on his hands that appeared barren without the fingerless gloves. His phone was illuminated beside him, a notepad app opened. "What are you doing here?"

"Writing, contemplating. The stars are reminders of a bright future robbed from me." If it hadn't been said with such melodramatic misery, Dipper would have assumed he was jokingly trying to be edgy. After staring at Robbie for an eternity, then switching his gaze to the stars, he frowned. They were clearer out here, twinkling specks of light dotting a black sky, but they lost their magic when paired with what Robbie had said.

Ignoring that his future was on the track to getting wrecked by a bad GPA, Dipper asked with interest, "What's your idea of a 'bright future', and why aren't you going to have it?"

“What is a ‘bright future’ anymore? It's a lie pushed by our parents and teachers. My band didn't work out, my major sucks, and my destined soulmate never felt like I did. Now all that’s left is despair and inevitable death."

"Wendy, right? Yeah, that's…" Dipper didn't know what to say. Extending comfort to Mabel, which he liked to think he did decently, was a different endeavor than Robbie. "Your existence isn't reliant on your soulmate,“ he offered, shifting his weight to stretch his traitorous legs. Bright future, that was a good one. "Lots of people have fulfilling lives without knowing their soulmates. You're good friends with yours, so that's something."

"Life is meaningless without her," he lamented. “We were made for each other, but she doesn’t feel the same. The world is a twisted, cruel mistress, who desires only our pain and suffering.”

Dipper was once again rendered speechless, so he brushed a hand through his hair to expel some of the nervous energy. "You should try poetry. I think you'd come up with some, uh, brilliant stuff." It was a subject they'd discovered they both knew something about, Robbie significantly more so than he did.

“I do write poetry,” Robbie said. “It’s one of my favorite things to do, expressing how limited our time on this earth is.”
There was a soft mutter of 'Jesus Christ' under his breath, not a reply to Robbie but more of a reflection of this heavy conversation because he didn't mind downer chats, but this was doling out the melancholy. Well, he could work with that. "I wish mine would be a little more limited."

"Why?"

"Quality of life," he said and repositioned to lie on his back. "It kind of sucks to do day-to-day things, so that's why I sometimes think it'd be nice to just… not, and Mabel—" this was hushed, as if afraid she'd manage to overhear and give him an earful, "wouldn't have to juggle college and work."

"It’s your thing man, but.. I don’t think she minds too much, she really likes you. There’s not a day at work she doesn’t talk about her ‘awesome bro-bro’." Smiling wistfully, he fluttered his eyelids closed because that was going to make him a teary-eyed if he thought about it too extensively. "Yeah, I mean… I wish I wasn't the reason that she had to do life on hard mode. I like to think things would be different for me if I wasn't dealing with chronic pain, but I don't know. I'd probably still be somehow stuck with Bill and failing in my major."

"Are you sure those two don’t go hand-in-hand? Bill, like, totally sucks. Period."

Although he didn't know why, that drew a chuckle from him, perhaps because it was so absurd to think fate may've once had alternative plans. "How're you doing in yours, by the way? English, right?"

"Oh, it's... whatever. The creative writing classes are tolerable."

"Wait, you don't like learning about the problematic nature of representation in the media, or Lacan's stages?" he clarified, an eye peeking open and cracking a smile at the playful inquiry that elicited a laugh from Robbie.

"Hey, Dipper..." That sounded more serious, so Dipper sat up and surveyed Robbie, briefly cursing at himself for the sharp movement since it brought on a dizzying head rush. "You said uh, soulmates don’t matter, you can find 'happiness' without them. Do you care about finding yours?"

The question stunned him, and he gauged his response. "I know it's important to some people," he replied carefully, sliding the sleeve of his plaid shirt, "especially those with traditional families and stuff? But I guess it's not a priority for me since my parents said it was more like a suggestion. I've always wondered who it would be out of curiosity—I mean, I still wonder—but yeah. Do you want to see the mark?" Dipper stifled an anxious laugh; his soulmark was less stressful than it had been a few weeks ago, and he could stare at it sans the burning question of who the handwriting belonged to. For once, the inscription was strangely pleasant and kind of amusing with its harshness, plus the thought of its owner possibly being Bill didn't strike dread or fear into him.

It could be interesting if they were, he mused to himself, encouraging them to arrange a mess of a domestic life and a future.

"Sure," said Robbie, "if you’re cool with that." Dipper merely 'mm-hmm'ed and offered his arm. Robbie peered at it, pensive. "Looks like my handwriting, only it’s fatter."

After chortling his amusement, he quieted to say, "It might, maybe… be Bill, but he doesn't know that, so it'd be great if you could keep it between us."

"Sure. The handwriting looks a little like his, but I haven’t seen much of it. Wendy would know."
"She said it looked similar."

"You talked to her? God, she never tells me anything anymore."

"Not specifically about the marking," he said as he returned his sleeve to its proper place, "it came up in conversation, and that was it. We're not conducting a full-scale investigation or anything because it doesn't matter to me, and Bill's super secretive anyway." But the thoughts of a domestic lifestyle were drifting to him again, dashed by a mental reminder that fantasizing about the possibility was ridiculous.

"Bill is weird about his. I’m not even sure Wendy’s seen it, and you know.. they dated. For a while."

"They dated," he repeated. "Is that a euphemism for they were getting it on for four months'? Because yeah, it's strange she still didn't see his soulmark during that."

If he'd thought Robbie was downcast before, the deep frown that dragged his face into utter darkness and anguish implied he'd seen the tip of the iceberg. "I can’t believe she let him."

Allowing that subject to fade, as he didn't think Robbie seemed comfortable and Dipper wasn't keen on it either, he moved to what'd been on his mind, a topic glossed over. "Hey, Mabel mentioned setting us up, I guess? I wanted to let you know that we don't have to, like there's no pressure. This semester's been busy, I don't know where things are at with you and Wendy—"

Stopping Dipper in his ramble of possible outs, Robbie replied, "If you’re available sometime, we can hang out."

Admittedly, he still wasn't feeling that connection but they had only talked for brief periods, and texting didn't count. He grasped for hope that a few dates would bridge the gap between not feeling attracted to Robbie. From a practical standpoint, dating him wouldn't be as dramatic of an affair than, say, his possible soulmate.

"If you want to," he said softly. "When I came out here, you were caught up in talking about Wendy and there's nothing wrong with it, but—I mean, if you're ready for that."

Robbie shrugged. "I thought hanging out might be fun."

"Is this hanging out like, friends chilling, or...?"

"Doesn't matter. We'll see how it goes."

That didn't answer the question or clarify how he should treat the outing, but he guessed he would assume the former: friends, no homo, a standard outing. That wasn't as nerve-wracking as a date, and he thought it might be easier than feeling evaluated for romance over the course of a meal. So with a smile, he nodded and agreed, "Yeah, that sounds good. How about sometime after next weekend? Are you available?"

"Should be," he said. "I'll see you then."

A breath of quiet had Dipper raising his eyes to the stars again, absorbing the tranquility of the night. "I should probably try to sleep. I came outside to stretch and cool off because the RV feels like an oven. Besides," he added, casting a grin at Robbie, "looking at the stars reminds me of a bright future that I won't have."

"Hey, that’s plagiarism."
"Sorry," he said, then amended, "citing Robbie Valentino as the author of that quote. Also, if you're staying here, I hope you don't, uh, wallow too hard."

Robbie's face contorted in what appeared to be an attempt at expressing happiness. "Nah, I got our hang out session to look forward to." Forcing himself to return the smile, Dipper's nod was half-hearted.

Opening his eyes to the sunlight, Dipper didn't need to check his phone to know morning had arrived and, despite the early hour, Robbie was already gone from his sofa bed. Probably with Mabel or Wendy.

Bill snoozed soundly—it raised conflicting feelings because he could allow him the extra rest after learning he didn't often get much due to insomnia, but he wasn't sure he could climb over Bill without waking him. As he tried to give it a go, a spike of soreness in his leg caused a spasm and aborted his plan with a clumsy tumble. Immediately, Bill jerked beneath him, a confused grunt escaping as he stared at Dipper, visibly startled.

"What the fuck?"

"Sorry," he mumbled and slid into his original spot albeit closer to Bill this time. "Was trying not to wake you, but I… yesterday kind of messed me up." He could still feel it, the tiny jolts of electric pain searing him.

"Oh, sweetheart." Bill drew him into a hug, leaving Dipper to enjoy the scent of spicy honey mixed with sleep, and the rumble of Bill's murmur in his throat. "Do you want me to get you anything? I can massage your legs, if that'd help."

The prospect of massaging had his agreement. "Okay, but be gentle," he warned and grasped Bill's hand to place it on his outer thigh. Vulnerability clenched him, shining through his gaze as it rested on Bill. "Maybe… start there."

Bill began to work his leg, kneading his thigh as he gazed at him intently, toeing the border of devious. "How does this feel?"

"Good," he said through a strained breath, biting his lip to hold back other noises. While Bill was doing a wonderful job, he didn't think moans of pain were going to be reassuring of that and figured it was best kept to himself, particularly when the crew outside of the RV might overhear. "It's definitely good, and— and basically do that, but gradually move upward toward my hip." As he spoke, he felt like he was sinking further into the sheets and coaxed Bill with him, soaking in this relaxing albeit torturous moment.

Humming agreement, he said, "I didn't know you'd be so good at this."

"I have the hands of a wizard," Bill informed him. "I'm the god of massage."

Lips curving into a smile, he surveyed Bill and commented, "Thought you were the Milkshake God, but I guess godhood just suits you." A lascivious moan escaped him as his hands brushed a sensitive spot. "Oh, Bill." Okay, so he was playing it up a little, but if Bill was going to give him those looks, he could do it back.
Bill raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know you were into godhood, darling.”

"What's not to like? I'm not going to reject a take-charge, all-powerful, commanding sort of guy." It ended in a playfully-sensual purr, a thinly-disguised compliment meant to stroke Bill's ego.

“Sugar, keep talking like this and I’ll show you how powerful and commanding I am.”

"Thanks for the massage," he said and pecked Bill on the cheek, their apparent form of currency. "Probably shouldn't do anything strenuous today like hiking, but I think I'm good."

“I’m here to tenderize your legs if you need me. Can I do anything else?”

"Uh, look. I appreciate the offer, but it probably wouldn't work that well since you don't know the exercises and stretches or anything. I could show you when we're back."

Bill's fingers grazed his cheek. “I’d like that. I want to help you, Pine Tree.”

A burst of warmth exploded in Dipper's chest, and he tugged Bill into an appreciative embrace. It was a rarity that anyone extended that sort of understanding. Mabel had been the only one for a very long time, but he was beyond ecstatic to have Bill as somebody to trust as well. "If your touch continues to be so amazing," he murmured with a light laugh, "I might let you show me that supposedly powerful and commanding side of yours."

“I’m looking forward to it,” Bill said, and the words sent a thrill through him, echoed by guilt as he wished Robbie's could have half that effect.

“Don't know about you guys, but I’m starving!” Mabel declared, rummaging through supplies. Around her, there was a variety of food scattered across the picnic table, from candies to cheeses, fruits and vegetables and bags of chips. “What do you guys want to eat?”

"All of it looks good," Dipper said, not fussy. "Whatever you want to eat."

“Processed foods again?” Bill's disapproving stare said it all. “We’re camping, this isn’t some picnic. We should go fishing like real campers.”

Robbie barked a laugh, "Since when do you actually want to be here? I thought you said that 'real campers' were 'forty-year-old-virgins' who 'need to shower more'."

“I don’t want to be here, but I’m going to make the most of it.”

"So, here's the deal," Wendy spoke up, joining Mabel by the food. "Bill, the RV has fishing supplies in the side compartment. You’ll have to find your own bait, but you can go be a mountain man at the lake while the rest of us eat what we packed. You know where that is, right? We don't want to have to get a SAR team—"

“I know where it is. I’ll get the fishing gear and the bait and I’ll be the MASTER BAITER of this camping trip," snickers rose for a second at that, "and you’ll be jealous as you stuff your faces with that factory garbage. There’s a real hunter in this forest.” Bill stalked off around the RV, a man on a mission.

A mission that was most likely going to fail, being realistic. Rolling his eyes, Dipper turned to Mabel as she prompted him with the offer of trail mix and fruit. “Hey, Dipper," Mabel started, rocking on her heels, "you don't think he's going to get a fish, right?"
"Nah," he said and squeezed her shoulder, "I doubt he knows how."

"Do you think it's possible that he could?"

Logic guiding his answer, he said, "I mean, it's possible..." Mabel's face paled, yet she didn't need to say a word because Dipper already knew. "I'll go after him. Where's the lake? Is it that one—"

“I saw it yesterday. All you gotta do is go up the hill where you can see the 80 and head in the direction of the 580, then follow that until you get to the brown sign and go north.”

Unaware of the clueless looks of Robbie and Wendy, Dipper nodded and handed over what remained of the trail mix. "Okay, got it. That's what I thought, but I wanted to make sure."

Departing from the campsite with a promise that he'd have his phone and preferably a signal, he abided by Mabel's instructions and arrived at a pond ("lake" was generous), barely a two minute walk from where the RV was parked. Bill was perched on a mossy log with a fishing rod in his hand, staring into the water as if the Big One would arrive any minute now.

"Hey," Dipper greeted as he approached. "How's it going? Have you caught a feast yet?"

“Trying,” Bill muttered, an edge to his tone. “My trap didn’t work, the piece of shit.”

"You... were trying to trap something?" he asked, scanning the area and raising his eyebrows. "With what? How?"

“It was made out of sticks and fishing line, and it kept falling apart.”

"What were you hoping to trap, a squirrel? I don't think you could've killed it anyway." Leaning into Bill's side and resting his head on his shoulder, he murmured, "You're a big softie, and honestly? I think it's a good quality on you."

“I could’ve totally killed it,” he muttered. “We could be eating squirrel stew tonight.”

"Gross, no," he replied. "It's bad enough that you're intent on putting a hook into some poor fish's mouth and killing it." And Dipper thought that was if he was lucky in the hook being in the fish's mouth, not in its gills or eye.

“Don’t hate on my fishing abilities.”

"I'm hating on fishing as a concept. It seems weirdly cruel to put metal hooks in something's mouth." Dipper didn't see a preferable outcome: metal hooks creating tattered fish that either were thrown back or killed. "Do you have a fishing license?"

Pride flashed in Bill's eyes. “Of course. Got the license, got the fisherman know-how, everything. Quiz me, I've been doing it since I was a kid.”

"Okay, but you have to have it on you." Pawing near the pocket of Bill's slacks for his wallet, Bill's glance convinced him to add, "CDFW Officer Dipper here to check the legality of this fishing excursion."

“I should knock your tiny ass in the water. Check the legality of that.” Though Bill’s expression was far from amused, he seemed slightly less irritated than before. “Why are you messing with my wallet?”

"Are you sure I was going for your wallet?" Coy question aside, he actually had been aiming to
locate his wallet, too far from the center for anything else.

“You’re not brave enough to go for anything better.”

Yielding, he quit seeking his wallet and determined they could address that if Bill caught something. "Yeah, you're right. My handjobs are reserved for pacifists."

“That’s fine, my dick’s reserved for people who like fishing with me.”

"I see you're getting plenty of action," he said, then closed his eyes again, focused on how he seemed to fit in the crook of Bill's shoulder. It was amazing how nice leaning into him was. "You don't have to do this. Come hang out with us at the campsite."

“You've gotta be kidding me. I don’t want them to think I couldn’t do it.”

Bewildered, Dipper thought aloud, "Who are you trying to impress? Wendy knows you can, she said you guys have been on camping trips before. And Mabel? She would prefer to keep the fish as a pet so getting one for food might not score points with her."

Bill said tersely, “The jerks.”

"The jerks? Why are Robbie and I jerks?"

“I didn’t say you, Pine Tree.”

"So this is to show off to Robbie," Dipper concluded, remaining skeptical but nevertheless curious. "Why? I'm not sure he'll care at all if you come back with a fish."

“I’ll make him care, and I’ll eat it in front of him too. Mm, fresh fish.” The acting was received by a deadpan expression, so Bill changed his approach. "I'm sick of his stupid face, I want to smear his smugness in fish blood."

"...Bill."

“What?”

Frowning, he prodded Bill's side because he knew why. Avoiding the risk of angering Bill, Dipper moved on from the topic of Robbie as he gazed into the murky waters of the pond, noting the shadows were growing longer, gloomier. It made the clearing a forlorn swamp. "I don't know if it means anything to you, but I don't need you to catch a fish. You're already the handsome man of the wilderness that this trip needs."

Rumbling his approval, Bill wove an arm behind him, possessively bringing Dipper to his side. “I don’t want you to leave.”

"I wasn't going to," he responded, then wrinkled his nose as he recalled what they were doing here in the first place. "Maybe if you catch a fish and have to gut it since that's kind of gross." Gorey and smelled awful. "But otherwise, I'll be most faithful to the god of massage and milkshakes."

“Maybe I should save the fish bits for when I see Robbie,” Bill mused. “Could put it in a bucket and throw it on him. Emos like that, right?” Unable to help it, Dipper gagged at the thought, regretfully visualizing bits of slimy fish entrails and the terrible smell that'd produce and the pieces. All of it was vividly repulsive. “What's the deal? I haven't done it yet.”

"That's messed up." Another reason to hope Bill wouldn't get a bite: senseless destruction of
wildlife, and Robbie would be wearing a bucket of fish remains.

Bill repeated, “I haven’t done it yet! I’m not some savage, Pine Tree.”

Relenting cautiously, Dipper said, ”Okay. I just… I don’t understand your issue with it, you know? Wendy chose you over him, and they’re soulmates.”

“She chose me, sure,” Bill countered. “But that didn’t work out, and it’s not about her. Have you talked to the guy? He’s such a fucking jerk, a douchebag! And he likes Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet even. Can you fucking believe that?”

“I talked to him last night,” Dipper revealed, analyzing Bill's reaction and going on when it wasn't severe. ”He didn't seem that bad, but I can see where you're coming from with the Romeo and Juliet thing.”

“Blah blah blah, ‘it’s satire, Cipher,’” he impersonated Robbie's snivel. "Sometimes he’ll quote it. It’s annoying as shit.”

Dipper exaggeratedly said, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo? ...Alright, I'll stop.” Unless jumbled poetry of suns and roses was close enough, he didn't know other quotes.

“Thank Stars,” Bill groaned. “I get enough from Robbie. I don’t know why you think he’s okay.” After a moment, he let out a noise of frustration. “I wish the fucking fish would bite sooner, I’m hungry. I always hated this about fishing– the waiting.”

Dipper shivered as he finally peered at Bill, frowning. "I guess I didn't see you as the type.” He'd liked it better when teasing about Bill being too soft to hurt anything was the reality instead.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Bill questioned.

"To go fishing," he answered simply and didn't feel the need to elaborate, details of how it was unnecessary in this situation would spark an argument when Bill's ego wouldn't allow him to see otherwise.

“That so? My father took me fishing when I was younger up until we moved. With his fishing buddies: his stockbroker and executive pals. He said sports were a good way to show people he was like them, so he'd catch one fish and call it good. We usually fished from a boat, though. Not the stupid shore.”

"Oh." Well, that resolved confusion about Bill's fishing knowledge, but it left Dipper unsure of how to respond since Bill didn't generally talk about his family. This was navigating foreign territory. "That's cool that your dad tried to find an activity to bond over. Stan tried to take me and Mabel once, but I'm not into it, personally.”

“Yeah, I can tell. I didn’t think you were that into meat.”

"I'm not. Livestock industries are horrible for the environment, and Mabel fawns over everything with a face, so we avoid it.”

“I don’t know how she could fawn over these scaly monstrosities.”

"I'm not arguing that fish are attractive,” he said, smiling faintly. "It's more of a 'do no harm' approach. As in, not intentionally tempting them into getting a metal hook through their body." Bill didn't seem impressed, "I doubt they even feel pain, and it’s just their lip.”
"Unless they swallow the hook," he pointed out. "Or it's in its gills or side or eye or something. I don't think they feel it like humans do, but I mean, that's true of every species." He shrugged, then busied himself by fiddling with the sleeve of his shirt. "Take dogs and fish. Both species still have the capacity to suffer, though."

"You can see it in dogs," Bill said. "Fish don’t react to anything beyond being removed from the water."

Eyebrows furrowing, he said, "Maybe fish are reacting to the pain, but you don't recognize it."

"Nah, they don’t like being out of water. That’s why you kill them quickly." Before he could say anything, Bill went on, "I’m going to dine on fish tonight, Pine Tree."

"Look, man. You do you, I guess." Slightly disheartening, but Bill appeared set on catching this fish for the sole reason of proving he could, and he'd made it clear that nothing was going to stand in his way.

Bill shifted, reeling in the line and then giving it more slack. "You don’t seem happy, Pine Tree."

"Hey, I'm…. okay," he said, the response lukewarm but earnest, then a nervous laugh escaped him as he thumped the log with his heel. "Not looking forward to you getting a fish, to be honest. I think if you catch one, I might start heading back since I don't feel like watching you wrangle a hook out of its mouth." And see the thing flail around, that wouldn't be pleasant either.

"You might start heading back?" Bill repeated him, disbelief in his voice. "You just got here."

Nonchalantly shrugging, he said, "Yeah, I might. And I got here a while ago, you've been out for over twenty minutes." Although he hadn't been present the entirety of that time, it was clear the evening was coming to a slow end since it was growing darker.

"Uh huh. You’ve only been here for a short time, Pine Tree." How he spoke suggested his mind wasn't on this topic, so it wasn't unexpected when it jumped tracks. "Like the fish in the lake. What was it you were saying about them maybe feeling pain?"

Curious, he peered to Bill but saw nothing out of the ordinary, his stare trained into the water. "It's sort of debated since their nervous systems don't support pain like ours do, but… I think there's research claiming it might damage them."

"Like, physically damaging? Or do they have something that makes their tiny brains register pain?"

"Maybe both? Nobody really knows yet."

"Huh." Bill went silent for a moment, fingers tapping on the reel. "No one knows if they feel pain."

"Not yet," he said, and shifting delivered a jolting ache through his legs, so he hauled himself to his feet to stretch and stiffly pace. "It's kind of similar, in a weird way. The doctors— after I 'recovered' from a shattered hip, they told me I wasn't actually feeling pain since it would be impossible. I'm glad they cleared that up for me." Sarcasm dripped into his voice.

"Sugar, are you comparing yourself to a fish?"

In hindsight, that hadn't been the best example.
"Uh," he paused near Bill to hover over him while his arms circled his upper torso, "...yes. The fish and I haven't been caught by you yet, since we're both immune to your bait."

“Ouch.” Bill deflated, slumping.

Dipper placed his chin on his shoulder, mumbling playfully, "I guess where the fish and I differ is that you're actually hoping to catch a fish. I doubt you want a Dipper."

“I don’t know, a Dipper would be nice right now.”

"Yeah? You seemed intent on the fish," he reminded, hands brushing down Bill's sides before he realized what he was doing and retracted himself to resume pacing. "I don't want to be your second choice here."

“Mm, at this rate you’ll be the first pick of the platter.”

Dipper cast Bill an amused glance. "Wow, uh, I'd be flattered but you're literally choosing me over a fish, which you've called unintelligent and unattractive today."

“You’re a better catch than Red.”

That stopped him in his tracks, and he swiveled to stare, wide-eyed, at Bill, whose attention remained on the water, fishing pole resting lax in his hands. Uncertainty flickered within him at the revelation as he questioned if Bill was serious, what he meant by that, and his thoughts were already spinning with countless possibilities, ranging from the implication that it was a sincere compliment to the more likely joking nature of the remark. Clearing his throat and scratching the back of his neck, he was suddenly aware of his awkward posture, glad Bill's gaze wasn't on him to witness this awestruck revelation. "Bill, I… that's—" sputtered Dipper, still struggling to find the words. When he spoke again, his voice had raised, flustered, "Thanks, I think?"

Bill broke into a brief smile, though it wavered. “There’s no need to thank me, Pine Tree.” Quiet filling in, Dipper wasn't sure if he should respond to that with a request for further information on what he'd meant, as he did want to know, curiosity on overdrive. However, Bill ended the silence before he could, “I don’t understand why fish are designed to feel pain. Hey, Pine Tree, I have a question.”

"Hm?"

“How far away is the camp from here?”

"Not far. I mean, you should know considering you walked here as well. But I would say… a minute or two on foot, so they could hear us if we needed them."

“Fish are sensitive to noise. A single yell could scare them off for tonight… so those assholes better stay quiet.”

As he settled onto the log again, Dipper raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't think that'll be a problem. It's getting later, and they're probably playing a game or talking or something, so I doubt they'll scare your fish away." The noises near the pond were natural, water gurgling at the rocks in slow, lazy waves, trees in the wind, the occasional sound of a cricket or animal coming from the woods.

“Until they get loud. I know how easily excitable that sister of yours is. And, you’d better watch it too. I know you like to run your mouth but you’re probably the reason my bait hasn’t caught.”
Baffled by the turn of this conversation, Dipper questioned, "Whoa, what?" It took an extra moment for what he'd said to register when it'd come out of nowhere, the increasingly-aggressive tone extra perplexing. It was another line he hadn't realized he'd crossed, and he was busy trying to think of what he'd said to trigger this.

"You heard me, fish-frightener."

Taken aback, Dipper stared in disbelief, more puzzled than before because Bill still seemed riled up by something he couldn't pinpoint, but it felt off. Bill's anger was easily-distinguishable in his twisted expressions of fury and the strain in his voice, the subtle tenseness — this was lacking in all aspects. "Wait, did… you call me ‘fish-frightener'? Dude, what the heck. I didn't— I haven't been talking that loudly."

"You're raising your voice right now!" Bill objected.

"What are you talking about? I'm seriously not." Though his voice was taut, more guarded than before as he struggled to determine where in this interaction things had gone awry.

"See? You're still doing it. You're ruining this fishing excursion, and you may as well be ruining my life."

"I'm ruining—?" Dipper had been about to scoff, but he hesitated when he noticed Bill's expression, still vacant of the traces of rage that he'd expect under these conditions - a declaration that he was *ruining his life* was seemingly tossed in at Bill's will with no lead up, almost to goad him into responding defensively.

Blinking, he examined Bill in the silence, observing a change that looked… pleading. Oh.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked, volume gradually climbing to a yell. "I'm not *ruining your life*. You're just A JERK!" The last part was a shout as thunderous as he could manage; the acting was lackluster, but it accomplished the goal, and he grinned sheepishly at Bill as he rose to his feet.

"Look at what YOU’VE done! You’ve scared away all the fish! That's it, now we have to go back, there’s nothing left here."

Rolling with it, Dipper said, "Oh, no. I guess I did. They'll be shaken up for a while, meaning I might've ruined fishing for the rest of the weekend. Sorry, I know you were eager to catch your own dinner, and I wrecked that." Precisely none of that sounded remotely close to how a human being would talk, robotic and monotonous.

The returning walk was uneventful once Bill collected the fishing pole, up until they arrived at the campsite where the group rounded a healthy fire as evening hues splashed over the scene. Mabel was in the middle of an animated story, but she stopped upon spying him and Bill.

"Hey bro, you're back!" she greeted and waved. "I was telling them about the time you and I got lost in the woods, since we were about to vote on who should fetch you two! It was getting late and we heard a shout—"

"So you guys *did* hear that, right?" Bill demanded, garnering the intrigue of the three seated around the campfire. “This little bully scared away all my fish!”

"Basically," Dipper admitted. "Things got out of hand, and I, uh, couldn't control my anger…?" The end was lifted in a question, given it was so very unlike him but maybe not when the other
party was Bill.

His hopes of sounding inconspicuous were converted to guilt as Mabel invited him to the spot beside her, clearly concerned. “Are you okay, Dippy?”

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. I'll tell you what happened later," he reassured as he sat, silently promising he'd give her the full version of the truth, considering he knew Mabel would be proud of Bill and thankful for the change of heart. "I think Bill's annoyed since I ruined his chance to catch a fish." And his life, apparently, but that had been baiting him into lashing out.

“Here I was, on the cusp of catching a fish. Had my line and tackle ready, my bait on the hook, and then he went and ruined everything. Great. Thanks, Pine Tree.” Bill articulated the theatrical finish by stomping over to a lawn chair, plopping into it and folding his arms. To Dipper, the sight of Bill fake-pouting was worth the entire ordeal.

After the others went to sleep, he and Bill remained by the fire. Robbie had retreated to the RV, Wendy and Mabel in their tent. It was long past hearing murmurs, all lights out except a camping lantern and the glow from the flames, which Bill looked remarkably dazzling in.

But perhaps the conclusion to the fishing excursion made him more attractive than usual, as Dipper was ruminating on how he'd essentially sabotaged himself after thinking about the potential for fish to feel pain. It was... endearing, and Dipper could only gaze with subdued affection until now, able to talk openly with the rest beyond earshot and unconscious.

"Hey," he said, clearing his throat. "So... I think what you did earlier was really amazing." While he spoke, he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off Bill, flushing from the admission or heat from the campfire. "I know I called you a jerk, but you're pretty great."

“Hm?” Bill glanced at him from where he sat beside the fire, leaned toward the flames as he prodded the burning log with a stick.

"Seriously, you don't know?" he asked, shifting to rest on his arm, closer to Bill. Lawn chairs were the least comfortable piece of 'furniture' ever invented, but being next to Bill was cozy. "I think Mabel is happy that dinner didn't include any fish except her gummy sharks. And uh," Dipper hesitated, almost timid, "me too, I mean. I'm glad you didn't."

“Yeah, we wouldn't want any more fish blood on my hands, huh?”

Flicking his gaze from Bill's hands to the fire, he shrugged. "I didn't know that you had fish blood on your hands," he said, watching the flames dance and form wisps of smoke, "but that's not the point." Bill's pride had been set aside because he didn't want to inflict pain needlessly.

“Like I said, we went fishing when I was younger. Some fish died. I never thought...”

Chewing his lip, he debated how to respond and hoped Bill didn't view him as the moral police on this topic. "It doesn't sound like they died for nothing," he tried. "You said it was with your dad, so you guys were bonding... and if you ate the fish, you didn't waste them at least. Sorry, I'm bad at this. Maybe, uh, let me try something else." After a moment of consideration, he said, "You like books, right? I think you might've mentioned crime and mystery—that's not important, never mind. But still, you know there's this thing called 'character development'? That could kind of apply here, if you wanted it to."

“I don’t think this has helped me at all, sugar.”
Disappointment struck. At a loss, he cleared his throat and fiddled with the ends of his shirt in thought, compiling a mental list of possible methods of helping Bill but coming up short.

“Maybe if I had known sooner, less fish would’ve been hurt.”

"Still don't know what the status on that is," he reiterated in reference to the concrete research, or lack thereof, concerning pain reception. An idea emerging, Dipper stood from the lawn chair and unhooked the lantern, then took Bill's hand. "Let's go," he urged but didn't give him time to disagree, pulling Bill toward the trail. "Trust me on this." It wasn't like he'd waste steps with his body as sore as it was.

Luckily, Bill allowed himself to be led and complied as the walk escalated into a jog. “Where are we going?” The squeak of the lantern intensified as he quickened, grip tightening on Bill's hand to ensure he kept pace with what'd transformed into a near-sprint. The rush was freeing, and he was eager to reach the destination he had in mind.

Brushing past familiar landmarks, he was swiftly greeted by a vast overlook, an open field with only the tops of trees to reduce the view of a limitless star-filled sky. And from there, he turned to Bill and pulled him into a hug, all but collapsing as they tumbled down onto the ground together. Bill yelped in surprise, and Dipper was merely relieved that he didn't try to control the fall, as they landed painlessly.

“What are you doing, Pine Tree?”

Dipper's hands mindlessly traveled over Bill's arms, pads of his fingers twitching against the fabric of his undershirt. Eyes lidding as he peered at Bill, a puff of contentment spilled from him as he saw Bill's face in the light of the toppled lantern, admiring his high cheekbones and jaw, overall somehow looking even more handsome.

"Just stargazing," was Dipper's explanation, laughing breathlessly, "As in, gazing at my favorite star."

“What, are you looking at the clusters that make up the Big Dipper? My favorite is Merak.”

Gently flicking his nose, he said, "You, dumbass."

Grinning suggestively, Bill looked flattered. “Oh, but sugar, I’m not a star. I can see where you might be misled since I do shine brightly.”

"You’re the star of my life," he said teasingly before becoming serious, "and… a shocking amount of productions, if what Mabel's heard from the Drama Club is true."

That seemed to attract his attention. “What’s she hearing about me?”

"Like, other things?" he asked, then hummed in thought. "You're a phenomenal actor, you're good at ad-libbing, and the freshmen girls get crushes on you. Um… oh! She's heard that you always have a significant other too.” Common knowledge because Bill encouraged them to attend productions and reserved a seat, which confirmed Dipper's speculation of serial monogamist habits.

"The significant other part is an exaggeration," Bill chuckled. “I’m not so desperate for a partner that I replace them almost immediately.”

"When do you think you're going to start looking again?" Casual had been his aim, but his nervous falter and fists clenching the fabric of Bill's shirt sold him out.
"How am I supposed to know? I don't have calendar dates lined up."

A valid response, but his quest for information hadn't been resolved. "Right, I meant... an approximation or something, not that it's important. I was wondering since you didn't seem too bothered by the whole breakup with Wendy." They'd been interacting well with each other, as if they were still close friends... and maybe that was it, they were better friends than lovers.

"Like I said, I don't know. I've been enjoying the single life again."

"Oh." Dipper eased off, hands sliding down to unceremoniously fall into the grass. "That's great. Me too, it's— I have nothing to compare it to, but it's nice." Two single dudes entangled on a hill under the moonlight. Normal.

"How are you enjoying it again?" Bill asked, entertained.

In mock defense, he protested, "Hey, I could theoretically stop enjoying it because I think it might be fun to not be single sometimes."

"That's not even close to how it works, Pine Tree."

"I guess I wouldn't know?" Elaboration was unnecessary when his previous statement detailed why that was the case, and he gently pushed Bill's chest to urge him off. When the silent request was understood, Dipper squeezed from under Bill and crawled over to the lantern to retrieve it. "I thought you liked having a relationship."

"I do! But I also like having me time. All about me, and me, and not a naggy redhead."

Bill flopped into the grass with a sigh. "Hey, Pine Tree?"

Head cocking to a side, Dipper leaned to hover over him and placed the lantern on his stomach. "Yeah?"

"When you look at the sky, what do you see?"

"There's a lot to consider here, there are stars, space, planets, the ozone layer...?" He stared at the sky, squinted for a moment, then peered back to Bill. "Am I supposed to be seeing something?"

"The brightest stars form a constellation, Pine Tree. Say hello to Draco."

Following Bill's gaze, he commented, "Huh, so it's part of the... uh, well— one of the dippers?"

"No, they're just close together. It's a Finger Family of Stars." Bill wiggled his fingers at Dipper. "Draco Finger, Ursa Major Finger, Big Dipper Finger..."

As he relaxed into the grass, he tried to discern the stars that Bill was listing. Enjoying the peace, it was serene to hear his little facts about the stars as they came to him, Bill's excited tone making his pulse rabbit, and it was somewhat disappointing when it tapered off. It left Dipper to his thoughts that were irrefutably about Bill.

The silence didn't lend itself to awkwardness between them anymore, but it was still unsatisfying because for once in his life, Dipper wanted to fill it with discussion. Practicality could take a hike, he yearned to talk for the sole reason of learning more about Bill, even listening to his voice.

Stealing Bill's hand in his own, Dipper rolled on top of him with sudden interest, slotting their legs to fit comfortably. "...So, uh, if you had a single opportunity to save and reload in your life, what would it be?" he asked, borrowing from Mabel's compilation of 'second date' conversation starters.
Bill hesitated, jaw working while he glanced away. “My... dog that I didn’t nearly breed enough. I could’ve had an army of Marigolds.”

Curiosity glinting in his eye, Dipper pressed, "What? Come on, that's not what you'd redo. There has to be something more personal."

“He was such a stud,” Bill insisted. “Could’ve had more golden babies."

"That's your only regret in life? Yeah, no," he said, clearly disbelieving as he hung onto the end of the word, "I don't believe you. I'll tell you mine if you tap into that fish-saving heart of yours and share something real."

“I did share something real.”

Dipper corrected, "Shallow."

“You're being awfully pushy, Pine Tree.”

"I prefer the word 'inquisitive'," Dipper replied. "but this works two ways. So in that case, my redo moment would be..." he searched his memories for something lame, "trying on a V-neck tee. I should have walked out of that Macy's."

"Seems gay enough to fit you."

"Nah, Mabel said it wasn't my style, and she was right. I'll stick to plaid and jeans, so I never have to go shopping again."

His mind drifted to the unfulfilled question, the genuine regrets of Bill's life that he guarded with an iron will, debating if it was worth reviving to see if he could elicit less superficial participation.

Before he could, Bill was speaking: “So this V-neck tee. I’d like to see you in one.”

"Oh, uh… no. That's definitely a no. Any other fashion suggestions?"

“No clothes at all?"

Blushing hotly, his gaze darted as he struggled to sputter out something more than unintelligible nonsense, flustered by the response. "Wow, I... I thought you'd ask me to, I don't know, wear lingerie or something," he finally said with an anxious laugh, tugging at his collar. "But that's uh, an idea. Noted. Duly noted."

“Hey, we can do both,” Bill offered. “Lingerie followed by the delight of your warm skin against mine. It’d be amazing, like you.” Dipper's eyes went wide, and an involuntary squeak escaped at the romantic nature of the comment paired with how… incredibly specific it was. Heat rising to his face once more, he backed off slightly and rubbed his arm.

His throat felt like sandpaper, mind spinning in a cycle of uncertainty, apprehension, and tentative concupiscence. "I..."

Bill cleared his throat. “The stars are nice.”

"Yeah, they're…” Dipper was blanking on everything he'd ever known. "They're nice."

“I wish we could see Orion,” Bill said. “Rigel A is another one of my favorites, despite its color. It shines the brightest in the sea of darkness, and you can’t view the companion stars from this distance, that’s how big and bright it is. It’s extraordinary how we can see them when they’re light
And in that moment, the stars weren't the only entities that happened to be light years away. Dipper's thoughts might as well have joined them, no longer focused on the conversation but on how Bill talked of astronomy, his initially-measured but growing carefree smile, the elevation of passion in his voice and charming confidence. It made his heart quicken, and there wasn't a chance that the crimson color of his cheeks would be fading anytime soon, considering what'd preceded this.

The progressively-troubling notion of being more than physically attracted to Bill wasn't helping either, but he refused to indulge it. Every ounce of mustered effort funneled toward distracting himself with his allure, not Bill’s compassion or his endearingly charismatic humor, nor the leap in his own heart whenever he saw him or how easy it was—how right it felt—to simply be with Bill.

Chapter End Notes

Also, sorry for any mistakes- this week's been tiring and we're exhausted. Thank you for being patient with us <3
When Stan had discovered they'd been camping without him, reparations were underway and fulfilled in an outing to the beach. Polite invitations were secondary to a voicemail that gave a date and time followed by a "you're going whether ya like it or not." While Mabel was ecstatic, Dipper didn't mind, a Tuesday afternoon and evening spent with his cousins, his sister, and his Bill sounded fine. It was better than ruminating on his imperfect grades in his dorm indefinitely.

In Stan's car, there wasn't time to ruminate, much less focus on anything because there was a constant conversation. At first, it'd been stiff with Bill and Mabel but had eased, a tentative friendliness taking shape in what seemed like a truce.

"...put the herbs on your head."

Tuning in, the nonsensical snippet snagged Dipper's attention. "What?"

Stan repeated it, "We're almost there, but there's a curve up ahead. What, do ya have bees in your brain? It's like ya can’t hear with all the buzzing."

"No, it's not that," he defended himself but the issue was precisely that, he'd been trapped in his thoughts again. "It's... it's really hard to hear, okay?" And it was, to an extent. With the top down on Stan's "trusty" red convertible, the wind made it more difficult for discussion at a normal volume.

“Yeah, if this damn top wasn’t down it’d be a hell of a lot easier!” Stan looked at Bill as he spoke, and Bill loudly scoffed.

"Oh, please," Ford replied over the noise, "if you had the top up, we'd be stuck listening to your music from the sixties because 'it fits her' or whatever nonsense you conjure to defend your car and your musical tastes."

Mabel piped in, "Also, you said you didn't know how to get the top down."

“Exactly, Shooting Star. It’s not my fault I know how this car works, Stan.”

It was Ford's turn to shoot Bill a dirty look. "That's not to say I approve. If this vehicle happens to flip—and it may, with Stanley behind the wheel—I'm not convinced seatbelts will ensure our safety."

“I’m sorry Fordsy, we’re not wasting money on a soccer mom’s minivan so you can feel ‘safe.’” Calling Ford a 'soccer mom' was more fitting than usual, considering he'd been reading a guide on beaches and scribbling in a notebook most of the ride. He'd voiced intentions to continue at the beach by studying the various shells.

"I wouldn't stress over it if the six-foot-one guy isn't worried. Bill's head is thick enough that he'll
probably take the impact for everyone." Playfully, he prodded Bill's arm, noting the lack of a blazer. It was just his undershirt and suspenders tonight, but then he caught sight of the missing article pooled on Bill's lap. That reminded him of the inward mini competition between him and Bill: who could stand the Californian heat with the most clothes staying on, two people bound to hide their soulmarks from each other (and one merely liking plaid shirts too much.)

Stan snorted, smacking the steering wheel. “Ya bet his skull can take the impact for us! Have ya seen it? It’s thicker than Ford’s.”

“My skull has a normal thickness,” objected Bill, his glance sending butterflies through Dipper. “Besides, even if it was thick enough, I’d duck and let Fordsy take the hit.” Dipper couldn't determine if Ford heard that and chose to move his face closer to the text as if to demonstrate how he wouldn't theoretically sacrifice himself, or if being an inch away from the words was standard.

Shrugging, Dipper said, "I guess it's up to me. It's statistically unlikely that I'd survive another severe wreck, though." He was only half-joking.

Mabel stiffened beside him, mouth closing and tightening, a reminder of how admittedly morbid the comment was. The others were forgotten as he gazed at her, expression softening. "Hey, I… didn't mean that. Are you okay?” he asked, hushed.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “Give me a second.”

"I'm sorry," Dipper blurted, chewing the inside of his cheek. Mabel knew sarcasm was his method of managing the rougher chapters of his life, but he recognized it'd been too far.

Talking about the accident and aftermath was difficult but doable, particularly tough for Mabel. It was an ironic twist since she hadn't been injured or hospitalized, but she'd seen it. Everything. And Dipper didn't want to make it harder. "Is there…” he trailed off when he didn't know what to ask, instead simply holding her hand as she leaned closer and rested her head against his shoulder, sighing softly.

“It’s okay, Dipper. Don’t worry about me.”

Yeah, sure. He’d just turn his thoughts off.

“Hey, we’re here! Get out.” They were stopped in a sandy, paved parking lot with a few other vehicles. The beach was splashed in orange-red of the sinking sun, people playing by the water and near the sand, none brave enough to swim in the chillier weather. Others lingered around the cluster of shops nearby, touristy establishments with a juice bar and restaurant overlooking the ocean.

"Are you ready to go?” Dipper asked, the question directed at Mabel.

“Yeah,” she said as she sat up, taking in the view. Bill and Stan were gone, meanwhile Ford was lagging behind in his quest to observe what the beach had to offer.

Despite her request, he was concerned and lingering discomfort painted his voice even as he changed the subject, "What do you want to do? I was thinking of chilling on the beach while there's still daylight.” Afternoon was winding to a close, evening at its heels.

Mabel nodded. "I'll be snapping some pictures later when the sun is actually setting. But for now, let's check it out. Ready, Dipper?”

Exiting after her, he said, "Sure, let's go."
Dipper walked down to the beach with Mabel by his side as they sought a sunnier spot among the beachgoers and their towels, hearing surf rock music from a stereo stationed in the volleyball court. It was funny, ridiculously Hollywood's version of California, but he liked it all the same. Once they tired, he figured they could pretend to be clueless tourists in one of the many shops along the oceanfront.

"How about here?" he asked as they reached a more secluded area, away from the bustle of the others gathered on the beach or filtering through seaside stores.

"Works for me!" Mabel threw the giant blanket onto the sand for them to sit atop.

"I can text everyone and tell them we have a spot over here. Any idea where Stan and Bill went?" They'd left in a rush and he hadn't picked them from the crowd enjoying the beach, but they had to be here somewhere.

"Oh," Mabel shrugged. "They're probably chasing ladies and trying to get some digits."

He grimaced. "We need to get a leash or something for them. What happened to Stan's... lady friend anyway? Susan, that waitress at the diner?"

"She was into him, but he started ghosting her. Wouldn't answer her calls, hid when she came to his apartment." Picturing Stan trying to make a dive for behind the couch or shutting himself in his room was equally sad and funny. "The whole shebang. So she gave up."

"She triggered his aversion to commitment," Dipper concluded, locating the two. Bill was chatting with three women, expression cocky and posture straightened, while Stan was as slouchy as ever but seemed to be doing alright with them. "Honestly, I hope people looking for something serious stay away from him." That was until one seemed to get offended, throwing her drink into Stan's face. Leaving Stan wiping his face with his sleeve, Bill was being led to the juice bar by the ladies.

"They'd be disappointed," Mabel agreed. "He'll keep running from them."

"He should've run a bit sooner. That one threw her drink at him, I'm pretty sure. Think he's alright...?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "He might want some water to clean off the juice." Stan was stumbling back to Ford, wiping at his face.

Dipper shrugged and started to get up, ignoring the warning from his legs that he shouldn't be changing positions repeatedly, he'd have to choose one and stick with it lest the soreness become more apparent."I don't have any water, but we can see if he needs anything."

Scaling the beach with Mabel, Dipper watched as she went ahead to call to them, drawing the brothers' attention. By the time he arrived on the scene, some of the juice had been cleared, but there was still a fruity scent in the air and Stan's complaints of stickiness.

"Now you know how I felt on prom night," Ford huffed as he straightened the ends of Stan's white shirt. "Getting a drink thrown at your face, and not by your own volition."

"I didn’t deserve that! I was bein' a real stand up guy," he declared, motioning to himself. "Women. They don’t know class. What am I gonna do, Ford? It’s fuckin’ drying on me."

"At least you smell nice for once...?" Dipper smiled faintly, persisting under Stan's glare.

"Wash it off using the ocean water? But be careful," Mabel suggested, and Stan grumbled but
heeded the advice, stepping to the ocean. That prompted Mabel to add, "Like, don't get it in your eyes."

Shucking his shirt, he threw it into the sand and began to splash water on his face and chest. "Women are complicated, they won’t even loan me five bucks."

"Is that why she threw the drink at you?" he asked flatly, trailing after. "You asked her for money?" Dipper, actively a bad flirter and terrible at expressing himself, knew better than that.

"Stanley, we've been over why that is not a viable pick up line," Ford reminded.

Exasperated, Mabel shook her head. “I can’t believe you tried to get money from her. No wonder she threw her drink at you— I would’ve too.” At Stan’s displeasure, she shrugged. “Sorry, Stan. It’s true. Ladies don’t like it when you panhandle.”

“I don’t need her stinkin’ money, because there's charm coming outta my ears. Ford, do ya see more chicks? I got a question for ‘em.” Stan had moved away from the water, soaked shirt hugging his bulky frame, while Ford rushed after with a string of ’Stanley’s and ‘what do you think you're doing?’. To them, he prompted, “Come on, use your eyes! Operation: Find A Chick is in action.”

“I’m not going to help you harass woman, Stan,” Mabel said. “That sounds like a bad time. Maybe worse than getting the saltwater in your eyes.”

Dipper asked, "Should I preemptively call the police?" It didn't seem like Stan was finding anyone, most with friends or unapproachable. Soon, he'd probably give up and sulk, maybe try to squeeze a free drink out of the juice bar. It helped that Ford was hovering over his shoulder, undoubtedly giving an essay on how this was a dumb idea.

“Let’s wait. I don’t want to bother them if Stan’s not going through with it.”

"Yeah, looks like he's realized this isn't going to work." Stan was winding down, taking a seat near where their blanket was spread. "Want to join them? I was going to," he glanced over his shoulder at the juice bar where Bill was sitting on a stool between two ladies, both leaned toward him with interest while he mimed what appeared to be a wild tale, "see what Bill's up to, but I think he's busy."

“Sure,” Mabel said. “If you want to go to Bill, I’m not going to stop you.”

"If I do and they leave, Bill would claim I ruined his chances with his new girlfriends." Then again, that might not be a bad idea since Bill didn't need the ego stroke of two women fawning over him.

Corners of her mouth lifting, Mabel snickered. “Sounds like him. I’m not sure how great his chances are, given what happened to Stan. Bill’s not much better.”

"I feel like there's a pretty big difference between the two. Stan asked for money, Bill… honestly may have also asked for money. I mean, that's what he did to me when we first met," Dipper joked but knew that hadn't been flirting. Probably.

Sparing another peek at the trio, it seemed the ladies may have been exchanging numbers with him and dispersing, which meant he wouldn't be interrupting anything. "As his possible soulmate, it's basically my job to ruin his chances with everyone else. Maybe I will go over there." Now that it wouldn't matter.

Mabel's fingers brushed his wrist in a gentle warning, her eyes searching his. “Are you sure you
want to be more involved with him, Dipper? Bill’s an okay friend, like— I had some doubts and still sort of do, but he seems decent. I wouldn’t get too cozy with him, because what if he takes you seriously?"

About to respond, the words dissolved when he noticed he'd misjudged the scene. The women weren't leaving Bill, as indicated by his departure from the juice bar with them, an arm around each of their waists. Although not envious by nature, that was a little sickening for Dipper and made his stomach do a queasy flip.

"Yeah, you're right. I don't want to date him," he said, but it was distant. "I mean, I don't think I do, and it's not like either of us are into soulmates so I'm not depriving him of it or anything." It'd become slightly rambly near the end but he brushed off the thought, urging Mabel into a brisk walk as they returned. Ford was sketching a shell in his journal, Stan whining about having an off-his-game day.

When he plopped onto the towel, he mindlessly picked at the threads, lost in thoughts until he realized Mabel was staring. "Hey, are you okay? You seem… spacy. Beep boop!" She poked him in the side. "...Is it about Bill? I didn’t think him hitting on some girls would bother you."

"Bothers me," Stan grunted, interjecting himself into the discussion which Dipper didn't mind in the least, as it gave him time to form a more plausible response than shaky denials. "Ya see him out there? Bill's scaring off all my ladies."

"Yeah, no. He's... I'm pretty sure he's not scaring them off." But Dipper didn't need visual confirmation, it would only irritate him. To Mabel, he said, "But I'm okay. It's really not a big deal, and it doesn't bother me. It's sort of weird, I think? That he might be..." He'd been about to say it casually, but it occurred to him that Stan and Ford were unaware, the possibly-matching soulmark a secret between him and Mabel. Clearing his throat, Dipper gauged her expression, reassured when she nodded in encouragement. "That he might be my soulmate, and is flirting with the entire beach."

Stan broke into a fit of coughing. "He's what?" he demanded. "When did ya find that out?"

"What?" Ford withdrew from his book, visibly intrigued. "What's going on?"

"Bill and I are maybe soulmates," Dipper explained but kept his voice quieted, even if Ford didn't acknowledge that courtesy with the astonished squawk that erupted from him. "I said maybe. I don't know yet, and I don't need to find out. But uh, September. That's when we met, and he said... well, you guys know what my mark is."

"Why didn't ya tell us sooner? Who else knows? Have you told Bill?" Stan’s questions rattled off, fists clenching. "That son of a bitch, first he steals my ladies, now he’s tryna steal my cousin."

Dipper held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, hey. I'm not being stolen by anyone, especially not Bill —"

"Focus, Dipper. As Stanley was asking—"

"I didn't tell you guys because it wasn't like I was going to act on it. I'm still not. As for who knows about it... Us four, plus Wendy and Robbie. Nobody else. I wasn't going to tell him either, since he might freak out."

"You know it’s safe with me," Mabel said, clasping his shoulder.

"Might," Ford repeated as if it was the joke of the century, but with no accompanying laugh
because it was Ford and he was too refined for that. "He most certainly will. I believe his approach to soulmates has been avoiding his."

Stan nodded. "The guy fuckin’ hates soulmates, why’d he get paired with ya? You’d have better luck pickin’ up one of these chicks."

"Maybe that's the thing," he suggested, shrugging. "We might have been paired together because we're not that interested in it, so... he doesn't have to worry, and we can be with other people." Like Bill was doing, Dipper thought but swallowed the rigid sigh. He knew it was irrational to be peeved when he'd made no indication that Bill should restrict flirting to him.

"Uh huh, ya can keep tellin’ yourself that, but it doesn’t mean it’s true. Kid, don’t let your guard down around him, or you’ll be smitten and he’ll run off with more beach chicks."

"Are you going to be okay with this?" Mabel asked him. "You weren’t happy when he walked off with those girls."

"I'm not smitten!" Dipper insisted, protesting the notion. When the response ranged from uncertainty to dubiousness, a joyless laugh barked from him, amused how the one with a blank mark seemed to believe in the power of fate and soulmarks more than he did. "Seriously, I'm not. Like I said, it was awkward because we're friends and he's… y’know, not hanging out with us. It's not a problem."

"It sounded more awkward that you were ‘maybe soulmates’ and he was off with chicks.” Mabel knew him too well, her insight treeing him, and he nervously brushed a hand through his hair.

"There's that too but it's not like I want to be the chicks in that scenario. It's more like… seeing an ex with someone after breaking up." Granted, he didn't have any of those. But Stan and Mabel did, so they could hopefully understand what he was going for. "You're not in love with them, you don't want them back, but it's weird."

Stan waved a dismissive hand. “Nah, those bitches can enjoy any sucker they get after me. They’re at a loss, kid. Missin’ out on the ol' Stan-love."

"Well, uh, I imagine Thistle Downe or whatever that guy's name is appreciates your generous… donation?" Dipper wasn't sure what he should say to that, but he'd heard enough about the Stan-Carla-Thistle drama to know it was a sore memory.

“She was a hand-me-down,” Stan said, though the bitterness in his voice suggested otherwise. “He was just gettin’ seconds, y’know? It doesn’t matter."

Although he wanted to restate his point about Bill to ensure it was ingrained in everyone's mind, Dipper allowed the subject to drop because Mabel was sprawled over the towel, her eyes closed in relaxation. Stan continued to scope out the beach, eventually convincing Ford to join him. That left Dipper to his own devices. Literally, under the circumstances, since he had his phone and was browsing various Internet rabbitholes. That could only entertain him for so long, and he texted Bill.

(5:04 PM) Where are you?

It was a valid question, he hadn't seen Bill in a while but assumed he couldn't have traveled far. The mental image of Bill dining with his new women stirred uneasiness.

(5:05 PM) Too busy having a threesome with your lady friends to reply?

(5:05 PM) I'm heartbroken.
**what’s up?**

Hey man. I haven't seen you. Is everything alright?

**i’m fine, probably won’t be around for a bit**

That was good enough for Dipper, confirming his assumption: Bill was too busy impressing his companions to be with them, but he didn't mind. Unlike before, when he'd seen the three of them laughing and having the time of their lives, this didn't spark any particular negative feeling beyond annoyance.

Besides, he had his best friend right here. Dipper set his phone down to flop next to Mabel and give her an affectionate nudge, which was reciprocated with a grin.

“Were you texting Bill?” she asked, flicking sand onto his knee, and he watched it tumble off.

Nodding, he said, "Yeah. I was making sure he was still doing fine since we haven't seen him in like, an hour and a half." Moving his cognitions from Bill, he said, "I'm glad you managed to get today off to come with us. It wouldn't have been the same without you." Lonely, really. Everyone was occupied: Ford exploring, Bill and his ladies, Stan in a volleyball game with college students.

She smiled. “I’m glad too. It’s nice having some time to hang out with you guys and finally relax for once. I missed this.”

Dipper let that sit between them for a few moments, but he had missed this too, being able to spend evenings with Mabel, with Stan and Ford. With basically whoever, no constraints of time and jobs and schoolwork to think of — it made him want to groan.

Eager to distract himself, Dipper considered the volleyball game. "I bet you could beat all of them if you joined," he said, dipping his head toward the volleyball-playing crew.

“Oh yeah,” Mabel said. “I’m going to kick some butts in a minute or two. They won’t know what hit them when the whirlwind of Mabel takes over.”

"If you wear Stan down enough, he might get hungry and buy us something. I was looking at the reviews for those places," he jammed a thumb in the direction of the small food and drink venues with touristy ones mixed in, "and it sounds like there's a good sandwich shop. Not too pricey, either."

Brightening, she said, “I am getting hungry… I could challenge him to a competition. Loser pays for food.”

"Evil," he teased. "Are you going to at least humor him?"

“I’ll humor him with these bad boys,” she responded, feigning a flex to indicate her muscles.

"Don't make him too bitter," he warned, "because you won't be able to enjoy your sandwich if he's telling you about what a hunky stud he was five years ago, and how he could've totally won back in his prime."

That brought Mabel into a giggling fit. “He doesn’t even know what ‘prime’ means. Five years ago, he was in the same state he’s in now.”

Stan and Mabel facing off in volleyball was a joy to watch, and listen to for that matter. To
say Stan gave it his all would be an understatement with how he worked for that win, shouts of vague threats directed at the net and the ball more than the opponents. Ultimately, he had lost, but Dipper and Mabel conceded to pay for their own sandwiches since Stan had been a riot to observe. And in Mabel's case, wage a veritable volleyball-war against him, as he kept slipping in hints of a rematch while they ate.

Afterward, they'd returned to the beach and were relaxing with contented smiles and full bellies. Mabel was launching her photography campaign, Ford had taken a break to collect rocks and shells, Stan tailing him and munching on a bag of chips as he chatted through the mouthfuls.

No sign of Bill, until he received a text:

(6:20 PM) hey pine tree

(6:20 PM) Hi Casanova.

(6:20 PM) where're you at? the lovely women are gone

(6:20 PM) Looking to fill the void? I'm not going to be your second (third?) best after those ladies.

(6:21 PM) come on, tell me where you are

(6:21 PM) I'm with the others, actually on the beach. Do you know where that is? I don't think you've been here all day.

(6:22 PM) yeah, i know where the beach is, but where are you on it?

(6:22 PM) With the others, I think we've been over this.

Antagonizing him had become a default pastime since a fair dose came back around via Bill and his crude comments, but Dipper wasn't foolish, he knew Bill's patience didn’t extend forever.

(6:22 PM) Before you get grumpy, we're on the south side by the rocks. Near the vehicle.

When there was no reply immediately, he added:

(6:25 PM) Are you almost here, or a slower walker than I am?

“Or I’m behind you,” Bill spoke in amusement-laced words, and Dipper leaned back, head tilted up as he gracefully fell against Bill's legs. “You should pay more attention to your surroundings.”

"I wasn't expecting you to come from the road. What were you doing over there?" Maybe it wasn't that unexpected. If he'd been in the shops, he likely had taken the sidewalk route to them.

Bill shrugged off the question and said, “What’re you doing over here, sugar? I figured you guys would be closer to the water. This is a beach, after all.”

Leaning forward again, he dragged the scent of saltwater through his lungs. They didn't need to be closer. "Don't pass judgment on us, you weren't anywhere near the water. Running off with two strangers for the afternoon isn't a day at the beach with friends." Although he stuck to what he'd said about not being jealous, he was a touch bitter because the Pines had stayed together primarily, yet there was a significant lack of Bill.

“Hey, those ladies were classy. Up until they refused to do certain things on the beach and left me.”
"What a tragedy. Your tears over not getting laid can join the ocean. Are you going to sit down or not? Standing behind me is making me nervous, it's kind of weird."

Complying, Bill took a seat beside him and stretched out. “It's less about getting laid, more about how my fantasy was rejected.”

Half-reassuringly and half-jokingly, Dipper pressed into Bill's side to illustrate his sympathy. "Gotta work up to that, y'know? You can't spring it on a stranger, you have to court them and romance them and take them on dates, then you bring in the wild bedroom stuff."

“I was romantic, but I'm not courting them. I'm saving that.” Bill flicked at the sand by his feet, and Dipper fought the urge to ask if he was saving it for his soulmate, the traditional courtship partner. Outdated as a concept, the formality of courting still lingered for soulmates. “Ah, I can’t get beach sex out of my head, Pine Tree.”

Nose wrinkling, he couldn't picture that going well. "Sounds uncomfortable." He dusted a patch of sand, sending the grains trickling down the fabric of Bill's slacks and settling onto the beach again, a vague demonstration of his point.

“It’s more comfy than you’d think,” Bill said quietly, in thought. “We could do it on the towel, or in the back of a car, it doesn’t matter. I could run my hand up your thighs, grind against you.”

"Whoa, wait. Are you— I think you're saying this like it's you and me. If you wanted me to do the freaky beach sex with you, you probably shouldn't have spent your time with those women today.”

When Dipper punctuated his statement with a playful nudge delivered to Bill's ribcage, Bill glanced at him, inspecting. “What, are you against totally normal beach sex? We could grind, get you all excited and wet…”

"I'm not getting in the water."

“I was referring to precum, actually.”

Eyebrows raised and with pupils as wide as saucers, Dipper reared back from him and nearly toppled over from the force of the motion, stammering and sputtering as it registered. A warmth bloomed on his cheeks, but it wasn't from the moderate weather. "Oh, wow, uh… Jesus Christ," were the first semi-comprehensible words he managed to utter, a heavy rush of air spilling from him while he clutched his arm, kept his head bowed. And the thought of what Bill had planned, theoretically, it…

It was getting to him.

So he cleared his throat and simultaneously tried to clear his mind of envisioning it, the hypothesizing of what they would be like together, intimately, on the beach.

"That's what you were going to do?" he asked, observing the waves crashing upon the shore for something to preoccupy himself with. "That's a shame they weren't interested."

“I know, right? I was looking forward to it. I want to touch, and feel, and I want to be close to someone as we reach our peak together.”

"Don't be bringing me into this,” he warned at 'our', though it was a struggle to maintain a nonchalantly teasing tone when he was still very much flustered. "You already decided you would rather have a stranger than your super amazing shadow-grader."
“Oh, but it’s not my fault you’re enticed by the idea.” Bill reached over to stroke Dipper’s knee, and he chewed his lip at the touch, debating. “You want to, sugar.”

Hand clamping over Bill's, he gave a gentle squeeze to deter it, then he placed his hand onto the sand between them. "Not going to be your second choice, dude." The sole time Bill had seemingly wanted him was a little drunk and a lot overtired while dating someone else; beyond that, signals of want waned.

“Come on, Pine Tree. You’d love being pinned against the towel, your thighs caressed—your body aching for more.”

Staring like a deer in the headlights, Dipper couldn't discern why the women were supposedly extended romantic gestures, however Bill couldn't seem to muster the energy for him. Either he took his companionship for granted, his take on romance was descriptions of physical intimacy, or he was kidding about this. The latter seemed the least stressful, so he tried to convince himself that was reality.

While unsure what to say, it seemed fate was in his favor because Stan's rumble resounded behind them. "Thinkin' of heading out soon before them flower-puking hippie types hit the beach, so—"

"We're already here," Dipper pointed out, a pinch strained from the preceding conversation. "So I'm gonna get ‘er started. I told Mabel we'd be leaving in a few, and I'm sure once Ford hears the sound of my girl's engine, he'll come runnin' over." Stan disappeared toward the parking lot, leaving him and Bill alone once again in the silence. There was a distant bird’s cry and the rhythmic noise of the ocean, but it was peaceful.

Almost.

Bill grumbled, seemingly annoyed by the interruption. “I hope the sound of ‘his girl’s engine’ is followed by it dying, because that’d be fucking funny.”

"Funny until you have to hitchhike with some huge sweaty guy to West Coast Tech." But more realistically, he assumed they'd have to call friends for an emergency lift.

Looking puzzled, confusion faded into an arrogant smile. “Why hitch a ride? We can fix the stupid car here.”

"If the engine's dead?" he asked. "I don't know much about cars, but I figured that one would take a bit more than some amateur mechanic… hammering it."

“You’re underestimating us,” Bill told him, yet Dipper responded with a 'hm?', perplexed. “We’re car beasts, we’ll fix that shitty car up.”

"What? I know Stan works on his car occasionally." Because he had to, otherwise it would've been broken down on the side of the road ten years ago. "I didn't realize you knew anything about cars, aside from demanding unnecessary paint jobs from poor college students."

“Oh, fuck off about that. We rearranged another form of payment, and yes, I know about cars. I keep mine in pristine condition, too.”

Dubious, he rolled his eyes since taking it to a dealership or his family's personal mechanic was hardly something to take credit for. "Stan actually works on his car, though. He refuses to take it anywhere, just buys replacement parts and swaps them himself. It helps that the car is ancient, so everything can be done without a professional."
“You know I’ve worked on his car before, right?” Dipper's disbelief thickened, skepticism awaiting Bill to backpedal and minimize. "And I can change out oil and fluids on my own. I don’t need to go to a dealership."

"Sure,” he said, but his tone suggested suspicion. "Maybe you should've told the ladies you moonlight as a mechanic right after you were done with all that romancing. They might've liked that and sucked your dick or something. I would've— y'know, if you'd spent the day with me."

“You could’ve joined me with the ladies any time, Pine Tree.”

"I guess I wanted to spend the day with people who…” he swiveled to bring Stan and Ford into his sight, Mabel snapping pictures of Stan kicking the tire of his car while shouting obscenities muted by separation, "care about me? I know that sounds stupid, but I mean, like, not random hookups that won't remember my name in an hour."

“Please, we could make them remember our names forever. You need to get out there, give it a chance.” An arm circled his waist to draw him near, and Dipper relaxed, resting his head on Bill's shoulder.

"Thanks, man," he said through a chuckle. "Real confidence boost, but I'm pretty sure the only reason they'd remember my name is because I'm exceptionally awkward. And because they'd tell their friends to stay away from me unless they want an experience best described as… I don't know, 'badly paced' and 'sweaty - not in a good way.'" Had Bill never met him? He didn't see himself as a ladies' man, a type that could get women or… satisfy them. Well, that was a weird thought verging on uncomfortable. "Uh, the point is, I wasn't looking for one night stands or anything."

“You’re missing out, doll.” Bill sighed, looking to Stan, Ford, and Mabel. “We should probably join them, huh?”

Humming an agreement, he said, "You heard Stan. The 'flower-puking hippie' crowd is going to be here soon, unless that's the type you're hoping to get it on with.” Dipper rose to his feet and brushed the sand from his cargo pants, then offered Bill a hand, which he took as he stood.

“I mean, I’ve been looking at you. There isn't a big difference." Bill didn't drop his hand, instead intertwining their fingers to pull him toward the others. "Come on, cutie. Maybe you’ll be more willing to have some fun in the back of Stan's car while he’s… what, kicking the tire?"

"Like I was saying earlier, this flower-kissing tree-hugger isn't really into hookup culture." But he had a feeling Bill wasn't serious so he didn't dwell on the simple explanation, swapping his attention to Stan's car. "Yeah, looks like he finished the tire-kicking ritual, now he's onto calling it a 'piece of junk' and slamming his fists on the hood. Must not be starting for him." It wasn't unusual.

Approaching, Bill released his grip and broke into a jog while Dipper scrambled to catch up, then slowed as Bill halted beside Stan to peer at the vehicle. “What’d you do, stick your dick in the exhaust? Stan, you know fucking cars doesn't prolong their life.”

Dipper reassuringly patted Stan's shoulder as he walked by, lifting onto his heels to see what was going on under the hood since it was propped up. As he walked on, he affectionately jabbed, "Maybe he's hoping to make a new one since he can't afford to buy it."

“Shut yer yaps,” Stan snapped. “The fuckin’ thing ain’t starting, and the only one stickin’ their dick in anything was Bill with those chicks he stole.”
Perching on a large rock overlooking their work, Dipper sat with his knees up, arms hugging them loosely. "Yeah, I don't think he got very far with them, if it's any consolation." With the sun moving underneath the horizon line, he squinted to scan for Mabel and saw a figure holding a phone to capture a panoramic shot. Probably Mabel capturing photos for her Instasnapbook or whatever it was, an enigma to Dipper who didn't keep any social media presence.

"Hey," Bill began to object. "I got plenty far with them, don't fucking—"

"What, did they ditch ya, Bill?" Stan's laughter boomed. "Serves ya right!!"

"They didn't fucking ditch me, unlike you. What happened to the ladies you tried to pick up?"

"What are ya talkin’ about? I was with Ford—"

"He's talking about the ones that dumped juice on you."

"Shut it, kid." Although he fell quiet, Dipper's cheeky smile didn't lie.

Slapping a hand on the vehicle, Bill burst into laughter. "They dumped JUICE on you? Wow, no wonder you're so sour. You wiped the sweetness away when you washed it off."

Stan was ready to retort, but Dipper had stopped paying attention, noting Mabel's wave and her brisk dash over. "Dipper!" Patting the spot beside him, Dipper scooted so she could join him on the overhang. "What's going on? Did Stan fix the car yet?"

"Not yet," he reported, "but I think they're working on it between arguing over who's game is better. Want to watch? It's kind of funny." They were still bickering, slinging half-hearted insults as they sifted through what was under the hood. Unheated jabs intended to knock each other down a few pegs, their ultra masculine dick-waving contest a show of camaraderie over resentment.

As Mabel settled in, he listened as she described her photography session and the filters she'd applied, genuinely sort of intrigued. Despite her hesitance, Mabel was talented; he enjoyed evaluating the different shots that she'd taken, but more than that enjoyed how she seemed to ooze excitement talking about it. Crafts, scrapbooking, photography, art in general — she was passionate, and Dipper was glad she shared it with him.

The first hour had been okay, the next thirty minutes were a little trying, but the thirty minutes beyond that were the worst. Whenever he, Mabel, or Ford would suggest calling someone to tow the car, give them a ride, or actually fix the thing, Stan and Bill would shut it down with a couple words of how they "almost" got it.

The soreness had set in hard, wracking his body until he was forced to do a lap or two around the car every fifteen minutes to ensure his legs didn't arrange a complete mutiny. The only decent aspects were talking to Mabel, the extending visit to the beach, and Ford recounting his adventures of shell-collecting.

And… there was a fourth one too, that he kept to himself. Dipper had a nice view of the car. Specifically, the shirtless Bill continuing to work on it. The tattoos were fascinating on their own, much more so in action while Bill was hunched over the hood and messing with its contents, a thin layer of sweat causing his skin to glisten, strands of slicked hair plastered on his forehead. The sight was strangely captivating and had him staring as if in a daydream from his spot on the rock.

"Earth to Dipper, can you hear me? Over."
Mabel's voice dragged him from his trance, and he looked to her, sheepishly pawing the back of his neck. "Hey, what's up? Did you, uh... hit the like goal you were hoping to?" A while ago, Mabel had uploaded her photographs from the day and expressed anxious excitement over her followers' reactions.

"Oh yeah, you bet I did, bro-bro! People loved the pictures, we should come to the beach more often. It's gorgeous out here."

"I wish we could. Or maybe it won't matter because at this rate, we're never leaving if Stan won't let us call anyone for help."

"They'll figure it out," she reassured him. "Stan's good with cars, and Bill can hand him any tool he needs."

"He told me he works on cars too. I mean, he's over there helping so it's kind of true? I'm not sure how much work he's doing." Dipper hadn't been listening in, bored with the car lingo that he didn't understand or care to learn.

Bill huffed from beneath the vehicle, a jack raising it. "I can hear you two!"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey Bill, grab me a wrench, won't ya?" Stan was clearly joking, but Bill grumbled in frustration.

"Fuck you. I should leave you to deal with this shit alone."

To be honest, Dipper hoped he did get out from under the car. It was harder to appreciate his physique from there, only sneaking glimpses from time to time, but dullness bred mischievousness. "A man who works hard and looks good doing it," he commented, loudly enough for Bill to definitely hear. "I hope my soulmate is just like you."


"Yeah," he called in agreement to the 'soulmates' part, snickering softly, "want to court me like one?" That was enough for Mabel to give him a poke in the shoulder of mild discontent, but her beam suggested she wasn't genuinely troubled by this.

"Maybe I will," Bill challenged from beneath the car. "Are you going to stop me?"

"Not a chance, man," he said, grinning widely. "You're dreamy, and I don't know why those ladies wouldn't—" recalling who they were surrounded by, he stopped short, "well, it's not important. After sufficient romancing, I hope you know I would, though."

"Is that so?" Bill sounded amused, emerging from beneath the car and strolling to the driver's side, turning the vehicle on. A collective, exhausted cheer rose as the engine roared to life, a sign they were going to be out of here before the end of time.

Unrolling his sleeves, Stan muttered, "Almost thought we'd hafta call Shermie to give us a lift in his fancy cop car."

Mabel slid from the rocks and was racing for the car door, meanwhile Dipper maneuvered himself down more carefully, passing Bill as he approached. "Sure," he said, voice lowered to avoid the others overhearing. "Add in a dash of romance to that plan of yours, and I don't think I could resist if I wanted to. I mean, look at you." The last bit was an awed whisper with redness dotting the apples of his cheeks, gaze raking over Bill from his bare chest covered in elegant tattoos to his dichromatic eyes. Splotches of grease coated his arms and the gauze, but it was still sexy.
“Oh, do you like what you see?” Bill wiggled an eyebrow at him.

Taking a seat on the hood of the vehicle to rest on his palms, Dipper replied teasingly, "If I didn't, I've wasted the last two hours of my life."

“You couldn’t keep those eyes of yours off me.”

"And deprive myself of the stunningly handsome Bill Cipher?" he questioned, clicking his tongue as he shook his head. "That's masochism."

“You know what’s masochism? Being forced to admire a cute little Pine Tree like yourself from a distance. There is no one else who’s captured my attention like you have.” A sharp intake of breath was Dipper's first reflex, his second being a string of analyzing, picking the pieces apart and matching them with possibilities. Anything resembling Bill truly meaning that was discarded among the impossible, the pile of outcomes produced by wishful thinking.

There was no way, the odds were stacked against him.

Hardly acknowledging it, sensory input echoed in one ear and out the other. "Yeah, yeah, that's enough. Can ya quit chit-chatting and admire him on the way home?" Stan called and honked the horn. Around him, the world shifted as Bill joined the others, claiming the passenger’s seat.

“Are you coming, sugar?”

Pulled into reality once more, Dipper mumbled a flustered "uh, yes" and climbed into the backseat, legs feeling like gelatin about to liquify under his weight. Although Stan's comment about admiring had been addressed to Bill, Dipper couldn't imagine doing anything else for the remainder of the drive.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

No comment replies yet since the cowriters aren't together to do them. Thanks Chocolate_is_key, Jaylafer, Acewolf, Piqued Penguin, Frost2098, Moonglisten, Pontus, MamMothFerre, AO3privacyisshit, OwlThisWorld, wetsock, WanderingWorldWarrior, and theLunarWarrior! Your comments are so very appreciated & we'll respond before next week's chapter! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Can’t wait to get some grub,” Stan said as he and Dipper crossed the street to the campus’ main science building. It was packed with a swarm of students on the lawn, surrounded by multi-colored flags, tables, and stands. Sounds of music and rippling plastic rose over the wind. “Better be free, I ain’t paying for this overpriced carnival crap.”

"The food is free, since it's backed by the student government. The rest isn't." Observing Stan thoughtfully, he said, "You know, this is for students, not cheap old grumps." Contrasting Dipper's indifference to the fall festival, Mabel had wanted to attend, ever a fan of social events. People, games, and food were her lifeblood, and work deprived her of time to pursue it. In her absence, Stan had taken him to therapy and upon returning to West Coast Tech, realized there was food for the taking.

“Are they checkin' IDs? I’ll use Ford’s, we look close enough.” Stan scratched his chin, scouting the food displays.

"You have Ford's ID with you?" But then again, he tended to mysteriously have it whenever there was food to inhale, though he hadn't thought Stan planned for this one.

Winking, Stan's hand ghosted over his pocket, then did a thumbs-up as he clicked his tongue. Dipper merely stared and started walking away, yet he could hear Stan puffing to catch up. “What do ya wanna do first, kid? I’m thinkin’ hit the hot dogs and fried pickles.”

"I don't know," he said. "I didn't even know this was happening until Mabel was sad about missing it this morning. Maybe they have cotton candy?"

"Ya want cotton candy? Let’s get stuffed on it."

"Hey, I don't need much. I don't really want to be puking up pink and blue in an hour from now." What a lame story that would be too. Overstuffing on cotton candy at a university-hosted event surrounded by well-behaved college students, but that also seemed uniquely him at the same time.

When he turned to Stan, Dipper wasn't surprised that he'd vanished, already in line at the cotton candy machine, and a couple steps brought Dipper behind him. "Did you hear what I said about not puking?"

“If we’re not puking our cotton candy guts out, we ain’t livin’, kid.”

"If Bill's here and happens to see that, I'm pretty sure he'll make fun of it forever and remind us at
every opportunity. Like, 'cotton candy cousins' or something." Wincing at the thought, Dipper groaned, "Oh god, that's what he's going to call us."

Of the scenario mentioned, it was unlikely that he'd engorge himself on cotton candy until he was forcefully expelling it, but rather likely that Bill would be around, a frequent face at school events. Scanning the crowd and ignoring the faster thud in his chest, the sweating of palms, Dipper didn't see anyone that resembled a tall bumblebee, but the possibility wasn't dismissed.

“Who cares? I’m here for food, not to chicken out of a good feast because I’m afraid of puking.”

"You can have fun feeling sick the rest of the night. I'm not going to be vomiting in your car, or in your apartment, or anyplace you take us.” Wherever he wound up after this, he could never tell with Stan. One minute, they'd be set to Netflix all night and the next, he'd be at a fast food drive through with Stan asking for 'as many fries as they could legally provide, and then some.'

Reaching the front of the line, he was glad the cotton candy was confirmed as free for students ("students", in Stan's case) because knowing Stan, he would've stolen it regardless. A nonexistent pricetag extinguished the immoral aspect to an extent, but was revisited when Stan hadn't asked for two servings, or three, but an incredible four for his "friends" waiting for him outside the line, significantly less truthful than Dipper getting an extra for Mabel.

“Here’s to when we're tossin' rainbows in a bit. Dig in, kid.” Stan said as they walked out of line, a large grin plastered across his face.

Raising an eyebrow at the sight of Stan devouring two of his helpings at once, Dipper asked, "Are you even going to share any of those with Ford? I only got this for Mabel." He gestured to his additional bag of cotton candy, skeptical of Stan's four.

“What Ford doesn't know won't hurt that nerd brain of his.”

Dipper's buzzing phone dragged his attention away momentarily, notifications of texts from Pacifica stacked on his screen.

(2:29 PM) The assignment due tomorrow doesn't make sense. Like, at all.

(2:29 PM) Why would he assign such plebeian busy work?

(2:30 PM) The worksheet? I thought it was pretty basic.

(2:30 PM) No wonder I don't understand it, I'm anything but basic.

(2:30 PM) Do you need help?

When he looked up, Stan was already done with one, impressive considering how overbearingly sweet it was, and he smirked at Dipper with a mouthful of dissolving pink grains. “Here's an idea: eat yours, then get a start on Mabel's. Enjoy the day for once.” That was a door better left closed because it would result in being enlisted in Stan's scamming schemes.

(2:30 PM) Immediately. You're perfect for the job.

(2:30 PM) Oh, thanks. But I'm at the fall festival.

(2:31 PM) I'll have my chauffeur drop me off shortly, and we can go to the library. There isn't any dirt, is there?
Dipper wasn't going to answer that.

"One, I have no idea how you can eat so much cotton candy. And two, remind me to never let you pick up food for me or literally anyone else because I don't think I'd ever see my food... or my money, for that matter. I'll stick to this one." As if to demonstrate, he took another mouthful of sugary regret.

"Hey! You'd see food.. maybe not the type you ordered, but the money is a finder’s fee."

"I'm not a big fan of food fished from the trash at the last minute because you ate my actual order."

After another bite, Dipper tried to wipe some of the residue from around his mouth to no avail.

"Kind of sticky too."

"Yeah, I betcha get real sticky all the time if that’s how ya eat cotton candy."

With a sideways glance and a smile, he said, "I don't have the mouth of a bass, so it's obviously going to be stickier." At least he was on the last wads of the cotton candy, and two swallows had it completely gone. "I know you're a bottomless pit, but did that satiate your hunger enough to look around?"

"I dunno," Stan said, finishing off his second one. "I’m still dyin’, kid. This shit’s too fluffy to last."

"Jesus Christ, man. Okay, uh…" Dipper searched the stands and squinted to see what might be available, inhaling the distinct scent of fried food and grease. "I think I see popcorn over there, and some type of cookies. Are you going to be able to get it, or do I have to go with you to make sure you don't take four servings again?"

"Hey, hey. I’m an opportunist, kid. Not a thief."

"I don't trust you or your five finger discounts, dude."

"Ten fingers, but that’s not the point. Look, all you’d have to do is talk to the nice worker while I swipe the food. It’s easy."

"Whoa, that's all I have to do?" Dipper asked, feigning astonishment then dropping into a flatter tone. "I'm not doing that. You're on your own, and don't steal anything. Seriously." Stan scoffed, but didn’t speak more of the matter, gazing after the food longingly.

Once they'd miraculously satisfied Stan's hunger, Dipper had thought that'd be it for their fall festival fun, but no such luck. The next stop was games, fueled by Stan's insistence on 'showing these college weenies how it's done.' He was puffing his chest up while Dipper looked on with a critical gaze. “I betcha I can win this game, first try.”

Noting the prizes of varying plushies, he pointed out, "We can drive five minutes from here and get something of the same or better quality. It'll be way cheaper too, since these things are always rigged." A logical mind was evaluating the cost of participation and came back with troubling results, yet Stan didn't falter.

Handing over a bill, Stan grabbed a ball and whirled his arm back, chucking it hard at a target.

A miss — the first of many, Dipper assumed.

Angrily, Stan huffed and tried again, his throw unforgiving. Another miss.
"Hey, don't worry about it. Like I said, these things are rigged." The student working at the game seemed displeased by his comment, and Dipper shrugged sheepishly because it probably was Stan's error, outright missing the targets, but preserving his ego would ensure they didn't have to talk about this for the rest of the day and how he 'almost had it.'

"Shh, I got this, kid." He threw a third time and hit the mark, target dinging to signify a win, and cockiness engulfed Stan's demeanor, expression, posture. "Told ya I'd win, and now I'm all warmed up. Watch me squeeze this for everythin' she's got."

Before he could reply, he was distracted by a fanfare of complaints marking Pacifica's arrival over the upbeat noise and bustle of the festival. Dipper spun on his heels in time to hear her tack on, "Why is this place so filthy? It's not even fit for dogs." Purpose in her step, she strode toward him while grimacing at the orange-black-yellow decor.

"Honestly, most people aren't nearly as deserving as dogs. But uh, hey, did you bring the assignment?"

"I have a picture of it on my phone. Where are you from, the Stone Age? You seem to be enjoying this savagery, so I wouldn’t be surprised." Pacifica's gaze traveled to Stan raising a victorious fist, and her lip curled, disgust overtaking her as if she was personally offended. "It'd be much more cost-efficient to just buy the prize."

"Yeah, I know that," Dipper asserted, then motioned toward Stan who'd begun bartering with the student volunteer for a free round, his prize—a stuffed dog—wedged under his arm. "It's this guy that needs convincing. Anyway, the assignment?"

Pacifica retrieved her phone, unlocking the screen to reveal an image of the homework, and she handed it over to him. "First, don’t get that dirty. Second, I don’t understand this question. It says — well, you can read it, can’t you? You're probably not illiterate."

Stan boomed with laughter as a winning ding resounded again. "Ha! I'm the champion of this game! Where’s my money? I deserve everything ya got from those other suckers in that register of yours."

Dipper tuned out the exchange to address the physics problem, holding a hand to see the screen in the sunlight and narrowing his eyes to read the text of a lengthy word problem. "I think this is a kinematic equation," he said after a couple seconds of examination, about to describe how to find the answer when Stan's hand was on his back, nudging him away from the game booth with urgency.

"Hey, we should scram, kid. Grab some more grub or try another game or somethin’." Stan's voice was rushed, and he didn't seem to be paying attention to him, darting between the student volunteers that'd gathered behind the stand. One had left and was beginning to approach Stan, now in the process of inching away like he was going to bolt.

Pacifica hurried after them. "Where do you think you're going with my phone?"

"Just uh, hold on a minute. Stan?" Dipper questioned, voice lowered as he shuffled to keep up with him, and he was instantly suspicious from the guilt written over Stan's features, his struggle to keep a straight face. "What's going on?"

"Hey!" The student called and grabbed his shoulder to prevent a not-so-stealthy escape, another student passing them to retrieve Stan. "That's your friend, right?" A thumb jammed in Stan's direction, displeasure in the motion.
Stan was his cousin and his friend, as lame as that might be, but Dipper didn't offer the correction. "Yeah…?"

Stan was hauled back, seemingly anything but content. “What’s goin’ on? Ya can’t hold us here. I wanna speak ta my lawyer! Right after I trick one into being mine.”

Pacifica shook her head, stepping away from them to join the crowd of approaching students. “Can you just quickly tell me how to solve this?” she pressed. "Petty thievery is a blue collar crime that I refuse to associate myself with, if that's what this is.”

Strained and pinched for time while Stan was being cornered and questioned by the staff, Dipper absentmindedly said to Pacifica, "If you can send me that, I'll text you the steps and a picture of the work, okay?" Pacifica's 'ugh' and her 'fine' weren't reassuring, but she'd disappeared into the masses.

Rejoining Stan, Dipper was fairly certain his faith in humanity died at what he witnessed: “What’s this?” The first student demanded, uncrumpling the bill Stan had given them to display a crude fake made on green construction paper. The drawing of Abraham Lincoln was the worst aspect, scribbled in sharpie with the likeness of a child. It included a lopsided tophat near the edge of the ‘bill’, rushed dollar signs, and a number ‘5’ on both sides. Dipper joined them in their annoyance as he shot Stan a look that screamed 'are-you-serious'.

“A perfectly valid form of currency!” Stan objected. “Run it through your validator machine, it’ll go through like a charm. Stanbucks are in circulation, baby.”

"What the heck, Stan? You can't do that, that's— dude!" It didn't even appear remotely close to legit.

“What?” Stan barked, and Dipper smacked a palm to his forehead, silently hoping they wouldn't end up in some snooty administrator's office. “Of course I can! They’re Stanbucks, and they’re as valid as any fancy dancy ‘U.S.’ currency. Don’t discriminate against my money jus’ because you ain’t seen it before!”

“You’re going to need to leave,” the student informed them. “Immediately, or we'll call the police. Fraudulent money isn't tolerated.”

“Oh, please! The police’re are a bunch'a pushovers. Trust me, I know one of ‘em! He’s my brother.”

"I'm pretty sure that Shermie is going to take counterfeit money as seriously as any other officer would. More so, because he won't have to investigate to know you're guilty." It was so Stan that it'd be hard to deny, especially with the eye-roll-worthy evidence literally named after him.

“I didn’t do nothin’,” Stan insisted, shouldering past the student. “These folks’re just locationist ‘cause I’m not a West Coaster!”

“Leave,” the student repeated, and Dipper shrunk from the glare that told him everything he needed to know: if they didn't obey, it was definitely going to be a confrontation with the campus police and possible future bans from university events.

"Let's go, man..." he said, taking Stan's arm and leading him to the exit, a wary glance cast at the student volunteers that kept their eyes on them, hawkishly tracking their departure.

“I won’t be silenced by these locationists!” Stan shouted as Dipper dragged him away. “Proud former resident of Glass Shard Beach here, everyone! Jersey Power! Jersey Power!”
“What the fuck are you doing?”

A familiarly semi-grating voice interrupted the chanting, and Dipper swiveled around to see Bill leaned against a fencepost. Strangely, his suit’s color scheme was altered: orange and black, with a couple buttons to signify he was also working at the fall festival. “Keep at it, Stan, and you’ll begin to sound like a Jersey supremist.”

"Oh my god, Bill," Dipper blurted his greeting, steeped in relief and affection. "Uh, we can't exactly stick around, they're making us leave."

As if on cue, one of the students approached. "We thought we told you that you had to leave. Is there a problem?" His focus was on Bill. "Do you know them? They're being removed, and if you could confiscate the prize, that'd be good."

“I’ll take care of them,” Bill said, the student understanding the hint to retreat. “What did you two do?” Without missing a beat, Bill snatched the plush from Stan. “This is mine now, by the way.”

“Hey! No, it ain't. I won it fair ‘n square!” Stan tried to grab the plush back, but Bill deftly kept it out of his reach, swapping hands and maneuvering it beyond Stan's range of motion.

Arms folded, Dipper glared at Stan while providing a less-than-pleased recollection of events, "Stan tried to give them Stanbucks."

“No wonder you’re being kicked out,” Bill said, amused. “You’re ripping off college students. Next time, give them something useful like Starbucks money for coffee. These hipsters love their pumpkin spice latte and shit.”

"I thought pumpkin spice lattes were pretty good."

Over Dipper's defensive mumble, Stan claimed, “I ain’t rippin’ off anything, now give me my fuckin’ plush back. It was five Stanbucks, and those assholes didn’t even compensate me for the emotional trauma of their accusations. I'll sue the university.”

Getting anxious since they shouldn't be waiting for this to escalate, Dipper chewed his lip. "We're not suing anybody. Let's leave, okay? They're still watching us." With that, he encouraged Stan via a light shove, peering to Bill. "It was nice seeing you, dude. Looking as good as ever." He awkwardly winked, giving him finger guns. "Less bumblebee than usual, though. More like a monarch butterfly."

Bill’s lips twisted into his classic smirk. “Just wait, I’ll buzz back into your life soon.”

"You've already fluttered into my heart," Dipper teased, the words spilling with very little thought attached. Flirtatious comments were easy with Bill, it was comfortable when he knew it didn't have to mean anything to either of them. Just a friend, a possible soulmate, and someone he cared about. Infatuation aside.

Although Bill chuckled, Stan groaned at the display of feigned romance.

"Stars, kid, you're being gayer than normal," Bill commented, "but you shouldn't stick around unless you want to be banned from other events, huh? Here, I'll show you guys out, makes it look like I'm doing something as a grad student volunteer in this shitshow. Come on."

A strut in his step, Bill guided them closer to the exit, diving into an exaggerated lecture on the dangers of distributing counterfeit money as they walked.
When the text from Ford appeared, he could barely believe what he was seeing. Ford, the introverted studier who didn't care for social interaction, texted him. Their entire message history could probably fit on the back of one of his hands simply because Ford didn't keep in touch over messaging, or... any other way, really.

Hey, what's up?
Is everything okay?

Stan was his concern, knowing he had a metaphorical iceberg of physical health problems waiting to be discovered, but he relaxed when bad news didn't come through.

I have a favor to ask of you.
Bill has been tasked with cleaning the graduate student office, and I am not there today. Would you be willing to stop by to ensure he's actually tidying up?

Sure, I'll be out of class soon and can check in on him.

That would be appreciated.

Once class ended, it was a short walk to the other end of the building, a convenient favor considering its timing and location under the same roof. Arriving in the physics department, he knocked on the office door.

"It’s unlocked,” Bill called, muffled through the wall.

Taking a deep breath, Dipper turned the knob and stepped inside, closing the door as his back pressed against it. A quick examination of the room said everything Ford had been dreading: Bill wasn't cleaning, didn't seem to have started because there were piles of books, papers, writing utensils... The floor and desks were a mess, and the filing cabinets had papers sticking out haphazardly. "Hi."

"Hey. What are you doing here? I thought you had... other things to do."

"My classes for the day are over," he replied but didn't venture further into the room. "Unless I have other obligations that I'm unaware of?"

“I don’t know,” Bill said. “Maybe? I’ve been distracted with.. this shit pile.”

Nose wrinkling, he surveyed the surroundings and concluded, "That's how it always looks in here. I don't see any difference, but Ford said you were in charge of cleaning up."

“Yeah, it’s a work in progress.” He kicked a stack of papers, sending them fanning over the carpet.

"Looks like you're making more work than progress," he said and finally pushed from the door, beginning to collect the scattered books. "Do you want me to help you?" The offer was delayed, as Dipper had retrieved several textbooks to organize them, neatly lining the shelves in alphabetical order.

Bill sighed, sifting through papers. “Looks like I don’t need to say anything, you’ve jumped right in.” Bill didn't seem eager to lend a hand, expected since his specialty tended to be generating messes rather than dealing with what was there, as shown by his apartment during busy stints. A
match made in heaven, as Dipper enjoyed recreational cleaning; doing it for others was relaxing and fun, doing it as a chore was unbearable.

"Have you been cleaning at all?" It didn't appear Bill had made an effort, so Dipper tsked and resumed taking old paperwork to shred and trash. "What has you so busy today, anyway?" Not that there was ever a time Bill wasn't busy, but to ignore Ford when they were supposed to be cleaning — that was a new show of bravery. Nobody liked the wrath of Stanford Pines.

“No, not really.” Bill idly tossed paper in the trash bin. “Ford won’t shut the fuck up about this because ‘prospective grad students are touring the building, Cipher.’ It’s so fucking annoying.”

"New grad students?" he said with an exaggerated gasp. "Wow, how can you be sitting around when there might be prospective grad students touring the place? I'm sure they'll withdraw their applications if they see the office looking like this." It could use a good tidying before it'd be acceptable as a professional workspace, and Dipper intended on getting it there. Passing by the back of Bill's chair, he pressed his hands to his shoulders and leaned beside him to tease, "Or maybe they'll withdraw because they see you sitting here, all broody and mysterious and unapproachable."

“Please,” Bill huffed. “They’ll come running in when they see you all over me. Wanting a piece of the action.”

"All over you?" he asked, a laugh rising from him. "I have no idea what you're talking about." Putting aside how he was draped over Bill, his hands now brushing his shoulders to his upper arms, fingers gliding over his biceps and drawing lower.

“Oh, you know perfectly well what you’re doing. Do you treat all your grad students like this, sugar?”

Jokingly, he murmured, "Just the ones that aren't related to me." Dipper gave his arms a gentle squeeze. "I should probably keep cleaning. There'll be plenty of time to feel you, preferably not in front of anyone who might be touring the department today. I don't want them to get the wrong idea about me— us. Any of that." After he'd continued collecting trashed papers, he added, "Besides, if they get accepted into West Coast Tech, they might expect the same treatment."

“And we wouldn’t want that,” Bill said with a shake of his head. “Can’t risk them eyeing you up. We’d have to expel them.”

"Yeah?" he questioned. "I didn't know that's where your father drew the line. Extorting labor out of me? No big deal. Cuddling on that office chair one time? Sure. Touching your muscles? Not a problem. But oh god, a grad student eyeing me up. How dare they.”

“Yeah, how fucking dare they! They don’t have the right, Pine Tree. Only I can look at you because I’m the best.”

Pausing in his cleaning for a moment, a smile played on his lips as he regarded Bill. "When I first met you, I thought you were an entitled, arrogant asshole. I'm glad that I got to know you better and learned you weren't any of those things."

Rolling up discarded paper in his hand, Dipper threw the wad at Bill, yet he dodged it, grabbing a sheet and crumbling it to throw, returning the assault. Catching it clumsily against his stomach, Dipper slung that one and an additional wad, snickering at the full blown snowball fight. Except… there weren't snowballs, just old sheets of paper. And after a few more seconds of pelting one another, they fell into their individual tasks with Dipper cleaning and Bill typing at his laptop.
Scooping up the last of the papers littering the floor, he was happy to see the carpet emerge, rescued from a state of grime. To Bill, he asked, "Were you planning on helping me, or…?"

"You’re doing fine without me," Bill answered. "I figured I’d leave you be while I got more important shit done."

Curiosity on high, annoyance could be reserved for later. "What are you busy with?" Dipper intended on finding out, as he approached the desk to hover over his shoulder and look for himself.

It was a wordy essay, formatted like a proposal for funding. "Not everyone has one assignment like you do," Bill told him. "I’m trying to work on getting the department better funding for our division."

"One assignment?" he repeated, uncertain. "Are you talking about cleaning? Because that's your assignment, but I'm helping you while putting my actual homework aside for this."

"No, cleaning is Ford’s assignment, but he’s pushing it onto us because he’s ‘busy’ or whatever."

"Isn't he appealing to the board to get that academic warning removed? Since there was that… Stan-counterfeit-money extravaganza, and he used Ford's ID."

"It’s not my fault he lets Stan take his things. He should be here cleaning."

"Stan lets you take his things," he mentioned with a dip of his head toward the plush dog on Bill's desk, an object that hadn't gone unnoticed but devoid of mild interest until now. "I can't believe you kept that."

"I bought it," Bill corrected, grinning. "With real money. And I gave that poor girl working the stand a tip."

Taking the plush from his desk, he held it up for examination. The fuzz was soft, and the dog far from realistic with a wide smile that rivaled Bill's. "Yeah, I felt bad about that. The whole thing, I mean—but mostly that. It seemed to be rattling her, then there was Pacifica who was more upset that I couldn't answer her question, and left because our crime was too blue collar."

"Blue collar crime or not, the volunteer was ripped off by a big guy and his companion. No wonder she didn’t want to confront you."

"Stan and I? I didn't know we were threatening." But he'd never considered that, given she'd looked at them like they were criminals even though the Stanbucks weren't remotely close to real money, and fetched a friend to nab them.

Bill surveyed him, face propped in hand. "Stan committed a federal crime, sugar." Giving ridiculously fake money to a festival worker would technically fall under that, therefore he was just happy they hadn't gotten into more trouble. "Of course she’s going to feel threatened. Who knows how he’d react when confronted?"

"Oh, I think I can answer that one. He ran in the opposite direction, yelling, 'Jersey power' over and over. I've tried to repress that memory because of how hard I was cringing." As he spoke, he returned the plushie to its original spot.

"You don’t understand how intimidating and frightening men can be to women."

"Oh, that was why? Yeah, got it—that makes sense."
“I hope you do.” Bill reached down, grabbing a stack of papers and tossing them toward the bin. “There, I helped.”

"I'm surprised you do. Well, sort of." But Dipper wasn't going to expand on that, as a check toward the clock had him noticing he'd been doing this for too long and hadn't enough progress to show for it. Bill's small demonstration didn't dent the remaining mess, so he knelt down to clean the spare desks. Ford's didn't require his scouring, pristine as ever, but the other two were in need of touch ups.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Trying to stay casual, Dipper cleared his throat. "Look, I… that wasn't supposed to mean anything. I just know your family," the patriarch specifically and former businessman, "happens to have, uh, certain views? That might not value women's experiences." At least according to his own parents. "Also, there's that situation with your mom." That was euphemistic, for 'conspiracy theory' was more accurate.

Bill bristled and his eyes blazed as they landed on him. "Do you know anything about my family? Who told you that bullshit?"

"Jesus, relax. I didn't say it was representative of you," he said, sighing. This had been a bad idea. "I guess I know the Ciphers are old money with your long line of corporations and have pretty traditional perspectives on social issues." Primarily relating to soulmarks and their uses, thinking they were a definitive sign of inevitable, undisputed romance and Bill's own behavior implied he'd grown up with those teachings but rejected them for himself.

Glancing away, Bill angrily huffed. "I don’t know what you’re talking about," he told him bitterly. “We’re nothing but progressive, and I don’t want to hear another word of it.”

Shutting down conversational topics was a terrible move with Dipper as a discussion partner, attempts to respect it self-sabotaged. The instant it happened, his curiosity and drive for knowledge flared, and he yearned so badly to press the issue, to extract more information about this family dynamic that seemed to be a sore spot for Bill. Worse yet, he was generally a patient person but this wasn't easy to be patient with.

"Okay." Leave it at that. Don't say anything else. Avoid the argument. It was still salvageable at this point as long as he didn't ruin it. Teeth pressing into the side of his cheek as if that'd keep his mouth closed, he distractedly continued cleaning, but his mind was miles away.

“What else do we have to clean?” Bill muttered.

The change of subject was expected, but not entirely welcome. "We? That's funny, I don't remember you doing any of the cleaning, unless sitting at your desk working on a proposal is now 'cleaning.'"

“You didn’t answer my question.”

"I am going to be cleaning the filing cabinets and sorting everything correctly," Dipper said as he extended the drawers to begin, "then I have to clean your desk. So either you can do that, or I'm doing it while you dodge your cleaning responsibilities." It was the sole chore that Bill should be doing, he could handle his own things. But if his apartment had anything to say to that… he wouldn't.

“Fine.” And with that, Bill went back to his desk… working on the proposal. Of course he would.
Nothing he'd done had been useful to this operation.

That proved constant throughout the next thirty minutes because the filing cabinets were reorganized and no longer had papers sticking out at odd angles from their folders, leaving the room in top condition, but not Bill's desk.

Dipper's gaze darkened as it settled on the offending furniture, then flicked to Bill who seemed oblivious to the fact he lived in the region of trash and messiness in the grad office. "Hey Oscar," he said sarcastically, "nice job cleaning up."

When it registered, Bill smirked and began singing, "Oh, I love trash. Anything dirty, or dingy, or dusty! Anything ragged, or rotten, or rusty!"

Okay, Dipper deserved a medal for managing to keep the frown on his face for a whopping three seconds before it started wavering and threatening to break into a smile. "Oh my god, stop." Or maybe it was Bill who deserved a medal for being too damn irresistibly likeable even when he wanted to punch the guy for hardly lifting a finger to aid in this effort.

“Oh, but doll, don’t you want to hear about how much I love trash?”

Approaching, his hand grazed the surface of the desk, leaning into it. The position stretched his legs out, a needed break after standing and sitting awkwardly. "No, I'm good. You know what I could go for hearing, maybe something about how much you love me considering I'm about to clean your desk for you." While Bill was using it, no less. That should be interesting.

“What?” Bill shuffled, moving closer to his desk protectively. "No, my desk is fine. I said I'd clean it."

"Your desk is not fine," he objected, motioning to the writing utensils sprawled over it, the papers in wild heaps, shreds littering the floor. "But if you can't take a break to do it, I'm still cleaning it for you." Dipper lowered himself to his haunches, pulling the bottom drawer out to start the cleaning process.

"Don't touch. Shoo."

"Oh, come on. Just do your proposal," he said, unfaltering while he thumbed through the papers and designated some as old, some worth keeping. "You were too busy to clean before this, so I doubt you've suddenly scraped up the time."

“You’re in my way, and you're fucking with my shit.”

"What do you need from in here?” Dipper asked, skeptical. Most papers were from several months ago, but he didn't mind retrieving a document if Bill required it. "And I'm not, seriously. I'm trying to get rid of this mess, and I swear I'll leave it in better shape than before."

Not that he could leave it in worse.

“It’s my desk, I need it, and... everything in it. Fuck off.”

"Okay, fine," he groaned because he could sense the agitation was moving into irrecoverable territory. He supposed he could push enough, perhaps bring Bill to the state of no return, then resume the discussion about his family... Exhaling the thoughts away, Dipper wasn't naive enough to think that'd result in anything except Bill shutting down, kicking him out completely. "I'll clean under your desk, then."
When it didn't seem like Bill was temporarily moving to make this an easier endeavor, Dipper huffed and squirmed underneath, his belly pressed to the floor as he plucked forgotten pens and pieces of paper from the carpet.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Pine Tree?” Bill was looking at him in disbelief, his chair pulled back for the sole purpose of staring in confusion. “Get out from under there. I’ll step on you.”

"Nah, man. Go back to what you were doing," he responded, wriggling further to sit upright in the space for the user's legs, crossing his own to fit in the compartment semi-comfortably. "Y'know, not being helpful in the slightest."

Bill grumbled, framing Dipper with his legs, crowding him. “You're the one being a pest.”

"You're going to be the target of Ford's wrath if this place isn't cleaned when he returns. You know that, right? I was only supposed to make sure you were actually working on tidying the office."

“Ford's typically angry with me, it's nothing new.”

With a heaving sigh, Dipper flattened himself to slip past Bill, straightening out now that he wasn't confined by being crammed under a desk. "For the love of god, what was your issue with that? I wasn't even digging through your stuff anymore." It wasn't anything personal either, maybe some of his students' grades and portfolios, but that was nothing he hadn't seen before.

“But you were to begin with! And you fucked my desk up. Look at this shit.” He waved his hands wildly toward his desk, but Dipper gave a fleeting look and lost interest.

"I'll fix it later."

“Fuck you. You shouldn’t have fucked with it to begin with when I said I'd do it.” Jaw tensing, that earned him a longer stare as Dipper evaluated Bill's mood, his stern expression, the very obvious anger settled over his features. The frustration was palpable.

After trying to be patient and ignoring the ungrateful attitude, Dipper was irked. "I'll let Ford know that you're almost done," he said in acknowledgment to the rest of the room, the room he'd cleaned.

Despite the colder tone, his text to Ford was deceptively kind toward Bill.

(1:52 PM) I peeked in and most of the room is finished.

(1:52 PM) Bill's still working on his desk, but everything else is looking good.

The clank of a chair against wood signaled Bill had gotten up. “What are you doing, Pine Tree?”

"I was going to leave. Uh, it didn't seem like you needed me anymore, and your desk is the only thing left that needs cleaning so..." He shrugged, falling silent for a few moments before he smiled lightly. "I get it, you don't want me going through your things. I'll catch you around sometime?" It was more of a formality than a genuine closing statement to their conversation, as Dipper knew he would see Bill in a day or two.

“Hold on a moment. You just got here, you can’t be leaving.”

Despite looking at his phone's clock mere seconds ago, he still checked the clock on the wall. "It's been like, an hour."
“Okay, but you didn't spend any time with me. You were more worried about the papers, and the books, and the... other stuff.”

"Ford sent me here to clean. Well, make sure that you were cleaning. Not to keep you company." Dipper, unsure of how long this conversation was going to last, didn't sit at the spare desk and lingered near the door. "I thought you were busy with the proposal anyway?"

“I always have time for you,” Bill said. “Just not cleaning.”

Beam reappearing, he said, "Touching, man, but I should go." It sounded like they both had their share of work to do, Bill with his proposal, his cleaning, and Dipper had homework to be doing. Staying would invite procrastination.

Bill was visibly disappointed and although Dipper felt similarly, it was bittersweet as he gave a short wave and a simple, "See you."

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon: a date with Robbie. Brace for awkwardness.
When Robbie branched from the group text conversation into a direct message, Dipper should have known something was up since it was a contact method reserved for special occasions. This was no different, and rereading the communications, his heart pounded in his throat as Robbie's arrival neared.

(4:31 PM) *Are you still down for tonight*
(4:31 PM) Are you?
(4:31 PM) But sure, I am. If you are.
(4:31 PM) *Yeah I wanted to make sure you were*
(4:32 PM) Did you have anything planned?
(4:32 PM) Like dinner or chilling or?
(4:33 PM) *Going out to dinner*
(4:33 PM) *Thought it wouldn’t be as lame as chilling, that’s what dumb teenagers do*
(4:33 PM) Okay, sounds fine.

Nice and breezy. But then, not so much.

(4:33 PM) So is it a high end thing?
(4:34 PM) Not that it has to be, I mean. Just so I know what the dress code is.
(4:34 PM) It seriously doesn't have to be expensive. Those places are kind of snooty anyway.
(4:34 PM) But it's alright if that's what you had planned! Sorry, I'll stop.
(4:34 PM) *Dress comfortable*
(4:35 PM) Thanks.

Then, while scrolling through them, a new message appeared.

(5:58 PM) *I’m outside*
(5:58 PM) Be there in a minute.

Ensuring his hoodie and jeans were free of wrinkles and stains was a relatively short affair compared to the extensive fretting about actually going on a date, if that's what this was. Robbie had never used the word "date" so he supposed they could play it off like friends, easier said than done because he was sweaty, twitchy, borderline itchy. Nervousness clung to him.

Dipper locked the dorm and with each step downstairs, tensed tighter until his shoulders may as well have been pressed to his ears while he held his breath, opened the door, noticed the purple van with a 'V' on it stationed in the parking lot. And did a double take.
Wits returning, he approached the passenger side and slid inside to admire the interior. "I didn't
know you had a van. It's nice." There was a spacious backseat with nothing but a single bag, folded
down seats, overall not the vehicle he expected — a hearse was more fitting.

"Yeah," Robbie said blandly. "It's a van. ...Hey, you look okay."

Biting back a laugh at the shrug, it was such a halfhearted compliment that it proved amusing.
"Jesus Christ," he said, tugging on his collar, "I had no idea you were going to be so forward. Let's,
uh, get some wining and dining done before we start throwing around things like 'you look okay.'"

Robbie hesitated. "What? Do you want me to say that you don’t look okay, man? ‘Cause that’s
bullshit."

Knuckles tapping together in his lap, that drew a genuine albeit small smile to his lips. "Thanks,
really. You look…" his eyes grazed Robbie, the jet black hair and piercings, scars from acne. Dark
hoodie with a heart, skinny jeans. "Good," he finished softly, "as usual." Considering he tended to
wear the same style of clothing, but then again that applied to both of them.

"Uh, thanks."

"So… dinner. Where are we going?"

"Casual restaurant, I guess. Nothing fancy. Sorry— it’s been a while since I did this, I’m a little
rusty."

"Did what?" Dipper asked, confused. "And you don't have to apologize, I don't really like fancy
places." Plaid and jeans or cargo pants were his favorite, swapping them for a suit made for an
uncomfortable evening.

"Go on a date." Surprise swept his features, leaving a scrambling Dipper to erase it in fear Robbie
would backpedal and redefine it as a friendly meal to prevent rejection. He hadn't remembered
Robbie specifying it was a date until now, but it seemed obvious in hindsight despite his mental
minimizing. "And uh, good. Good. It’s not fancy."

"To be honest, I've never been on a date." Unless that one coffee date counted… No, probably not.
Robbie let out a scoff. "Yeah, well. Mine were with Wendy, and you can see how that turned out
when she tore my heart apart.” The statement oozed bitterness and nigh-masked pain, meanwhile
he tried to avoid wincing.

"You don't have to do this if you're not ready to. I know Mabel can sometimes be overzealous with
the romance stuff, so we can just get ice cream or frozen yogurt and call it a night or something."

"Are you sure? ‘Cause we can do this, man. It’s whatever."

"Well, I guess," he started, an awkward laugh escaping as he leaned forward, "I'd rather you be
comfortable, that's more important than going on a typical date."

Robbie relented with a sigh, flopped against his seat. “Okay, fine. Where to?"

Dipper chewed his lip thoughtfully, pondering their choices. "There's a place off the 405 that has
tasty desserts," he said, yet Robbie didn't seem to grasp that, looking clueless.

"Where is it again…?" Robbie asked.
"Basically south of the 405, but it might be challenging if you're not accustomed to the area." 
Remembering his conversation with Bill that'd ended in a GPS taking his navigation job, Dipper typed it into his phone and set it in the cupholder. "There, that should give you directions."

“Oh, thank god.”

The faintest traces of humor weren't lost on him, and Dipper replied, "Ouch. My directions aren't that bad, but I guess Wendy said you guys weren't from around here."

“Uh, we’re from a small town in Oregon. And the directions make sense there, too.” The last piece was a mutter as Robbie drove from the parking lot, turning onto the road. His driving was oddly careful, double checking mirrors and following every speed limit, much different than driving with Stan or Bill. Stan perceived the rules of the road as suggestions, and Bill… was an enigma; he maneuvered with practiced ease but almost seemed reckless, never looking but knowing where other vehicles were.

"Dude, you are stacking on the direction-hate here," he complained mildly, "but uh, that's cool. A small town in Oregon, coming to college in California with your friends… Do you like living in the golden state? Stan—my cousin, he's from Jersey—usually whines about all the 'damn hippies' or whatever, little does he know they've basically infiltrated half the family."

“It’s been fine,” Robbie said. “I guess. I don’t understand your uh, 'hippie directions.'”

"Yeah, it's... I get it," he conceded and cleared his throat. "It doesn't really matter, I guess. The phone can do it for us." Already, the recorded voice was giving directions to the next turn. "I haven't gone out for dessert, since… honestly, I don't remember. Feels like forever, I haven't been able to do much this semester with how busy it is."

“Same. Been out with Wendy but.. it doesn’t matter. It’s hard to determine what does.” Thumbing the hem of his shirt, he briefly recollected how many times Robbie's ex-girlfriend was appearing in their conversation, unsure if it was coincidental or a sign that she'd be their conversational topic during this outing.

"Right," he said, fidgeting. "She's told me a lot of stories about the stuff that you guys did together — like, you and that whole group of friends." And if he and Robbie actually became steady dates, that was a social circle he'd have to assimilate into, a daunting prerequisite that demanded extroversion and the spirit of an entertainer in that rough-and-tumble pack of companions. "They seem fun."

“They are,” Robbie agreed. “Dunno if you've ever met them, but I think you'd like everybody.”

"Yeah? What are they like? Wendy hasn't introduced me yet." They didn't cross paths often because when he and Wendy met up, it wasn't with her friends, so exchanging passing waves was the scope of their interaction. "I know some names, like Tam… Tammy? And Nate, maybe?"

“Tambry,” he corrected. “They’re a blast, real fun. Basically the only good thing I have in my life. Nate, Lee, Thompson– he doesn’t really count, Wendy…” Robbie trailed off, Dipper tensed. “Man, we need to hang out again. Haven’t seen them in a few days.”

"Don't you guys all live on campus?" he asked. "It wouldn't be that hard to set up something, and you can always time your visits to the dining centers. Mabel and I do that."

Robbie's hands palmed the steering wheel, his fingerless gloves revealing nails bitten and short. Like Dipper's. “Oh, no. I don’t live on campus, I have a house.”
"Okay, that's— wait, did you say 'house'? Like, an actual... house?"

"Yeah, I'd hope it's a real house," he said, looking over his shoulder to merge onto the freeway, slipping between the train of traffic. "My folks decided to move here when they learned I was going to college in California to stay with my friends and my soulmate."

"Uh, wow. That seems kind of extreme."

"Nah, it was a business decision for them. They run a funeral home and thought they'd make bank with the police and gangs killing everyone."

Grimacing, Dipper mumbled a 'holy shit' under his breath and combed digits through his hair. "Oh. Good for them...?" Surveying Robbie, it wasn't unexpected that he was from a morbid family because talks of death and destruction were frequent, just as dyed hair, excessive piercings, and a stitched heart hoodie told a similar story.

There was silence for a couple moments as Dipper gathered his thoughts, considering Robbie's parents and how his own might fare, then remembering he had several unanswered texts from his father - questions of how his studies were going. Lying to them and saying it was great was the worst part.

Intrigued by the possibility of Robbie forking from his parents' imagined future path for him, he inquired, "What do they think of you majoring in English?"

"They're hoping I lose interest and join them in the dead people business." Dipper could sympathize with that, the notion of parents pushing him toward a career that he had no interest in. "I'm guessing you don't want to do that?" he clarified. "Seems like it'd be kind of a rough job, arranging funerals for families and renting out the space to a bunch of grieving people." It sounded horrible, living in the midst of insurmountable sadness and still treating each appointment with sensitivity and unique understanding.

"Whatever, it'd be 'perfect for me.' I want to write poetry though."

"Oh, that... makes sense. So you're doing creative writing stuff."

The deduction yielded envy as he realized that could have been him, refining a hobby to make into a future; writing his screenplay had bridged into the realm of crafting his own fiction, particularly of the mystery genre. Sure, he'd devoured tons of mystery novels but creating them himself? He hadn't thought of it or tried until this semester, yet it'd been the most enjoyable part of his academics. Short, unedited stories meant to be cathartic were populating his laptop's hard drive.

Attention drifting to Robbie again, Dipper placed aside jealousy to focus. "What kind of poetry do you write? Like, gothic things? Sorry, I don't mean to be stereotypical or anything, but from what you said on the RV, I thought..."

"It's gothic, with a lot of death, violence, and gore." Dipper internally patted himself on the back for keeping his poker face throughout the explanation that made his stomach do a flip of uneasiness. While he'd intended on signaling himself open to the possibility of reading it, that was no longer the case if it was as graphic as Robbie described. "Wendy said she liked it. My favorite thing to write about is familicide mixed with romance and tragedy."

"Does... that still fall under 'gothic' poetry?" he asked but had started to discreetly slide his phone from the cupholder, the urge to text Bill gnawing at him, but he was debating what to say when there weren't many words to adequately capture the mood of this date. Aside from... friendly,
semi-uncomfortable.

“If you’re smart about how you write it, yeah!” At least Dipper could praise his enthusiasm and applaud him for chasing a dream. "Do you want to read it? It’s mature, there’s a verse about incest.”

"I don't know, man. Those sound like pretty heavy topics before we have food— maybe, afterward? You could send me an excerpt or something later over text." A text that he would conveniently forget about and wipe from his memory, if it was as potentially disturbing as warned.

“I’ll send you the document. It’s, like, nine hundred or so pages.”

So much for that. Now, he hoped that Robbie would be the one conveniently forgetting.

"We're almost there," he reported but didn't have to view his phone's navigation to discern that. It would be an exit off the freeway, then less than a mile. "And it'll be pretty hard to miss, there's a giant sign with an ice cream sundae on it." As he spoke, he was opening the messaging app and composing a text to Bill:

(6:16 PM) Hey golden boy. <3

Guilt flickered in him the instant he hit the send button. It seemed unfair to Robbie to be blatantly flirting with Bill, but he hadn't thought anything of their standard dynamic, merely something they did together. Friends bonded over mutual hobbies, his and Bill's were playfully flirtatious comments and jokes.

But Dipper wasn't immune to the icy feeling that there was possibly more to it than a friendship at this point — he'd known he was physically attracted to Bill, but it went deeper than that, beyond the searing desire of lust and cozy warmth of companionship. Calling it a crush felt dumb and childish, but a better label eluded him.

(6:16 PM) hey pine girl <3

The worst part of it was, he couldn't envision Robbie's text shooting an adrenaline rush through his system and bringing a smile to his lips like Bill managed to do effortlessly. It was heart-wrenching that he quite possibly had no idea.

(6:17 PM) Pine girl? You have the wrong number if you're looking for Mabel.

(6:17 PM) i know who i'm looking for, and it's a tiny cutie in a pine tree hoodie

(6:17 PM) Wow, weird. I'm actually wearing that. Do I wear it that much?

(6:17 PM) you know me, sugar, always got my eyes on you even when you don’t see me

(6:18 PM) Flattering? But I'll venture a guess that you're not secretly spying on me or anything right now, since I'm on the freeway.

(6:18 PM) a guy can dream, sweetheart. a guy can dream

(6:18 PM) It's reassuring that your dreams are about me.

Realizing he hadn't said anything to Robbie, too absorbed in the text conversation, Dipper cast a peek at him and was relieved to see he hadn't noticed anything was amiss.
He racked his brain for discussion starters but was coming up empty, inwardly groaning at himself for being so helpless. It was easy to talk to Bill, why couldn't it be like that with someone obtainable?

“Hey man, are you okay? You're staring.”

A startled noise escaping, Dipper's gaze darted to the road ahead, unwilling to sneak another glance at Robbie while his cheeks burned brightly. "I… I space out a lot. Sorry, man."

Robbie dismissed it with a nonchalant, “No need to apologize.”

"Thanks," he said, a hand coming to rub and squeeze his upper arm apprehensively. "Bad habit of getting lost in my thoughts, I guess." As Stan tended to say, his height was a wonder of the world since his head was perpetually in the clouds.

“Like I said, it’s cool. Don’t sweat it.”

(6:21 PM) i'm always dreaming about you

(6:22 PM) Same. Dreaming about you, I mean.

(6:22 PM) Guess you're dreamy like that.

(6:22 PM) not as dreamy as you

(6:23 PM) Are you doing anything?

(6:23 PM) Aside from probably preparing an unsolicited dick pic.

(6:23 PM) wondering where you are so i can collect you

(6:23 PM) Gentlemanly, but why would you collect me?

"Oh, turn here," Dipper said as he switched off the phone's GPS, peering from the screen to the windshield where they were approaching a string of smaller shops. "It's in this parking lot."

“It’s this place? Wendy and I used to come here all the time as freshmen. God, we were so lame and cringe-worthy.”

"...Yeah. We should go in." And as he was climbing out of the vehicle after a minor struggle unclipping an unfamiliar seatbelt, Dipper realized a text from Bill had arrived.

(6:25 PM) because i want to

(6:25 PM) I wish you could.

(6:25 PM) i will

“You coming?” Robbie asked, slouching as he waited a distance from the van. Although Dipper replied with a "yeah" and trotted to catch up to him as they scaled the parking lot, he slipped a message to Bill.

(6:25 PM) I still don't think you can, and also, can't text anymore. Later.

Tucking his phone away, he murmured an appreciative word or two as Robbie held open the door.
to the parlor, meanwhile Dipper was thankful the line wasn't that long. The thought that it wasn't
the wait flashed through his mind, it was the fact that the wait would be with Robbie and a
conversation about Wendy.

"Should we get in line? I think you'll have enough time to decide what you want." Dipper gestured
to the illuminated board above the cashier with each flavor pictured and listed.

“I used to get rocky road with Wendy. She liked pistachio, because the green and nuts reminded
her of the forest. We’d get it in the cones, and I'd pay them extra to always load us up, so it would
take us more time to eat and I could talk to her longer...”

Dipper tuned him out.

There was guilt attached to doing so but not enough to coax him into hearing about the Adventures
of Wendy and Robbie for the span of this trip, which he didn't actually count as a date anymore
because… well, Robbie was right. He probably wasn't ready for this, much less a serious romantic
relationship if he could hardly hold a discussion beyond his group of high school friends while the
spotlight sat atop his ex-girlfriend.

It wasn't an issue with Wendy, Dipper reflected. He really enjoyed her friendship and thought she
was an amazing person (he didn't need Robbie to convince him, though Robbie didn't seem to
realize that), but this wasn't the time and place when the expectation was more 'pre-first date' than
'the Wendy chronicles, as told by Robbie.'

By the time they reached the cashier, Dipper let Robbie relay his order and then gave his own for
soy frozen yogurt, tacking on rainbow sprinkles at the last minute with the ambition of sending a
picture to Bill. Although Robbie voiced his willingness to pay for both of them, Dipper declined
and covered his share of the price.

Once they were seated, Dipper quickly snapped a photo of the yogurt and messaged it to Bill,
opening himself to a teasing remark or two about the rainbow sprinkles.

He was glad they'd elected to eat somewhere even if it was simply dessert. Undeniably delicious,
and as a bonus, it hindered the discussion so they couldn't dive into Robbie's psychological
examination of his breakup with Wendy. After taking the first few bites and wincing from the
sudden cold, Dipper said, "I don't think I ever asked. Why rocky road? The taste, or...?" Trailing
off, he wondered if that had been a stupid question, nobody knowingly ordered ice cream that
tasted bad. But as long as it didn't lead into a sentimental story about Wendy...

“It’s fitting for me… my life’s a rocky road.” Robbie sighed dramatically, taking another bite of
his cone.

"It is?" he questioned, hoping Robbie would expand on that. "That… sounds kind of rough, dude.
Are you doing okay? You know, I'm here if you ever need anything.” Emotional comfort wasn't
his slice of expertise, but he wasn't terrible at logical solutions or listening, if that was what Robbie
yearned for in a support network. Under those circumstances, Robbie could chat about Wendy all
he wanted.

“I wish I was doing okay,” he complained. “I miss being in my rockin’ screamo metal band, then
Wendy fucking dumped me and I moved to this stupid city… it hurts, man. My soul is bleeding.”

"Oh…" Speaking of bleeding, he was pretty sure his social awkwardness was hemorrhaging from
him and spilling all over the speckled plastic table since he hadn't a clue where to begin with that.
"You had a… a band? Was this in Oregon?"
“Yeah, we were fucking awesome. Our official name became Robbie V. and the Tombstones, but while we were just messing around, we went through other names like Rad Bromance, Oedipus and the Motherfuckers, Sexually Transmitted Virginity, and Fuck Off Lee We Don't Even Need A Bassist—"

"Do you have any of your stuff recorded? I mean, I'm not that familiar with… what did you say it was? Screamo metal? But uh, I'd be interested in hearing it if you want an audience again."

“It was a few years ago so no, but I can give you a demo! Live, right here.”

"Wait, what? You can do that?" Dipper asked and swiveled around, as if expecting a metal band to climb out of the woodwork and colorful tables and chairs. "I thought you'd need instruments or… your tombstones, if those are— were?" he tentatively corrected. "People."

“I was the vocalist and also played guitar. I can scream lyrics.”

Oh. Oh no. About to scurry for any excuse to stop this before it became the reason they were removed from the premises, his phone began to buzz, and he mumbled a 'sorry, hang on' as he checked the caller.

Bill.

Heart taking a leap in his chest and pulse thrumming faster, palms sweating, he inwardly groaned at himself, wondering when the thought of Bill alone got him worked up... though perhaps that was the effect of Robbie's proposition to scream morbid lyrics to the family-friendly dessert shop. To Robbie, he said, "I hope it's not a problem, but I… should probably take this. I'll be back in a few minutes."

“Uh, okay.”

Bowl of yogurt in one hand and phone in the other, Dipper ducked out of the shop to sit on a brick barrier surrounding the land owner's attempt at a garden, mostly dried grass and rocks, but the center was a sad-looking palm tree. With the device now tucked between his shoulder and his ear, Dipper answered with relief, "Oh hey, if it isn't the handsome jerk of Miami. What's up?” As awful as it was, he was content to be away from Robbie for a bit.

“What did I do?” Bill huffed on the other side of the line. “Here I am, wanting to talk, and I got a little cutie abusing me.”

"Sorry, man," he said but didn't sound apologetic. "Did you need something? Or did you call to hear my voice as you're jacking off?"

“Yes.”

"Wow, way to be vague about this. I can't believe you didn't even have the decency to video call so I could enjoy too," he chided, scooping a spoonful of yogurt into his mouth.

“Do you want me to? I can swap pretty easily.”

"Are you actually jacking off? Because I'm in public. People could hear you, or.. see you. Or both." Listening for a second, he deemed it unlikely that Bill was doing anything of the sort unless he was masterfully quiet.

“I don’t care about that. Just want to see your pretty face.”
"Probably not as pretty as you think," Dipper said. "I'm kind of trying to eat frozen yogurt, and I didn't think to bring napkins outside with me."

"Mm, messy? I love that shit."

Cheeks pinkening, his eyebrows raised, pupils darting around the venue as if checking to ensure nobody had heard them. "Yeah? It's soy vanilla, so there isn't much going on except the sprinkles — I think they were in that picture I sent? Those are long gone."

"I’m learning a lot about your sexual preferences right now."

"What?" Dipper laughed. "Are you? What does that mean?"

"Vanilla with rainbow sprinkles.. you gobbled up the sprinkles first. What a gay Pine Tree."

"The sprinkles were on top!" he defended himself, but his grin was widening. "What was I supposed to do, eat around them? That would've been super weird, and I think Robbie might've gotten the wrong impression if I was like, doing some fancy spoon-work."

"...You’re with Robbie?"

"Yeah," he said but deflated, "it's... not going that well, so you don't have to get jealous. Seriously, dude, I'm talking to you on the phone instead of being with him."

"Where are you? I'll rescue you."

"No, that's... that'd be really suspicious if you rolled up in your fancy car."

"Nah, not at all. You can scream 'help I’m getting kidnapped’ as I whisk you away."

Dryly, he replied, "Oh good, so your plan is to traumatize Robbie and then be arrested. Or be shot I guess, since the LAPD isn't known for restraint."

"It’s cool, I have money. The police love me."

Popping the last of the yogurt into his mouth, he leaned back casually on his hands, resting against the palm tree while balancing the phone between his shoulder and ear. "Same," he said through a soft, earnest confession that he didn't elaborate on. "Anyway, maybe we can catch up later if you're not doing anything?"

"Or we could catch up now, and get you away from that emo freak."

"Come on, he's not a freak. Mabel was right when she said he's a genuinely nice guy, if you know anything about that." The dig was light. "But it's just..."

"What have you two been doing?"

"Talking."

"About?"

"Um..." he trailed off, sighing. "His poetry, his band, his friends, and we had a very engaging and totally not disturbing discussion about his parents' business."

"Sounds like you need a real man to take you out. Is Wendy there?"
Humming in thought, this was a vital question to answer correctly because it was likely Bill's method of gauging if this was a personal outing, as in a date, or if it was a group excursion, and he would never believe him if he protested that it was the two of them on friendly terms and nothing more. "Yeah," he replied without acknowledging which statement it was referencing, "so were you free for later? Or are you busy?"

“I’m down for later… up for now.”

"Up for now?" Dipper repeated, eyebrows hitching. "Is that a masturbation joke?" That elicited some unwanted attention from younger teens and their parents entering the parlor, and he blushed a bright red, ducking his head. "Dude, I think I mentally scarred a couple teenagers because of you. I should go."

"That's exactly why you should stay. We need to redeem ourselves with good Catholic talk."

"I'll see you later, Bill."

“Pine Tree, don’t do this. You can’t hang up on me.”

"I have to, I can’t just—" he exhaled, frustrated with the circumstances and indirectly at himself because he didn't know why he was broken, why he couldn't like a perfectly nice young man that was actually a romantic possibility. "I can't stay on the phone with you the whole evening. I wish I could, but yeah."

God, he hated himself. He didn't know why he couldn't forfeit the enticing thought of a relationship when one would never happen in the first place, miles from the stability necessary to last.

“Let me come to you,” Bill pushed, yet Dipper frowned in spite of his heart's heightened rate and the appeal of the offer. “I’ll take you away.”

Desperate for a reminder that Bill didn't care for him any more than on the level of friendship, he asked, "Is this because you're lonely? Stan and Ford might be home tonight, and you can hang out with them until I get there."

“I don’t want them, I want you.”

"Bill, I…” Dipper brought his knees to his chest, feeling pressured. Not by Bill, but by the obligation to end the call and return to Robbie, loathing himself for not looking forward to it. Drawing up his sleeve, he glared intensely at his soulmark, wanted to burn it into his brain because it'd never been more true. When he responded, it was quiet and wavering, "Why?"

“Why what? Do I want you?"

Forcing an inhale, he tried to calm himself. Having a meltdown or panicking episode in public over this was a terrifying thought. "Yeah, that."

“Because I like spending time with you, Pine Tree.”

"Mm-hmm, I got that. I meant why me over Stan and Ford, since we’re your friends, all three of us. Stan’s your coworker at the comedy club, and Ford is a fellow grad student, so if we’re going this route I think it’s safe to say they’d be, uh, even more— friendly? With you?" Dipper wanted to die.

“Pine Tree, why are you fighting me on this? I want to hang out with you.”
He'd take that as a confirmation that there was nothing to worry about. "Okay, sounds good. See you later, bye." Click.

Rejoining Robbie at the table produced another round of small talk and stilted conversations, but at least he could count on one hand the number of times Wendy arose. Although his slight fixation no longer interfered, it still hinted that Robbie wasn't equipped for anything romantic which was in similar alignment to his own situation, a subject Dipper decided was for the ride back to the university, strategically timed for when they were approximately five minutes from his dorm in hopes of avoiding potential awkwardness.

Easing into it was the best approach, but he couldn't muster the courage to tear his gaze from the late autumn scenery of the passenger window. "Thanks for, y'know, taking me out," he said, fingering the edge of his phone while thoughts of Bill filtered through his mind. More relaxed, he was no longer clenching at his chest and pulling his hair out over a dumb crush, but he knew it wouldn't be fair to let Robbie think they could continue this when signs indicated an opposite pursuit.

“Uh, yeah. There’s no need to thank me– it’s not like I had a chance to like, pay for your yogurt or anything.”

"Earlier you said you weren't sure about, like, calling it a date. And that's cool," he added, "because I don't know if…" Gathering his nerves, he swallowed and fidgeted, phrasing cautiously kind. "If I'm feeling it with us. It's not you or anything, it's just.. the chemistry, I guess?"

“Okay.” Robbie shifted, face unreadable but discomfort prevailed. “Knew I'd fuck this up somehow.”

"You didn't," he reassured, almost feeling as if it was his fault if anyone's. He _should_ be attracted to Robbie but wasn't, that was his own problem. "Not that it would've mattered if you did, though. I'm not sure us being a couple is… right for me," he spoke hesitantly, questioningly.

“This is like an ‘it’s not you it’s me’ talk where you’re trying to convince me that I’m not the bad guy.”

"No, it's exhausting enough to do that for Bill," he muttered. "Seriously, it's not either of us."

“If you’re sure, man. I just don’t want things to be lame with us– I know Wendy’s on my mind a lot, don’t want it to weird you out or whatever.”

"I don't know," he shrugged, "I figured maybe… you were still working through that, which isn't a big deal or anything but might not make the healthiest relationship."

“Yeah, right. Right. We cool, man? You’re not gonna like, give me a bad review on Tinder, are you?”

"Um, Tinder?" Dipper asked. "Oh, that dating… hookup thing? I don't use social media, so… no. But yeah, we're cool."

“Oh, good. I don’t need my matches being put off by one bad review,” he barked a nervous laugh. “Uh… thanks for suffering through it, I guess.”

"Mm-hmm, there was so much suffering between the nice conversations and dessert," he said sarcastically, finally shooting Robbie a fleeting grin. "I don't think you need to be that hard on yourself, man. It was fine."
"I’m supposed to be hard on myself, dude. If I’m not, what will fuel the despair and sense of loss I feel?"

Dipper couldn't pinpoint if that was a dark joke but was too worried that he'd guess incorrectly, therefore smiled in sympathy while grateful for the dorm coming into view. "Thanks again," he said, giving Robbie's forearm a pat since it lingered on the gear shift as they reached the parking lot; however, he retracted his hand a second later and turned toward the door. "Oh, and best of luck with your poetry. It's a shame about the band, but it sounds like you have a lot going for you, creatively."

"I’ll make sure to send you my document," Robbie said. "All nine hundred and eighty-five pages."

"Might, uh, take me a while to get through that," Dipper said, scratching the nape of his neck. "Have a nice night. I'll see you around."

"Remember to give feedback," Robbie told him, grin lopsided like he didn't do it enough to appear natural. "The more detailed it is, the less pain my soul endures. Unless you say you don't like it… then my soul will want to kill itself."

"Whoa, hey…" he raised his hands in surrender, "that's… messed up."

"Perfectly normal in a dying society with no hope of success or appreciation for poets? Yes, I agree."

Dipper stared for several long seconds, unsure if he should feel disturbed or… or if Robbie was joking, but again, he didn't take the risk of expressing anxious amusement and said his goodbyes, then climbed from his van to stride toward the dormitory's double doors.

It was a breath of fresh air, a weight lifted from him, and that sense of freedom carried him into the building and upstairs with almost a spring in his step, ignoring any twinges of pain. He knew Mabel wouldn't be home yet, not for another five hours at least — it was the weekend, meaning long night shifts at the diner.

And as soon as his back hit the patterned sheets of the uncomfortably-stiff bed, he texted Bill.

(7:12 PM) Still want me?

(7:13 PM) i always want you :)

(7:13 PM) Cuddles* and Netflix?

(7:13 PM) *On the super thin plank West Coast Tech claims is a dorm bed.

(7:13 PM) Bring blankets and pillows and we'll make a nest.

(7:14 PM) blankets, pillows, and a better bed. got it

(7:14 PM) Nah, I don't mind the narrowness if you're sharing with me.

(7:14 PM) gonna be soft as fuck, for all our gay sex needs

(7:14 PM) Yeah, no. Netflix and cuddling.

(7:15 PM) i’ll be there soon
I'll be waiting for you in lacy lingerie.

Beaming like a lovestruck fool, he could recall the night under the stars with Bill during the camping excursion, the confession that Bill possibly desired to be witness to him donning skimpy attire or nothing at all.

Just kidding, I'll be wearing my usual pajamas.

you look good in those too ;)

Sharply inhaling, the compliment had a jolt of electricity racing up his spine.

Charming. If you hadn't mentioned trying to score tonight, I might take you seriously.

you should take me seriously, you're cute as fuck and i can't wait to see you in a couple minutes

Intoxicating flurries of excitement rose from within him, engulfing Dipper in a wave of utterly giddy affection that refused to be denied and compartmentalized any longer. He felt like he was on cloud nine. What Robbie had over an hour and a meal to accomplish, Bill could do in a single text.
"What do you think?" Dipper stepped back to fold his arms over a proudly-jutted chest, admiring his masterpiece of fluffy softness, the most comfortable nest that he could imagine. In preparation for cuddling and Netflix, Bill had brought several blankets of varying thickness and a stack of pillows to add on the near-cardboard 'mattress' provided by West Coast Tech.

“I think it needs more you,” Bill answered as he plopped into the nest, and Dipper glowed at the recognition, the subtle affection in the answer. God, he was so… unbelievably entangled in this crush. “Come here, cutie.” Motivated by the invitation, Dipper sprung on Bill with enough force to send them crashing onto the squishy heap of pillows and blankets, the resulting bounce propelling him up again.

Perched on Bill's lower stomach, Dipper's head tilted slightly in surveillance, a feisty glint in his gaze as it traced over Bill. He had no right to look this good in such casual attire, his typical sleepwear: plain shirt, boxers, and that ridiculous gauze that Dipper positively loathed but could live with if it meant drinking in this sight for the evening.

The date with Robbie and validation of his crush on Bill had him feeling invigorated and confident, and a confession was undergoing construction, the best and scariest thought that'd crossed his mind the whole day. The moment would be ideal— no, not ideal. Perfect. Two conditions had to be met, he inwardly plotted: a perfect moment and reasonable suspicion of reciprocation. Without those, Dipper determined he couldn't dare insinuate genuine feelings unless he was equipped for the potential reality of losing Bill's friendship. As if to psyche himself out, the nagging doubt that flirty exchanges were playful and nothing more was churning in his stomach, battering the once-intact drive to admit to his affection.

Bill's chuckle startled him to the present. “Saddled in for riding, huh? Always knew you were kinky, sugar.” Like that, the anxiety was alleviated, the mental lists gone. The only thing that mattered was this, because the world was reduced to the size of this instant between him and Bill like they were the sole entities in existence.

The apples of his cheeks flushing with delight, Dipper said, "Saddle? What kind of discount cowboy do you think I am? Barebacking is the only way to ride."

“Oh? Is that an invitation, doll? I have pretty easy access right now."

"Nah, I think we agreed this was going to be cuddling only," he said, referencing the text conversation that preceded Bill's visit and the nest-making that followed. "Well, I mean, I agreed on it." While tempting to slide downward until they were chest-to-chest, he flopped to the side then asked, "What do you want to watch tonight?"

“Hm, are there any new movies that’re good?” The nudge under his neck prompted Dipper to raise his head, and like clockwork, Bill's arm slid around his shoulders and pulled him closer on cue.

"I think there might be this one," he started, leaning into the touch to drape a hand over Bill's ribcage. Underneath the fabric, he could feel the outline of bony ridges and muscle shifting every time he inhaled. "About this quirky instructor— he teaches a class of college-age students and recently decided to use a fleet of paper airplanes to call on students when nobody's offering an
answer. Oh wait, no, that was you. Last Tuesday."

"Is that a movie?" Bill asked. "Oh, that’s exciting. I wonder if they have their own Planetential."

"I really doubt someone else, even fictionally, would brainstorm physics puns to use as plane names for an hour before class."

"I put a lot of thought into my name. Don’t be hating on it."

Sarcasm hid in the edges of his tone as he said, "You nicknamed me 'Pine Tree' because I wear my pine tree hoodie all the time. Yeah, your naming procedures are top-notch and very intricate." But beyond the exaggeration it was teasingly affectionate, and his fingers fanned over Bill's ribs to demonstrate that with a reassuring stroke of pressure.

"It goes with your last name, and pine trees are layered beneath the bark. Your nickname is complex, sugar."

A beat of skeptical examination later, Dipper told him, "I feel like you made that up just now." However, the explanation of the nickname and its origin dragged a contemplative hum from him while he pondered his own names for Bill, a collection shockingly short. Usually, he was 'Bill' or 'jackass' or 'the jerk who tried to charge me for nonexistent damages but has become so ingrained in my life that I can't get rid of him… and also, my crush and possible soulmate.' Still thoughtful, he inquired, "So, you already know 'Dipper' is a nickname from my parents. Do your parents have any nicknames, like, for you?"

Bill shrugged. "I don’t want to talk about those. They're horrible."

"Come on," he encouraged, a hand grazing the side of Bill's face to tilt his jaw toward him, curious eyes bright and eager resting on Bill's expression of reluctance. "I won't use them."

"Billy, B-Dog, Billzebub."

Although grinning, Dipper miraculously stifled his laughter, aware that'd trigger an uncooperative Bill. When he was certain he wouldn't burst into a fit of unstoppable chortling, he asked, "...Wait, they called you 'B-Dog'? Did they think you were going to be a rapper or something?"

"Look, I was a rapper, and I was amazing."

Repressing the laugh suddenly wasn't an option anymore at the thought of Bill being a rapper. Much to his absolute disappointment, it wasn't a mental image he could conjure. "You were a rapper?" he questioned, Netflix forgotten as he focused his attention on Bill. It wasn't a conscious effort, but an effect of talking to Bill — everything else disappeared, time moved too fast to be real.

Bill puffed up. "Hey, I wasn’t just any rapper. I was the best."

"I seriously had no idea you were into rapping," he said. "I guess… it's hard to picture? How long ago was this, anyway?"

"Maybe eight years ago?"

"Oh my god— uh, you were fourteen? Fifteen?" The thought of a young Bill showing off his rapping prowess made this significantly more enjoyable. "Dude, that's amazing. Do you still do it?"

It was a thinly-disguised attempt at witnessing it for himself, but his hopes weren't high.

"Why would I still do it?" Bill huffed. "I was the best. I’d ruin my awesome streak."
"So that's a no, then?" Dipper had figured. "Does anyone else know that you went through a rapping phase?" Before Bill could respond to that, he went on, "Please tell me you wore baggy clothes and gold chains and always had your hat on backwards."

“What, do you think my father didn’t know? He told me it was shameful to our family’s name.”

The beam disappeared, a frown forming in its place. "What? Really? Wow, your dad's an asshole," Clearing his throat as if that'd erase the blunt declaration, Dipper curled into Bill's side, resting his head on the space between his chest and shoulder. "If you were the best rapper, I don't think you were bringing shame to the family name. I mean, honestly, if anyone's brought shame to the family name…" That would be big daddy Cipher himself, for his less-than-legal activities and dodging the fallout by supposedly handing off his assets, distributing them to remove the public's heat. Dipper's knowledge of the incident came from his own parents, far from fans of the guy's antics.

“I think we both know who’s disgracing my family.”

Yeah, and it wasn't Bill.

A brief quiet fell upon them, Dipper's thumb idly sweeping over Bill's collarbone and the broadness of his shoulder. "Uh," he said, "I… never told anyone about this— like, only Mabel and my parents know, but since you shared the rapper thing… I went through a phase too. My, um, happy-hardcore-slash-rave phase when I was twelve."

“You went through a rave phase, huh?”

Humiliating recollections abound, his free hand draped over his face in embarrassment. "I told everyone to call me Dippy Fresh."

“Did you have rave glasses?”

"They're stunner shades, man." Dipper sincerely hoped no pictures of that period of his life persisted, the photographic evidence of cringey tween years. "I had these neon clothes, the colorful canvas shoes, everything."

“Wow. That honestly sounds… super gay. I bet you rocked it.”

With a laugh, he admitted, "Yeah, no. I really didn't, but it's sweet that you think I did." The sentiment was tender, and he wondered if this would set the mood to delve into a lowkey confession to gauge Bill's reaction to his crush. Arranging the framework was step one.

Thoughts of approach were dashed within seconds. “You know,” Bill mused. “Wendy used to kill it in her shades. Have you seen her in them?”

"Oh god," Dipper groaned at the topic, shifting his weight to be atop Bill and playfully swatting his arm, "I thought I was done hearing about Wendy for one day." This wasn't how he'd intended to prepare them for a warmer discussion, and he hoped it could be steered before they were too off course.

“Oh? You don’t like hearing about her? I thought she was pretty swell. Not the best girlfriend, but… I think I do kind of love her still.”

Paling, everything dropped from under Dipper as his heart and mood plummeted, and he was tongue-tied in formulating a response, words thick. "No— it's not that, I've just heard about her for basically all day."
“Actually, I don’t love her.” Dipper couldn’t relax, his pulse still hammering. "I’m not like Valentine, Pine Tree. He’s thirsty for her, I’m fond of a couple old memories. Nothing more, you don’t have to worry about a repeat.”

"It's… fine if you want to talk about her," he amended awkwardly, separating and retreating from Bill to rest on his haunches, "or if you, I don't know, do still have feelings. Like that. For her." The syllables ripped from him, painful and tedious, but he knew this would be infinitely less heartbreaking than receiving an outright rejection. If Bill told him where his affections were, he'd believe him.

“I don’t love her,” he insisted. “Not a bit. That love shriveled up real quick.”

"Okay…" but now, he wasn't sure, hesitating to resume his plan of maybe, possibly, potentially implying the development of romance.

Before he could say more, Bill flashed a grin at him. “What movie were we going with?” If Bill hadn't reminded him, he didn't know if he would've remembered to watch a movie at all when he was stumbling through the fog of his thoughts and struggling to realistically gauge if Bill could feel similarly about him.

Pulling his laptop from the floor to place it onto the bed with them, his reply was flippant and distanced, "Uh, whatever you want."

"Have any sixes?" Dipper asked but couldn't discern if he and Mabel were even playing the same game at this point as they divided their attention between the cards and a soap opera. Except he wasn't watching the soap opera, another dramatic series that he didn't care about, so he definitely wasn't waiting to see if Lady Ladington recovered from her recent breakup and saved her dog from an awful ex lover. That was Mabel and Stan's thing, not his.

After a study session, Mabel had proposed a plan he couldn't refuse: pestering Stan and Ford for an evening, and that would have worked great if Stan had actually been there. Questioning Ford, they'd learned Bill had requested the night off and Stan was carrying the workload in the meantime.

"What was that?" Ford questioned, cocking his head at them from the whiteboard and pausing mid-equation.

"Sixes, not…"

"Oh, I see."

Mabel skimmed her cards. “Do two threes work instead?”

"Uh, sure. I guess.” He didn't know the game, much less the rules. In response, Mabel threw the two cards down between them, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Go fish!”

Tentatively, Dipper picked a card from the deck, then another as he eventually found a six. Whatever that meant anymore since win requirements were cryptic, but he was going through the motions.

While they played, he kept one eye on the television, watching as Lady Ladington valiantly saved her dog and in the process, found a new sweetheart to begin pining after. "This show is super
unrealistic," he commented, but it was mild. "It's like the writers aren't even trying."

"How dare you!" Mabel gasped, theatrics visible. "You’re hating on it because it lacks your fancy mysteries! Lady Ladington is a national treasure, a portrait of feminine strength and beauty."

Smiling, he said, "I don't need mysteries. I mean, they're way better than a sappy romance plot, though. I don't know why people sit through them, everyone knows she's going to get with the main love interest at the end."

"Yeah, but you don't get it. It’s about the journey to the end. You should know, Dippy! You're writing your own little romance."

"My own— oh, my screenplay? I have to write that, it's for a class." But it was interesting how it'd evolved from a mystery-thriller into incorporating a romantic subplot between the main characters, that were maybe based off of him and Bill. Loosely, very loosely.

"Still!"

"I didn't say I was good at it or understood the genre that well," he pointed out. "I haven't read that many romance novels, just… the ones you have laying around, if I run out of my own books."

"Uh huh, “ Mabel teased lightly. "You love them so much that you turned your mystery screenplay into romance."

"That— that isn't what happened!" Dipper protested, sheepishly clasping his arm. Maybe he had read a decent amount of romance novels, but mystery would forever be his favorite. "It… I don't know, came out like that. There was chemistry between the characters, okay? And the professor said I needed a subplot, so it kind of worked out, I guess."

"Dipper, you can deny your love for romance novels all you want, but it won’t make it any less true.” Mabel nudged him gently, then glanced around as his phone began to vibrate. “Hey, what’s up with that?"

"It's my phone," he said distractedly as he twisted and turned and shuffled to reach it from his back pocket, then swiped the new notification from Bill.

(10:13 PM) hey where are you

(10:13 PM) Probably running through your mind. Have you checked there?

"Bill's asking where I am," he reported to Mabel, "so… I didn't tell him. I mean, I will, but he's kind of fun to antagonize."

"He's still being nice to you, right? At Drama Club, Bill said everything was good, but I want to make sure and hear it from you."

Warmed by her protective demeanor, Dipper confirmed, "Yeah, he's been fine."

(10:13 PM) don’t make this gay

"Well, sounds like I made it gay according to him."

(10:14 PM) I'm at Stan and Ford's with Mabel, but Stan's not here. Are you coming over?

(10:14 PM) you bet
Rapid knocking on the door was quiet at first, then quickly intensified to borderline banging. Dipper’s expression brightened. “I’m guessing that’s Bill. Should I leave him out there for a while?”

Over the noise, Ford responded, "For the love of my hearing ability, please do not." And since Mabel shrugged, Dipper broke from the card game and approached the door with a 'coming!' to hopefully reduce the noise. No luck.

Opening the door, it surprised absolutely no one when it was Bill. "Oh look, it's the Milkshake God," Dipper greeted, leaning against the frame but not budging further.

“Pine Tree!” Bill's entrance was derailed with Dipper in his way, eliciting confusion. “What are you doing?”

Idly, Dipper asked, "Did you, uh, teleport here or were you already around when you texted me?"

“Already in the area. I was wondering if it was worth stopping over before I went home. And you’re here, so yeah. I’d say it is.” It puzzled Dipper how Bill could say something like that and call him the gay one.

"Wow, you're the sweetest boyfriend ever," he teased, and… okay, maybe he could understand why Bill said what he did about their sexualities. Although he could barely get through it without laughing, he stepped aside and invited in a poorly-manufactured seductive tone, "I'd love it if you'd come inside."

"Mm, a Pine Tree after my own heart." Bill smirked as he gracefully strode into the apartment, casting a devilish look at him. “I’ll come in you as I please.” Despite starting this, Dipper was blushing to the tips of his ears while he closed the door and gave Bill a nudge toward the living room.

"We were playing cards, and Ford was working on your guys' semester project. Are you here to help Ford, or pretend to be helping Ford even though you're actually goofing off with me and Mabel?"

“Both. Mostly the second one. Fordsy is alright without me, and I'll get barked at if I try to help. ‘Cipher, your equations are lacking. Cipher, our research indicates I'm a brainiac genius egghead. Cipher, this is not the time to draw phallic shapes on my whiteboard.’”

Ford scoffed. "Poor impressions aside, I don't believe there is ever an opportune time to draw phallic shapes on my whiteboard."

Bill ignored him to ask, “What’re you two doing with the cards, anyway?”

"Playing a card game," he repeated, and that was as specific as it was going to get because which one they were playing had been lost ages ago. "Oh, and we were watching this soap opera. It's pretty… uh, out there, but it's Mabel's and Stan's favorite."

“Soap operas? Gross. They’d be better off watching sappy gay movies. Those are good.”

Intrigued and taking note of that, Dipper raised an eyebrow while he settled beside Mabel again, but his attention was on Bill. "Sappy gay movies? Are you just saying they're good because you star in most of them?"

“I’m not fucking gay. And why are they watching soap operas?” he grumbled, averting his gaze from Dipper, who was left scrambling to remember what Bill had told him that night about his
sexuality. He hadn't claimed to be heterosexual and the interaction with the almost-kiss suggested a hint of attraction, at least in the midst of intoxication. If Bill didn't consider himself attracted to men, though, that rendered Dipper's crush and their possible soulmate status as increasingly problematic.

Realizing he hadn't responded, he said, "That's what they watch, I don't know." However, it was delayed and sulkier than he'd intended, but he moved on to shuffling the cards. "Are you going to watch the soap opera or play cards with su?"

“Fuck the soap opera, I’ll play poker. Is that what you’ve been doing?"

“Nope,” Mabel said. “Also, stop hating on my show! It’s fan-tastic,” she emphasized, “and it has romance, drama, tragedy, everything. Let's see your movie recommendation hold up to an American jewel of cinema!”

"Yeah, we don't want to watch your gay porn or whatever you said," he added. "I guess we could play poker? I know you like to show off your money but no gambling."

“Where’s the fun in that?” Bill argued. “Come on, let’s bet.”

"The only thing we'll be betting is, like, pieces of candy."

Mabel reminded, "But then we can't even eat the candy because it's all dirty after everyone's hands have been on it a bajillion times, so let's not bet anything. Playing for fun is rewarding as it is!"

“You guys're killing the mood,” Bill said. “Seriously. No money, no candy because you’re afraid of some germs. What’s next: no strip poker because you don’t want your little belly buttons getting cold?”

Shrugging, Mabel said, “It's better than the money or candy idea.”

"I, uh…” Dipper shifted uncomfortably, kneading the cheap carpet in a sweaty palm. "I guess if you guys want to, but nobody should be getting completely undressed because that's... weird." The agreement was half-hearted, and he was hoping Ford would swoop with a 'not in my house' roadblock, but none came.

“Then it’s settled,” Bill said. “Strip poker. Hope you two are ready to get naked."

"Wait, what? I'm not playing anymore."

“If you’re in your boxers you might as well be naked.”

"As long as I'm not actually naked,” he said, warily peering at the room's occupants. Not exactly the crowd he preferred to be naked in front of, especially when two-thirds of it was his family.

“Great Stars, no. You won’t be. Jesus.” Bill shook his head, the corner of his mouth twitching with displeasure.

Perking up at the resumption of a game, Mabel beamed. “Are we getting started? I can take over shuffling and be the dealer for this round!”

Subsequent rounds switched dealers, cards passed between them, and based on the betting, clothing articles were shucked. Mostly Bill's, as Dipper and Mabel enacted revenge upon him for suggesting this method of betting in the first place. While Mabel had taken off her hoodie because she was too warm, and Dipper merely lost two socks and had his plaid shirt unbuttoned (Bill claimed that was a
violation, Mabel settled the dispute with a pass), Bill was nearly bare. Funny, considering he had the most clothes between them: a blazer, a vest, a bowtie, an undershirt, slacks, socks.

"Another score for Team Pines!" Mabel declared as she set her cards onto the carpet, revealing a straight. "Guess that means… Dipper, what does it mean?" she asked with a sly quirk of her lips, snickering at the sight of Bill who was down to boxers, pout scrawled on his face.

The show of displeasure was seemingly feigned in the small puff of his chest and the smirk whenever he'd catch him stealing glances… which was often. His tattoos were nice, his muscles were nice, the shape of his shoulders was nice, everything was so goddamn nice and it was flustering. To make matters worse, Bill knew that.

"Guessing it means we're done because Bill doesn't have anything left to take off," Dipper said, then an idea occurred to him, his heart skipping a beat and drumming faster than before, pounding at his ribs in violent thuds. "Unless… I wouldn't mind counting the gauze as a clothing item. You could take off the one on your left arm for this round?"

“What?” Bill bristled, tensing. “No. No. We’re not fucking doing that.”

Pacing to wear off some of the ache that'd pooled in his legs, Dipper rounded the coffee table but almost slammed his knees into it because he was snared by internal calculations of this discussion ending in disaster. "It's the only thing, man. Your boxers aren't being removed."

Although Dipper hadn't realized Ford had been listening since he'd relocated to his desk some time ago, he cut in, "I second that motion. Keep your underwear on your person, Cipher."

"I wanted to play strip poker, not ‘take off bandages’ poker. If we were playing this game as it should be, my boxers would be off, and Mabel would also be fucking undressed. It’s not my fault you two are ganging up on me like mini assholes."

"And give up a chance to see you almost naked?” Dipper played along and paused in his pacing near Bill to lean over him, trailing a hand over his bicep. "You look great like this." Although phrased as a joke, it wasn't even close to one.

"Are you taking it off or forfeiting?” Mabel inquired, gathering the cards.

“Fuck off, both of you.” Abruptly, Bill rose to his feet, and Dipper had no choice but to scramble back. “You’re a dick, and you suck at playing this.” Dipper's expression darkened, sourness dashing any semblance of playfulness.

"Hey—"

His snarl must have activated Mabel's instinct to smooth things over because she frowned, sympathy swaying between them. "Aw, don't be mad about this, you guys. It's just a game! Let's forget about it and watch the rest of this episode— Lady Ladington is about to hack into the Pentagon. Oh, wait, I guess she's already in."

“No.” Bill was headed for the door, a veritable thundercloud hanging over him. “Not when you were trying to push the bandages bullshit.”

An irritated sigh heaved from Dipper, and he collected Bill's clothes from the floor to go after him."Bill, wait." But he wasn't interested, tromping out the door in a huff and slamming it behind him. Over his shoulder, Mabel appeared worried and Ford confused, meanwhile Dipper mumbled something about "calming him down" as he readjusted the clothes in his grasp. Throwing the blazer over his shoulders, the rest was manageable to fit under one arm as he tossed on his shoes.
and headed into the hallway. No sign of Bill.

To his dismay, Bill was resolved to make this challenging. Dipper speculated how far he'd gotten, if he was bursting through the apartment complex's doors with nothing more than his boxers and gauze for cover, or if he was brooding in a stairwell. His pride wouldn't allow him to return.

Retracing his steps through the grungy complex until he was standing on cracked pavement of the parking lot, Dipper was about to give up and then, he saw him. In the glow of a buzzing, intermittent outdoor light, Bill was leaned against the building in a state of undress, not that he expected Bill to raid the nearest source of clothing: the laundry room. It was equally unlikely that anything would fit his figure, tall and built with a physique that Dipper marveled at.

"You probably shouldn't leave without these," he said, almost timid, but kept his distance as he indicated the clothing. He didn't want to have to track Bill down again.

"I'm fine without them," Bill grumbled. "I don't need you harassing me further over bandages once you hand those over. Being publicly naked is good."

It was astonishing his eyes didn't fall out of his head given how hard he rolled them. Wrapping the sides of the blazer around himself, he sarcastically said, "Great, I'll keep these clothes and this mental image of you to jack off with."

"Fine, you do that. I don't fucking care."

Irritation sparking at Bill's dismissive non-reply, Dipper didn't know why he'd bothered going after him. "I'll drop them off at the grad office," he mumbled to prevent this from escalating. "And before you make a comment about it: no, I'm not going ask." It was a lesson he'd learned too many times, but naïveté seduced him into believing their relationship had flourished to where the next time would be different. Prodding and pushing Bill for answers about sensitive subjects yielded fights, not results, and both of them walked away dissatisfied.

"What, are you fucking done now? I don't fucking believe you."

"Yeah, I'm done," Dipper said, terse and cold. Spinning on his heels, he was at the door of the apartment complex when he finalized the interaction with a short, "Bye."

"No, you're not fucking done. Get back here, you piece of shit." In the glass' reflection, Dipper saw Bill advancing toward him and turned around in equal parts alarm and annoyance, clutching the clothes tighter as it registered. Although he knew Bill was angry, likely at himself as much as he was Dipper, the insult painfully slashed him, waking a deep ache in his soul while the sheer surprise of Bill saying that was salt on the wound. It was hard to believe this was the same guy he'd shared intimate laughs and secrets with as they'd cuddled to Netflix, that level of comfort wavering.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You harassed me over the bandage, and now you won't even own up to it."

Despite his reservations over the claim, Dipper knew better than to think Bill was intentionally hyperbolizing this. "I shouldn't have proposed it," he said, treading carefully. Being upfront occurred to him, simply admitting to the desire of seeing his soulmark, yet he didn't voice it in worry it'd be perceived as another attempt to coerce him or an excuse, not an explanation for the unfortunate ending of the strip poker game.

"No, you shouldn't have." Bill growled, and it unconsciously backed Dipper against the glass, clothes held to his chest as if creating a barrier between them. "You know I don’t remove the gauze, and you were being a dick about it."
Dipper replayed the events leading up to this, reanalyzing everything he'd said, if he'd pressured Bill. He knew his request landed them here, but calling him names seemed overly harsh since he'd backed off for the sake of Bill's comfort. “What, cat got your tongue? Where was this silence when I originally told you I didn’t want to take off the gauze?” Bill’s eyes narrowed at him. “I still can’t fucking believe you. I thought we were friends.”

"Um…" Rattled and hurt, his throat felt dry, heart dropping at the implication. "I— I think I said you'd look good?" In the face of a conflict, it was difficult to sort through it, mind muddled with alternative paths he could've — should've — taken to avoid this, ways he could've calmed Bill before they were here, possibilities of how to proceed overwhelming him. But none of that made a difference to him and was met with numbness, drowned out by the resounding, very specific bit of Bill's rant: I thought we were friends.

“No, you fucking said—” And he cut off, a frustrated noise escaping him as he turned away. Desperate to escape this situation, he told himself he was legally allowed to leave in fifteen seconds if he didn't turn around again. “Why the fuck does it matter? I told you before I didn’t want my gauze messed with, and you disrespected my wish.”

Anything he could say seemed woefully repetitive, so he stayed quiet, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he debated burying himself in Bill's pile of clothes.

“Well? Are you going to fucking say anything?”

"Yeah, uh..." He rubbed his arm, line of sight lowering to a pebble on the concrete that was much less nerve-wracking to talk to than Bill. "Sorry that tonight went sort of badly and for disregarding that boundary." There was more he wanted to add, such as a promise that he wouldn't bring up the gauze or soulmark again, or a plea to disband fury toward Mabel since none of this involved her, but he couldn't get the words out.

When Bill opened his mouth to respond, panic shot into him. Dipper instantly lost his bravery. "I should be going," he blurted before Bill could utter a sound, and he clumsily pawed at the door handle of the complex before rushing inside.

A few paces into the entryway, he sent Mabel a text:

(11:34 PM) Bill isn't taking his clothes back.

(11:34 PM) I'll be up in a while, just need a moment.

And that moment was to sink to the dingy floors with his knees to his chest, collapsing into himself and hiding his face among the fabric of Bill's clothing. Spicy honey infiltrated his senses, and the sudden tightness of Dipper's chest and constricted breathing were indicators of an impending cry, but no tears came except for a couple that weren't tears as much as they were wetness in the corners of his eyes. Nothng particular had made him emotional, aside from perhaps the implication that their friendship deteriorated over the course of a single evening, but the intensity of the interaction wore on Dipper.

The deafening silence was shattered by the creak of the door, the clunk of it closing. Dipper didn't have to look.

“Pine Tree?” Bill’s voice was quiet.

Dipper waited, tensed to avoid moving a muscle or betray that he'd heard anything. But then, he caved, inhaling to regain his composure. When he spoke, it was despondent and muffled. "Hey."
“I’m sorry.” There was a pause. “I shouldn’t have.. done or said any of that. You’re a good friend, maybe even my best– and I’d be lucky if you were still one. I’m an overreactive ass.”

Quivering like a leaf, Dipper was thankful to hear it but had his guard on high, jaw clenched with stress. Bill's overreaction was a problem, a serious one that would need to be addressed professionally, but couldn't be broached when there was such fragility between them that it could crumble. "It's... yeah," he said lamely, unable to meet Bill's eyes. Neither 'fine' nor 'okay' was appropriate. "Sorry too."

“Don’t be, it’s not your fault. I’m just.. fucked up, and I shouldn’t have done that.”

A suspended breath fell from him, stilted and rough as he inched from breaking into another sob. Outside, he hadn't been certain what to say because nothing felt right and now, he was encountering the same. Bill had made a mess of his nerves but was simultaneously somehow a calming presence, called their friendship into question only to suggest he might be his best friend, said terrible things to take them back later. It was perplexing how Bill was one of the easiest people he'd ever talked to; they could chat for hours about nothing yet the conversation never staled, but it was also the most challenging relationship to maintain and navigate.

This night was a wreck, and Dipper wanted to forget about it.

Bill took a seat and reached over, putting his arm around him gently. Their knees brushed. “It’s okay, Pine Tree. I can leave if you’d like.”

Content in the beat of odd serenity, Dipper didn't push him away, tipping into the partial embrace. "You're a jerk," he finally said, light but watery. "...don't know why I like you." Why Bill had to be the sole person his heart was set on, he hadn't a clue but it was so miserable, equally puzzling, and incredibly amazing all at once.

“I know I’m a jerk.” Bill squeezed his shoulder. “I don’t know why you do, either.”

Using the tail of Bill's blazer, he wiped wetness from his eyes and slumped into Bill again, a puff of air deflating him as he trembled. "Are you going to be nicer to me?" he asked, gaze straight ahead and trained on the opposite wall. It was vulnerable and raw, and he couldn't muster the courage to look. "Calling your maybe-best friend a piece of shit is sort of a dick move." It wasn't the first time Bill had name-called him in anger. Other arguments surfaced, 'dick' and 'ungrateful brat' being thrown around during.

“I’ll be nice to you,” he assured.

Almost teetering on fragile, Dipper pressed, "Are you?"

“I will be, Pine Tree.” Bill urged Dipper against him. Slowly, his other hand inched closer, attracting Dipper's attention as it settled to rest below his knee to knead the underside of his leg. Dipper jolted as the dull ache became ten times as sharp with Bill's fingers digging into the sensitive muscle, deftly skimming the sore spots in precise motions.

Groaning lowly, he slid his foot out to give Bill more space. "I didn't think you'd remember," he confessed, recalling the demonstration of his physical therapy exercises to Bill, a quick interaction that'd been nestled between a study break at Bill's request. "Thanks, I— how did you know?"

“You kept getting up during strip poker, and it seemed like walking hurt you. Then I ran off like an idiot and you came after me, so I figured you might be in some pain.”

"Yeah," he confirmed, enjoying and dreading the massaging touch that caressed under his leg. Bill
was being careful with him and as much as he despised being treated with care, he didn't think he could handle anything more after the total chaos of tonight.

Letting his thoughts roam, Dipper wedged his head into the crook of Bill's shoulder, closing his eyes. The promise to be nicer was in the forefront of his thoughts, but he knew it wasn't resolved — this wouldn't be, not until Bill could show that he was serious about keeping his mood swings in check. Dipper knew he wasn't blameless; asking for the gauze to be removed was a terrible idea and bound to ruffle Bill, but he couldn't believe it'd been enough to incite an attack with cruel names. A proposition to battle problems between them instead of one another was on his tongue, but he didn't get an opportunity to voice it.

Breaking the stint of peace, Bill asked, “When are you available next? We can hang out then.”

"I don't know, any day. I guess, maybe… Monday? Can you wait that long?” A whole two days.

“I work Monday,” Bill said. “You can come by during my shift, though. If you want.”

"And be hit on by those old guys again?” Dipper asked, a murmur since he was pretty sure Bill could hear every stagger and hitch of his breath, his volume didn't need to rise above the minimum.

“They won’t fuck with you.”

"Then Monday,” he said, the approval rumbling from his throat. "Maybe I'll even go home with you." It was a joke, but the sad inflection of his downcast mood threw it off. "Sorry, I… I was kidding, but I might actually need a ride back. …And a ride there.”

“Well, I can give you a lift, though I can’t imagine you wanting to spend your entire night at the bar.”

A shrug lifted his shoulders. "Maybe if there are good shows, but I'm not sure who's performing. Even if there aren't, you're pretty fun to watch, honestly. You… I don't know, you look good when you're bartending and talking to people.” He was lively and whimsical, everyone's closest companion.

“So is that a yes?” Bill asked. “I think Soos is coming this week, you’ll probably be subjected to his show.”

"Mm-hmm, I thought it was good last time." Maybe he'd pass that onto Stan if he didn't know.

“Alright, guess I’ll be picking you up Monday.”

Studying Bill, Dipper's expression softened upon seeing his do the same. "Okay." Lingering in this moment felt a little too intimate than what he supposed they should be with their arms around one another, Bill's lack of clothing, an agreement to meet up soon, and their faces mere wisps apart, but Dipper didn't have the strength or will to end it prematurely. It was comfortable, tranquil, and maybe from how Bill's eyes flicked at his lips… it suggested he kind of wanted to kiss him, a thought that made his heart soar and anguish.

But he knew it was a bad idea after everything and it was possible Bill recognized that as well because he hesitated before he glanced away. Thank god. “Did you want to go upstairs?”

"Fifteen minutes ago, yeah," Dipper said, checking phone's clock. There was a text from Mabel asking what he was doing, if he was alright. It wouldn't be long until she came to investigate, so he detached from Bill and straightened to stand. "I'll see you Monday."
Bill stood as well, prompting Dipper to offer his clothes after shedding the blazer. To his relief, Bill took them. “Do you want me to go with you? I can help you if you need it.”

The desperation was distressing and had his commiseration when he realized Bill didn't want to be alone, but there wasn't much to be done. He knew he was welcome at Stan and Ford's apartment but since that didn't seem to be in the plan, Dipper shook his head with a melancholy smile and stepped closer to him to peck his cheek. "Goodnight, and uh, thanks for playing poker with us. It was fun, for a while."

“I’ll see you soon.” It was all Bill said, voice tapering with every word. Dipper couldn't ignore the pang in his heart, so he decided to run from it like a coward in how he gave him one last look before scaling the stairs, numbly walking back into the apartment as he tried to keep his thoughts anywhere but on Bill.

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick shoutout of appreciation to everyone who continues to read this fic. <3
Observing Bill had been a marvelous choice, an experience worth sitting in a bar for hours on end while he watched Bill's elegantly eccentric displays. The patrons adored him, naturally. It was hard to avoid when he threw on the wide, dazzling smile and conversed as if they were longtime friends that hadn't seen each other in eons. It was downright mystical to his social incompetence, but Dipper noted Bill's open posture, his upbeat attitude, joyous demeanor. All of it was so attractive.

Now, Bill was still entertaining guests, but nowhere near as frenziedly as he had during the peaks. The end of the evening meant Dipper was sore from sitting on the bar stool but otherwise doing well, clinging to distractions from homework.

"Hey, Bill," Dipper cooed teasingly, raising his head from the textbook to place it in his waiting palm, resting against the wooden surface of the bar. "I have a physics question." The last time he'd said that, he remembered a fight about Robbie ensuing and never resolving, but that wasn't what he had in mind. This was an ego stroke, a little pick-me-up for Bill since he'd been working his ass off making drinks and engaging patrons. More than a few times, he caught himself staring in awe and had to put in conscious effort to drag his eyes away. It was silly how whenever he saw Bill, not to mention exchanged light banter, his heart pounded in wild rhythms and a flush bloomed on his cheeks.

Bill spared him a peek, hands busy at work as he reorganized the drinking glasses below the counter. "What's on your mind, sugar?"

"So," he drew out the word while his smile widened, dazed and content, "you know about quantum field theory, right? I know this is probably a complicated question, but I'm wondering how I can focus on that when I'm in the same room as the stunningly handsome Bill Cipher."

"Sweetheart, how do those correlate? My charming looks have nothing to do with that theory."

Dipper scrambled for a connection. "Uh, well, I guess it treats particles as excited states, and… whenever you treat me, I go into an excited state?" The bullshitted response had him holding back laughter because it was borderline nonsensical, but Bill had treated him. With food and drinks.

The free food during Soos's set improved his stay along with mixed beverages that Bill let him 'taste test' by finishing completely, the rest a bore between reading physics textbooks and doing worksheets while club music and the noise of patrons droned on in the background.

Bill's body shook in laughter as he stood, wiping down the counter with a damp cloth. "That's the alcohol talking."

Although he didn't agree, he playfully said, "I mean, that'd explain why I think you're so good-looking tonight."

"Only tonight? Damn, you wound me, doll."

Dipper reached toward his vest, flicking one of many pins secured into the fabric. "It'd help if you wore the little buttons more often." Most were of drinks, some quotes, others simple objects drawn in flashy colors. It added a lot to his standard attire.

"These aren't for everyday use, honey. Work only."

Humming in consideration, his head cocked. "They're cute." And Bill was attractive, buttons or not.
Dressed for work with a formal suit more black than yellow, his eyes were bright and lively, hair slicked with meticulous care. His fine features were to die for, that jawline and the slight dip in his cheeks. A swoon-worthy sight to remind Dipper that he needed help, was too far into this crush to pull himself out of it.

“Not as cute as you are.” Bill blew a kiss, and that sent a thrill through him, the familiar warmth dappling his cheeks and turning his smile giddy.

"Wow, I…” he paused, at a momentary loss, "I don't know if you were serious— a while ago when you joked about courting... Probably shouldn't because I don't think I could resist falling for you if you're going to say things like that.” The phrasing suggested he hadn't yet become hopelessly enamored, absurd when all evidence insinuated that was a line crossed long ago.

“Perhaps that's my plan, sweetheart.”

Oh god. Palms sweating, pulse thumping in erratic beats, every inch of him feeling warm… Yep, definitely enamored, unless that was the alcohol's effect. Dipper's shaking hands grasped the edges of his book to ground him, and he swallowed, throat dry. "Nah, you couldn't possibly want to date me."

Bill flashed him a smirk, Dipper raised his eyebrows. “Don’t doubt me, Pine Tree.”

"I figured you'd prefer someone with... looks, charm, money, redeeming qualities, or at least a good dating record." Sitting back, he asked Bill teasingly, "Is it because you think you're past your prime at twenty-three? Trust me, you're as attractive as ever." But the last part didn't sound like the rest of the joke, it'd lost the inflection and was genuine, a tiny utterance alluding to more.

The actor in Bill magnificently faked irritation, but Dipper saw through it. “Please, darling, I’ve never been out of my prime. You can’t resist me.”

"...Isn't that the same as never having a prime?” he mused, and when Bill leaned closer to give him a critical eye, Dipper poked the heart-shaped button on his vest. "That reminds me, you should've seen this group of women—college age—here for the act at ten, they were fawning over you, kept looking over."

"Ladies do that all the time,” Bill told him. “Only one that matters is you.”

"So, I know you chat it up with the customers... Sports, news, drinks, that kind of thing. Is flattery how you get a tip from the hopeless romantic? Because I can tell you right now, I don't have any money."

He dramatically stepped away from the counter. “Guess I’m not interested. Bye, cutie.”

"Bill,” he whined, exaggerated, struggling not to laugh. "Get back here, man. I could pay you in other ways."

Bill whirled around to face him, a feral grin plastered on his lips. “Mm, are you going to put your money where your mouth is, doll?"

"I thought you'd rather my mouth be occupied with your—” Dipper stopped there, glancing to the bar section where several patrons remained; the crowd had thinned, flocking to the bar now that the comedy acts were over. Yeah, maybe they shouldn't be having this discussion in which he was about to graphically detail giving Bill a blowjob at his place of work with customers around.

Plus, they might get the wrong idea.
“Oh, I’d love to have your mouth occupied with that. You’d look so much prettier.” Bill winked at him, and although Dipper was on the brink of offense, he realized Bill had said prettier, a drastic leap from pretty.

Leaning over the bar counter, he gave Bill a kiss on the cheek and pulled away, gazing at him fondly. "Did I look as pretty as you thought I would?" he asked, smirking. "I believe cheek kisses are the currency that you and I have agreed on."

“No,” Bill murmured. “I was thinking of you doing something better with that pretty mouth of yours.”

Motioning toward the other bar stools, Dipper inquired, "Does it involve telling you that you have customers to serve?"

Bill let out an ‘oof’ upon noticing the lineup. “I’ll be right back.”

Returning to work, Bill appeased the disgruntled customers by dispensing charisma and booze while Dipper busied himself with homework but kept one eye on Bill. As it seemed the amount of thirsty patrons was dwindling, Dipper assumed that was his cue to not only be next but grab Bill’s attention by slamming the last of his beverage. Nudging the glass toward the other side of the counter, a glowing, fuzzy feeling washed over him and left him unable to decipher if it was Bill’s presence or the alcohol.

“Already eager for more?”

"Yeah, actually… I know you're trying to win me over with alcohol, but I'm not really into the taste. Like, the burn or bitterness, so I'll have water." Discovering Dipper's indifference, tonight had been Bill's attempt to create a drink he'd like, a funny phenomenon when Bill didn't give the paying customers half that consideration.

“Uh huh, I got you, doll.” It was frighteningly accurate with how he'd been mooning over Bill for the past several hours, swapping between assignments and thoughts of his allure, what they'd be like together. And best of all, the alcohol let him indulge in those fantasies beyond the constraints of logic and reality and anxiety. Bill did have him.

Snapping from his daydream, Bill had disappeared but after a brief search, Dipper found him crafting a drink.

"Is that for me? I said water."

“Relax, cutie. You’ll get water.” Bill finished and strode over, presenting the drink alongside a glass of ice water. The beverage was brightly colored, a slow gradient topped by a lemon, and he raised his eyes to Bill’s as if asking what’d been brought to him and why. “Try it. I think you'll like the flavor.”

Sipping it, he was met with a sugary, fruity rush of liquid that tingled but didn't burn, sting, or shrivel his tongue. "This is pretty good, man. I don't think I can taste the alcohol at all."

Bill puffed his chest. “I knew you'd enjoy it.”

"Am I going to be drunk if I finish this? It's nice and everything, but I like where I'm at," he said, inwardly examining feelings of warmth and looseness, not as uptight about social interaction or other stressors but still fully cognizant and capable.

“Nah, it’s not that heavy.”
He took another sip, grateful. "You're seriously the best bartender, and I would tip you if I could. Don't tell Stan I said that." Which part, it didn't matter. Either one would have Stan riled for his admiration or his money.

Through a snicker, he asked, “Not into us competing for your tip?”

"I don't have any spare money, so it would be an extension of your guys' standard ultra-macho dick waving contest, but for no payout."

“Ah, but I’d get the best payout for winning. Your love.”

Flustered, Dipper grinned but remained skeptical. "That particular payout isn't available to Stan unless you want to cash in on familial love, but I was kind of hoping that wasn't what you meant." As soon as he spoke, he determined he wasn't nearly intoxicated enough to be saying things like that and took an extra drink.

A chuckle rumbled in Bill, a lower sound than what Dipper thought he could make, and it had him squirming. “Sugar, I’m not a ‘love thy family’ type of guy.”

Envisioning a committed relationship, Dipper believed Bill would be devoted, almost to a fault. Maybe it was loneliness that kept him loyal, but Bill was basically always available and wanting to be with him. Beyond that, it was difficult to predict; he and Wendy were rocky and tumultuous, an exception more than a steady relationship to collect data from. Eyes lidding in dreamy thoughts of a sweet and gentle suitor who boasted a fiery side, he surveyed Bill, mind abuzz with possibilities. "Can't believe I implied you weren't, uh, boyfriend material forever ago, I bet you're a huge sweetheart. Sorry, I hope that's not weird."

“It’s fine,” Bill said. “But let’s be honest here, doll. The only sweetheart here is you.”

The flush accumulating over the past twenty minutes was nothing compared to the redness that spread over his cheeks in a crimson flourish, but he couldn't be bothered to duck and hide it, smiling too wide to care. "Oh my god."

“No, cutie, it’s ‘oh my, Bill!’”

"You're my god now?" he questioned, recovered from the burst of adrenaline and butterflies. "Seems conceited."

“I am your god, and you should address me as such. Chant my name, darlin’.”

Unable to help himself, Dipper snorted as he shook his head to signal he would not, in fact, be chanting Bill's name in the foreseeable future or accepting him into his life as a deity. "No way. That'd just sound like the opening to Bill Nye," he retorted. "What higher powers would you even possess?"

Bill made a noise of disgust, shooting Dipper a dirty look. “The power of ripping your clothes off to the tune of Bill Nye the Science Guy.”

He tapped his fingers on the glass of his drink. "That sounds... surreal. My childhood and my sexual coming-of-age moment tied into one awkward, confusing encounter as Bill Cipher strips me and Bill Nye chats science in the background."

“He’ll do the chanting for us.”

Jokingly sultry, he said, "Depending on how you do after the clothes are off, we might not need
“Keep talking like that and I’ll be fucking you over this counter, right here and now.” Astonished scandal swept over his features at the notion, and Dipper gestured frantically at the other patrons, at the doors to the kitchen, over to the dining area, sputtering half-intelligible protests of why they couldn't possibly do that before remembering… that wasn't even an option, this conversation worlds from reality.

"Wouldn't want you to get fired," was what Dipper finally settled on, then busied himself with taking a few gulps of the drink. When he refocused on Bill, a sudden curiosity hit him. "...Hey, what are you, by the way?"

Once he'd asked, he started to correct himself in acknowledgment of its vagueness, but Bill spoke before he could, “Pansexual, sugar. I thought you knew that since I've been eyeing up pans.”

"It's incredible that you know what I meant," he commented, but then addressed what Bill said with an eye-roll. "That's too bad. I was hoping you might have a thing for dippers, but I see you're into other kitchenware. Wait, I guess they're called soup ladles, not dippers."

“Soup ladles, because I could just drink you up.”

"Really? You think a romance between us would pan out?"

“Only if you could handle it, honey.”

"Funny." Dipper noted the pun and wondered how Ford put up with this for over a year of working with him professionally. "But probably not. You're weird as hell, probably out of my league, and experience doesn't override my lack of qualifications here.” Well, maybe not that last aspect. It was ambiguous whether dessert with Robbie was a date, more casual than the standard would be but nevertheless an exploration of prospects.

“Honey, I don’t care how experienced you are. Doesn’t change how I feel.”

The inkling that Bill had more than friendly affection resurged, Dipper's heart taking rabbiting jumps as he snapped through the likelihood of this being real, Bill actually possibly having a crush on him, or perhaps he was joking about this, or Bill acted the same with all of his friends, or he was overthinking it as always and—

“Hold on, doll.” Although that wasn't helpful at all, Bill flashed him a toothy smile, attention stolen by an approaching customer. Mind racing, Dipper was stuck in a dazed state until Bill returned, nodding at the fruity drink. “Hey, did you want me to make you another one?”

"It's not gone yet," he pointed out, then shrugged and went with 'sure.' The taste made physics less painful.

As Bill departed to the other side of the bar to mix it, he was content to zone out chewing his lip until, behind him, a familiar voice startled Dipper by amiably greeting, "Hey." A sharp inhale constricting his chest, Dipper swiveled in the chair to bring Robbie's slouched frame into view, his hands submerged in the stitched heart hoodie. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

"Uh, likewise. I— I thought you were banned from this place.” That was accompanied by a subtle head tip, eyes darting to the corner to suggest Bill was right there and could easily see him if he turned around. To answer what he was doing, he thumbed the corner of the textbook and relished in the noise. "Studying. Hanging here while Bill works since he's a pretty good source of answers."
"Yeah, I called about that and the manager was going to chat with me and Bill. ...Are you drinking?"

"Free drinks. Bill's been making them to show off or something, all because I told him I don't like the taste of alcohol." It wasn't legal, but the beverages were light and Bill had said the manager wouldn't care if they stayed lowkey about it.

Robbie made a face. “You're not twenty-one, so isn't that, like, illegal...? Are you okay with it?”

"It's seriously fine," Dipper reassured. "If I didn't want to drink it, I wouldn't. Bill wouldn't force me, and I'm not drunk or anything, if you're worried about that." If not for Dipper's mild interest in taste-testing the flavors to find one that'd suit his palette, Bill wouldn't have offered at all.

Robbie narrowed his eyes, but he nodded slightly. “Okay, man. If you need anything let me know.”

"Yeah, I—"

“What is he doing here?” Bill growled from behind him, posture rigid and almost aggressive. “I thought I kicked you out, Valentine.”

"Hey, relax," Dipper said, hands coming to rest over one of Bill's, the touch intended to calm. "He's here to talk to the manager, don't worry about it."

“No, he's not allowed to be here. I told him to get out. I'm going to call the fucking cops.”

“Whoa, don't get so hasty, man. I wanted to talk to your boss, y'know, the person who actually calls the shots.”

Squeezing his hand, he murmured, "Bill. It's okay." To Robbie, he gave a quizzical glance fringing on impatient, wondering why he was waiting for Bill to explode at them if he had to talk to the manager.

“I don’t get why you’re pissy with me,” Robbie continued, then addressed him, “Is this about our date? Is that what he's mad about?” Color draining from his face, Dipper choked because no, he hadn't even thought to tell Bill about it when all that'd happen—

“'You what?' Bill’s voice rose, ending in an audible crack. “What the fuck!”

Wincing and shrinking down, that was approximately the expected reaction. Knowing it couldn't possibly go over well, and considering how the date had ended in a decision to be friends, he'd decided informing Bill wasn't necessary, merely a method of stirring up dramatics. "Look, it wasn't... we just went out for ice cream," he mumbled, kicking nervously at the wooden paneling of the bar. "It was one time."

“'You went on a date with him?' Bill repeated, staring with revolt and deep betrayal.

"Kind of," he countered, defensive and sheepish. "It was more like an... uh, outing for two friends, and it wasn't romantic."

“We had a great time,” Robbie told Bill pointedly, and Dipper groaned because that was among the worst things to say. Bill looked ready to murder him, visibly tensed as his grip around the glass tightened, knuckles whitening.

The glass shook, suggesting an iron hold that could translate to disaster if sustained. "Okay, Bill, maybe— it might be time to let go of the glass..." Dipper said as he tried to pry Bill's fingers from
it, but his grip was unrelenting. He forced a lighter tone as he attempted to peel them away. "Just gotta remove your fingers there."

"I can’t believe you," Bill bitterly accused, retracting the glass from Dipper’s reach, but his grasp was steadfast, and his furious gaze was similarly unwavering. "Especially you," this was to Dipper, whose eyes widened like saucers.

Rearing back in surprise, Dipper blurted, "Me? I— what?"

"Going out with him?" Bill growled, squeezing harder.

And then, the glass gave way with a sickening crunch that could be heard above the bustle of the bar. A pained intake of breath followed.

"Bill!" Dipper cried in alarm, leaning forward to see over the counter, afraid of what damage he might've inflicted on himself. Bill had dropped the glass, shaking his hand and sending scarlet droplets onto the floor. The rest of the bar's noise was drowned out by blood rushing in his ears as Dipper gasped and a string of ‘oh my god’s spilled from him to join Bill's curses.

Even Robbie seemed worried, but Bill took a step back, holding his hand at an angle to reduce the dripping. "Whoa man, do you need help?"

"I'm fine, fuck off."

"Dude, you’re fucking bleeding. We should get you to the ER."

Robbie was moving to go around the counter, but Bill swung a fist at him. "I said fuck off!"

Tuning into the other patrons, there were hushed murmurs growing in volume and concern over the injured bartender and several suggestions of retrieving the manager, which Dipper could only hope someone would do.

"Okay, okay, relax," Dipper said, though he sounded far from it, raggedly breathing and a thin sweat breaking over his body. He clenched at his chest and had a fistful of plaid, bunching the fabric as panic bubbled within him. Although aware it was risky, he ignored that to slide over the bar counter. "Please don't hit me, man. I just want to see it."

Bill took another cautious step back, narrowed eyes on Dipper as he approached. "I'm fine. Just— both of you need to fuck off, I don't want to fucking see you– why did you choose him?"

"You're not fine," Dipper argued over him. "You're holding your hand, and— and oh god, there's blood. Dude, there's blood literally dripping onto the floor. Is there a first-aid kit in here somewhere?" When scanning the room didn't yield anything, he continued closer to Bill and captured his hands in his own, gently curling his fingers around each to separate them.

"Stop.." Bill tried to pull, grimacing, the motion seemingly agitating his wounds. "Washcloth in my pocket."

Tempted to ask which pocket, time wasn't in their favor and he essentially patted Bill's vest pockets, then his slacks where he felt the washcloth. Retrieving it, he took Bill's wounded hand, stomach doing a flip as he saw the damage. There was blood everywhere, causing difficulty discerning where the cut was, but he nevertheless wrapped it securely. "We can clean it once you stop bleeding."

"Why are you doing this?" Bill sounded exhausted. "You’d have a better time with Robbie."
"Oh, stop it and let me care about you," he scolded, no heat attached. "We'll talk about that later, but we seriously need to get this under control first." Bill's hand was covered but darkening the washcloth with blood.

Robbie had reappeared, a stranger at his side. “See? I told you he was bleeding all over.”

“Bill,” the man said, gravelly, almost a snarl. “Get in the back, now. We need to close the bar.” Hands to his hips, stern displeasure rested on the blood droplets.

Beside Dipper, Bill grumbled, “Get better glasses. These pieces of shit break too easily.”

"Um, do you want me to clean? I know where things are. I don't work here, but I mean, I could." Then after a pause, he added, "Clean. Not work here."

“No, blood is a bio-hazard. If you tried to clean, it could result in legal action being taken against our restaurant. Please, go in the back and wash your hands. I’ll take care of this from here.” The manager's lingering stare didn't permit further protests, so he slunk to the restrooms to wash himself of Bill's blood.

Waiting at a closed bar for Bill and Robbie wasn't as bad as he thought it would be since he still had homework to complete. Until, well, he finished it and was stuck counting the bottles of liquor stashed on the shelf, assembling backstories for the few remaining patrons that were sticking it out until the bar reopened.

Bill was the first to come back, pale and dazed. Instantly alert, Dipper internally calculated how much blood he'd lost, though it didn't match his complexion.

Dipper wriggled off the bar stool, rushing over guided by a combination of distress and relief. "Are you okay? What happened?"

“I told you Robbie was a fucking dick.”

In the dark about what that was alluding to, Dipper brushed the thought away while inspecting the wound, glad the bleeding slowed and wasn't soaking through anymore. "Do you want to go to the ER? I don't think your boss should be mad or anything if you have to leave, this might need medical attention."

“I bet my boss would be happy to see me fucking go.”

"Look, do you want me to get someone to take you or not? I don't know if you'll be able to drive..."

Stubbornly, he rejected the idea, “I don’t need anyone to drive me anywhere.”

"You can't serve drinks like that," he pointed out. "Your hand is messed up, and it's kind of gross if you're bleeding everywhere."

“Yeah, I’m not fucking serving drinks anymore. The customers can be happy about that.”

"You're not?" Dipper asked, pleased that it seemed both Bill and his boss were being sensible about this. "Okay, good. We can go to the ER like Robbie said, or to your place? I guess it depends on how bad you think it is. I couldn't get a decent look."

“I’m not going to the ER... and Robbie can choke on a dick. I hope he fucking dies.”

Dipper staggered back, stunned. "Dude! That's... super not cool, like—"
Down the hallway, a door slammed shut, and the manager was power-walking into the room with Robbie dogging him. “Come on, dude, firing him was extreme! Give him his job back, I didn’t want anybody to get fired over this. I just wanted to be able to come here.”

Jaw falling open, he exclaimed, "Wait, fired?" And he turned to Bill, delivering an equally-shocked variation of the first, "You got fired!"

The manager cleared his throat. “Yes, and he needs to leave immediately. He’s not welcome back, nor will he be rehired.” He said to Robbie, “Don’t feel so bad about selling your friend out. We’ve been waiting for a good reason to fire him.” While wishing he could be upset on Bill's behalf, there was no logical persuasion to a manager that'd made his decision, and Dipper suppressed a tired sigh. Robbie didn't seem placated, still urging the manager to reinstate Bill's position to no avail.

Fingers curling around Bill's wrist to haul him toward his belongings awaiting retrieval, he suggested, "Let's go home and get your hand cleaned up, okay?"

“What home?” Bill challenged. “You don't live with me. You might as well live with him since you went out with that fuckhead.”

Sparing a pained look to Robbie didn't rescue him from this mess, not when he was too busy chasing after the manager with an amended story of how he'd deserved being removed from the bar that evening. Addressing Bill, he replied, "For fuck's sake, I don't live with either of you. Let's go to your apartment. There, is that better? Can we get out of here? Come on." Tugging Bill's wrist, Dipper threw his bag over his shoulder and started pulling him to the exit, a futile effort if not for Bill's compliance.

Outside, Bill sulked on the walk to his vehicle, unlocking the doors and climbing into the driver’s seat. “Fuck that place.”

About to speak, he stopped as Robbie burst from the establishment and dashed toward the car but veered off to the passenger side. Ignoring Bill's threats of running him over, Dipper rolled down the window since he seemed almost hysterical, guilt clear as day.

"Hey, Bill." Realizing this conversation wasn't directed at him, Dipper pressed against the seat to give Robbie a better view. "I’m real sorry, dude. I didn’t mean to get you fired, I just.. wanted to drink here again. Look– I can get you another job. My folks're looking for a grave digger and a groundskeeper, or I could hook you up at the diner."

Bill’s response was the bird, and rolling the window up in Robbie’s face, but Dipper made a dissenting noise and rolled it down again. This was met with a fight for control, but then there was a distinct click, and the window was rolled back up.

"Did you..." and Dipper tried it again, expression flattening. "Did you use the child lock?" Already knowing the answer, he mouthed a 'sorry' to Robbie, frowning.

“Apparently I need to when you’re around.”

Exasperatedly, he flopped against the door in defeat. "Okay, whatever. Are you sure you can drive safely with your hand sliced up?"

“Yeah, yeah.” The ride was quiet and resulted in a detour where Bill collected Marigold, muttering about how Robbie might've taken his job but not his dog, not on his watch.

By the time they reached the apartment, Dipper felt his adrenaline crashing but was intent on caring for Bill's injury anyway, and he let Marigold breeze past them into the apartment (after
ensuring the other residents hadn't seen her), then trailed behind while encouraging Bill to sit on the sofa. "Just rest," he instructed once he'd stored the dog supplies, "I'm going to grab some stuff to help your hand."

“My hand’s fine.” Bill patted the armchair, urging Marigold to the oversized cushion. She jumped up and placed her head on the armrest as Bill claimed the sofa diagonal to begin stroking her, but Dipper didn't have a chance to admire the adorable scene since he was partway to the bathroom, then sifting through Bill's medicine cabinet. After their fistfight, he'd taken stock of where items were.

When he returned, it was with an actual bandage, a wet cloth, and an antiseptic. Perching on the arm of the sofa, he hovered over Bill to take his hand and unwind the washcloth. "This might hurt," he warned as the last of the cloth was separated from the wound, luckily without resistance. But then came the worst step: cleaning. Diligence didn't begin to describe the level of caution exercised as Dipper wiped dried blood from the injury as Bill’s hand jolted slightly, clearing it to reveal a nasty gash that thankfully didn't seem to have lodged remnants of glass. Holding the antiseptic up to Bill, he inquired, "Ready?"

"Just. Fucking get it over with.”

He disinfected the wound and tried to make the process painless but knew it had to sting terribly, given the air sucking through clenched teeth and not-quite-stifled grunts, the small movements of Bill struggling. "There, done," he announced as he replaced the bandaging. "You're going to have to keep cleaning and replacing that, though. The cut's kind of bad, but I don't think there's any glass in it."

"Thanks,” he huffed, fingers curled in Marigold's fur. “I’ll probably leave it and see what happens.”

The objection was immediate, "No, it'll get infected."

"Nah, you’re worrying too much. Even if it does.. not like I have a job, that fucker.”

"What?" It was a demand, not a question. "Infections are serious business, jackass. I don't want you to be rushed to the ER or die because you're too lazy to change some bandages. If I have to, I'll stay here and do it for you."

Dropping the subject, he exhaled and fell into Bill, aware they'd have to talk about the date and his firing sooner or later. "Also, Robbie didn't want to get you fired. It sounded like he was begging your manager to reconsider, and he offered you a job."

"Please, all he’s doing is acting so you like him. But that fucker can’t fool me, I know what game he’s playing.”

"I don't know, seemed pretty genuine to me," he offered, shrugging and sinking against Bill. "But it doesn't matter, not really. You should be civil with him, and— I still can't believe it, that you broke that glass." Traces of surprise had faded from the recollection, disappointment remaining. "Do you think the manager will let you grade his students' homework to pay it off?" Easing the potential anger from his joke, he nuzzled into Bill's neck to reinforce it as playful, but stayed there to breathe in the comfortingly sweet spicy honey scent.

“I’m going to sue them,” Bill told him, though he didn’t sound angry, just exhausted.

Chuckling at that, he mumbled, "Oh my god, dude." It was good that Bill kept his humor at least.
"Why are you laughing? I’m serious. They wrongfully terminated me, therefore I have the right to sue their asses into the red."

"I don't know if that was wrongful termination..." he said, but then tapered off because talking about it in detail would likely spur Bill into action. If he forgot, the chances of it amounting to a court case were substantially less, so he chose to divert his attention.

"About the date," Dipper began, "it's not really what you think. We went out for ice cream and afterward, agreed it wasn't going to work between us. Like, as a relationship. Robbie had his own issues to sort through, both of us weren't 'feeling' it, and I..." Holding his tongue, he cast a wary glance at Bill and averted his eyes after a second, the sparks of apprehension igniting within him as he wondered if he should say it. No, probably a bad idea. Not with how the rest of this night had gone.

"Did Robbie sabotage me because of this?" Bill questioned. "To fuck with me by going through you?"

"Uh, no," he said, bowing his head to paw the back of his neck. "We ended on good terms—friends, and like I told you earlier, he was there to talk to the manager because he wanted to visit the bar again without you kicking him out."

"Yeah, look at how that went! He got me kicked out."

"I still don't think he meant to do that, and I promise it wasn't because he was bitter about anything."

"He conspired with that stupid manager to get me removed." Although typically a fan of conspiracies, the absence of foundation deemed this one uninteresting. "I know you trust him and believe he can do no wrong, but I’m not going to let his emo-ness blind me."

Unsure of how to convince Bill it'd been an unfortunate turn of events, Dipper lifted his eyes to the ceiling but there were no answers awaiting him, nothing to use as an excuse to stay.

"If you have everything you need, and you promise you're going to take care of your injury by not letting it get infected, I should probably head to my dorm for the night."

"I don’t think I can promise that," Bill muttered. "Wouldn’t want to be a liar too."

"Dude, why. Why won't you take care of yourself?" he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fine, whatever. I'll do it for you. Do you want something to eat? Coffee? I know you didn't get a chance to grab food during your shift."

"No, I’m not hungry. Or thirsty."

"Oh." Shoulders curved inward, he slumped dejectedly. "That's okay, I'm guessing you're pretty sick of me after spending seven hours together."

"I thought you’d be sick of me."

"Are you kidding?" He landed against his side and leaned into Bill, a semi-sad, relaxed smile on his face. "You're a riot, man. Flirty, fierce, fearless, and super funny, and every minute with you —" Dipper rambled, then hushed as he realized this was verging into something more personal than he was comfortable with, so he coughed. "Every minute is, uh, a gift from God or whatever us good Christian boys attribute it to."
Bill grinned at Dipper, theatrically swooning back. “The only Heaven that exists is the moment of euphoria I get in your presence.”

Falling into laughter, Dipper's head came to rest affectionately on Bill's shoulder as he quieted again, a look best described as 'tender' resting on Bill. Amused, he mumbled, "You are the biggest sap."

Bill offered him a small smile. “To you, Pine Tree.”

Although that raised his eyebrow, Dipper didn't comment and thought to his date with Robbie, suppressing a sigh. "Remember that day I sent you a picture of my yogurt, we talked on the phone, then we texted for a while and you came over for some Netflix and cuddling?"

“What about it?”

"That was my 'date' with Robbie. It wasn't actually a date since we agreed it wouldn't be, but I spent it talking to you. Sad, huh? I guess I kind of suck at the whole… romance stuff."

“I dunno, you do a good job around me.”

"To be fair," he started, fingers grazing Bill's soulmarked forearm, "you are a much more practical romantic prospect than Robbie is. Mabel thought he and I would be a good match, but I don't see it.”

“Yeah.” Bill hovered closer to him. “Your sister doesn't have good taste.” Although he was about to agree that she didn't have the best record setting up potential love interests, the next thing Bill said obliterated it: “The only good match with you is me.”

Heart skipping a beat and racing twice as fast in amendment, he eyed his marked arm and then Bill. Soulmates, possibly, but it didn't feel like it mattered anymore because it wasn't the basis of his attraction, or hours of analysis didn't suggest it was. It'd crept up on him, developed; a seed that'd spurted and grown over time too slowly to truly realize it'd been happening. "Wait, like…” he blurted, thoughts a mess, "you and I? Do you mean us dating, or...?"

“Hey, I didn’t say anything about dating…”

Dipper hadn't noticed he was holding his breath until Bill clarified, and he unclenched again, well… more like deflated, honestly. It'd been dumb to think Bill was admitting to the chemistry between them. "Oh,” he replied and rubbed his arm nervously, "yeah, uh… I guess you didn't, but that makes sense. I probably don't have a good romantic match anyway since anyone not discouraged by my looks is once I open my awkward mouth.”

“You have a pretty mouth,” Bill corrected him.

"Wow, you think so? Thanks.” The airiest of chuckles spilled from him, and his gaze danced from Bill's, to his mouth, then to his eyes again. The glitter of light in the dichromatic arrangement was breathtaking. "You too. I don't know why Wendy didn't want to kiss you.” It was said before he could halt it, before he could think better of that and keep it to himself that he knew details of their breakup.

“What? She didn’t want to kiss me?”

"Whoa, chill. I just meant… well, okay. After you guys broke up, Wendy told me that things weren't going good with you two? Intimately, I mean.” Dipper chewed his lip. "And I thought she meant sex, but she said it was everything. I figured she wasn't initiating things anymore or was
rejecting you."

His lax posture and jovial ruffling of Marigold's fur led Dipper to believe Bill was mildly entertained. "That was me."

"What? Seriously? You were the one rejecting her?" Dipper asked, puzzled, then sputtered. "Dude, I had no idea. I thought— Why?"

“I don’t think I need to explain my lack of desire to touch Red.”

Dipper's eyebrows furrowed, contemplating. "I thought you guys had a good, um, physical relationship. You weren't into her the entire time? Why did you date her if looks matter that much to you?"

“You know it wasn’t always like that. Her nagging was a turn off.”

"Not to say it didn't happen, but Wendy doesn't strike me as the 'nagging' type," he commented and dropped it, yet was intrigued by the circumstances of their relationship's deterioration.

Recalling an earlier conversation, he pressed, "Are you sure you don't want food or coffee or something? I don't want to leave you with nothing to eat since it'll be a pain for you to make by yourself."

“If I need to, I'll throw something in the microwave. I don't need coffee.”

That wasn't leaving much for him to work with. "Okay. Do you need me to..." Dipper zeroed in on the apartment, "clean anything before I go? Since you shouldn't be using your injured hand."

A beat passed, but it did nothing to equip him for what was coming. "No, you can just fuck off like everyone else did." Flinching at the tone, Dipper's expression betrayed the flooding of surprise and hurt; while he may otherwise have been irritated at the comment, this was different. It'd arose during a peaceful, seemingly-affectionate moment, and he hadn't expected the harshness to bring it to a screeching stop and carve it in half.

Throat feeling like sandpaper, Dipper gauged, "You... want me to leave?" He was retracing his steps in the discussion, uncertain if it had been several minutes ago when he'd proposed departing. It was possible Bill had wanted him to leave then and there, and he'd missed the hint.

“Sure, you made it clear you already planned on doing so.”

"I was trying to come up with excuses to stay, actually," he replied bitterly. "I wouldn't have wasted my time if I'd have known you were about to give me an unignorable reason to leave."

“IT all sounded like you wanted to leave,” Bill complained. “Making me a quick meal so you don’t have to come back, offering to brew me coffee which takes like, an extra minute max, then you offered to clean. If you wanted to stay longer, why don’t you do that?”

In hindsight, that had been the better idea rather than generating tasks to stay and be useful to Bill. It wasn't as if those had solely been intended to buy him additional time- that was the added bonus of doing something nice for him that he likely would contend to in the coming days. But now the issue was...

"Were you trying to guilt trip me?" he asked, retreating from Bill to frown at him from the other end of the sofa. "When you were doing the whole 'fuck off like everybody else' thing."
"Possibly."

"Yikes, dude," he said as his frown twisted to a grimace, and he drifted into the cushions again. Unable to make eye contact, Dipper kept his focus on Marigold's peacefully sleeping form. "I don't get it. Sometimes, I feel like things are relaxed and fine with us, and the next minute you're yelling at me or trying to be manipulative. What's the deal?" It wasn't a recent problem, it was a steady element throughout their friendship which was ironic considering Bill's moods were anything but steady.

“I don’t know,” Bill said. “I get this feeling— this sensation you don’t even want to be here, you’d rather be with them, so it's... easier to expel you from the apartment before you can make some lame excuse to go. I can make my own excuses then.”

While Dipper processed that, it unearthed the extent of devastation inflicted through people walking out of his life that Bill must have endured for this to be his coping mechanism. It seemed to be control and illusion, essentially removing people before they had the chance to do it themselves because it allowed Bill to pretend he was responsible for their departure, protected him from the knowledge that they left on their own accord.

"Jesus Christ," he said under his breath, in sorrowed awe. "You know I wasn't kidding, right? Earlier, when I... I said I want to be with you." So painfully that it hurt sometimes, that his other friendships dulled in comparison. "You're one of my best friends, and I like spending time with you, man. More than I should, probably." That was tailed by a short, anxious laugh as he ran his hand through his hair. "There aren't many people I'll chat with while literally on a date with someone else."

“I like spending time with you too,” Bill confessed. “It freaks me out when you seem to want to leave. I don’t want to lose control of what happens.”

"Look, I'm not leaving," he promised, "not... tonight, unless you tell me to." It didn't seem like Bill was in a solid place emotionally or physically to be alone. "But Bill, that's seriously— you should talk to someone about it, like a professional therapist." If the unhealthy mindset produced freakouts, uncontrollable anger, and manipulation, counseling could assist.

“But... they’ll tell me what to do. I don’t want them to be in control. That’s my job.”

Dipper caught the darkening of his expression, the warning of impending problems. "They would offer suggestions if you ask for them, but otherwise that's up to you to implement or ignore it. I just think... it'd make you happier with yourself." Aiming to keep Bill from taking a defensive stance, he scooted closer again and draped a hand over his shoulder, thumb circling in a massage.

“I don’t know," Bill said apprehensively. “It doesn’t sound like a good time, Pine Tree. I don’t want them sucking away my life like some... therapy vampire. I already had to deal with them a few years ago, I don’t want to go back.”

Although curious, he didn't ask since Bill didn't offer, and he didn't want to overstep his boundaries. "If you've already seen a psychologist, then you know how this works. It's really not a big deal, and it can be helpful. If I didn't go to mine, I probably would've— been... worse off.”

“They stopped working, so I quit them once my medication kicked in. I don’t want to go back to that. They fucking suck.”

"Whoa, back up. Your medication? What? I didn't know you were on medication."
“Yeah, and apparently it’s real shitty too, doesn’t seem to be working like the therapists. I should quit it.”

"No, uh, maybe… you should see the psychologist, and try to get your medication adjusted if that's related. I mean, how long ago did you get the prescription? Things can change."

“Don’t remember. Seven years?”

"Seven years?" he repeated, gawking. "Holy shit, go to a professional." When Bill didn't acknowledge him or the request, Dipper murmured more pleadingly, "Bill."

“Pine Tree…”

"Bill."

“Don’t do this to me.”

"Get help," he urged, hanging onto the hope that Bill was bending on this, "it'll be good for you, and I'll—you know I'm going to support you and stuff, like if you need someone to talk to about it. I've been there." He drew in a gulp of a breath, gathering his courage, then releasing it in a braver statement. "Just want you to be your best self because I care about you. A lot. You're an asshole, but still."

“I’m not an asshole,” Bill grumbled. “I’m the asshole, and I don’t. I don’t know. I guess I’ll do the therapy.”

Dipper blinked at him, then beamed. "You'll do it? That's great, man."

“Uh huh.” Bill glanced away as he reached over to stroke Marigold. “This is going to suck. I always fucking hated it.”

The venom erased the smile from his face. "Try it and if you don't like it, you don't have to keep going." Not preferable, though there was no point in Bill attending if he was building resentment for it.

“I know I won’t like it,” Bill told him. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m tired, Pine Tree.”

"Do you want to sleep? I can get going or," he measured his reaction, "I could stay, if you want…?"

“I’d rather you stay.”

"Okay." Dipper waited a second, wondering if he would relocate them to his room or undress or do any pre-sleeping rituals but it seemed he was getting comfortable, then muttered something about being too drained to move. It was alright, wholly minuscule in relation to the bigger picture: Bill was going to therapy, he'd actually agreed to try. He wanted to be better.

“Come here, Pine Tree.”

Complying, he wedged himself between Bill and the backing of the sofa. "Thanks," he murmured, "for at least giving the therapy a shot."

“Mm, anything for you,” Bill responded, draping an arm over him protectively to ensure he stayed nestled into his side — one arm for him, one for Marigold. They were an odd little family, curled up together on Bill's sofa in a heap of three a.m. fatigue, but Dipper couldn't imagine being
anywhere else.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Checking the clock, Dipper jolted upright with a staggered inhale. How could they have spent two hours doing this? Physics wasn't fun. It'd be better categorized as cruel and unusual punishment, but Pacifica's presence and the three sugary coffee drinks somehow made it more bearable. Time had slipped by and before he knew it, nighttime hung over West Coast Tech's campus.

"We should stop here, since it's getting kind of late. ...What do you think?" Dipper asked as he gathered his items from the small table in the coffee shop, then placed them into his backpack. Textbook, worksheets, notebook, mutilated pens. When Pacifica didn't answer and was staring quizzically, he elaborated, "I mean about studying. I know you're doing the practice problems and vocabulary right, but are you getting it?"

Pacifica flipped her hair. "I'm a Northwest, of course I'm getting it." At the display of arrogance, Dipper gazed in mild amusement until she admitted more sheepishly, "It's a lot easier than it was earlier in the semester."

It would likely be one of their last sessions, though perhaps not the last one since Bill would be distributing a study sheet that'd outline important areas to look over for the final. The thought was bittersweet as he reckoned the disbanding of their tutoring lessons, and he knew he'd miss her companionship.

"Yeah?" Dipper asked, relieved and happy for her. "I remember that. It was… uh," he scratched the back of his neck, "rough, getting started, but you really pulled it together. It's impressive how much we managed to get through in two months." Taking the credit for it would be egotistical because once Pacifica had established a baseline knowledge, it'd gone faster. She understood the lessons, texted him the occasional question, they didn't have to truly review anymore. It'd fallen into place. "I know you could do it, obviously— the only people who won't improve are the ones that don't bother trying or coming to class."

Noticing Pacifica's attention rested out the large glass window, she seemed distracted as she collected her belongings. "Yeah. By the way, you sure you still don't want money? I have a couple hundred dollars in my purse."

It was a ritual they had to go through at the end of every session, and like before, he shook his head. "No, it's fine. Next Monday at the same time, same place?" he asked, reminded this was the part of their script in which Pacifica confirmed.

Her response threw off his expectations: "You're declining payment? I have to walk across campus, and I don't want some savage mugging me for my money."
Startled by her perceived prevalence of crime, Dipper craned his neck to sweep his gaze around the lingering students in the coffee shop, then turned back to Pacifica with furrowed brows. "You're afraid you're going to get mugged?"

"I'll have you know I'm a wealthy woman, and this area has a history of savages assaulting the upper-class. Didn't you hear about what happened five years ago?"

"No? Also, I didn't know there was anyone but upper-class on this campus." Might as well be populated by affluence, considering the prices around here and the general attitude. "What happened five years ago?"

“Someone got, like, mugged and beat up. I imagine it's the fault of poverty, as always.”

Thoughtfully, Dipper tapped his pen against his lower lip. "Yeah, I can't say I remember that." A couple seconds of chewing on the pen with nothing coming to mind was enough, though, and he pocketed it, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

Stealing a peek through the wall window had him biting down a sigh, not looking forward to a walk back to the dorm with his legs as sore as they were, but he trudged to the door with Pacifica in tow and opened it for her. She didn't step through immediately, leaning to scout their surroundings before taking a step from the coffee shop into the night.

A distant memory of Bill's wisdom was jogged, chased by a ripple of concern. "You said you were walking across campus?" Dipper spoke, and Pacifica whirled to face him, a miniature can of pepper spray clenched in her hands. "Do you want me to walk with you? I know this went longer than we thought it would, and you probably weren't expecting to have to walk in the dark."

Dipper recognized the expression of deliberation as she fiddled with a jeweled bracelet, then said, "Oh. I thought you were going to take me up on my offer of payment, but I suppose being an escort is acceptable too. Do you want compensation for that?"

"When you say it like that, it sounds—" he stopped there, winced, and shook his head, "but no, I don't want compensation or anything. So where are we going?" Dipper asked as he peered over his shoulder, glad he looked back in time since he was mere seconds from slamming into a lamp post.

"The library to pick up textbooks. Can you believe they wouldn't sell them to me? They could get a new version online if they needed to. Anyway, I'll be meeting my chauffeur in the parking lot afterward, and here, you should hold my purse." The brief warning was the sole indicator she was about to shove it into his hands, and Dipper had no time to react as she carried onward, leading with a confident gait while her high-heels clicked on the sidewalk. "If we get mugged, I don’t want to be targeted."

"Uh, okay, I don't think we will be. If you want to hang on to this…" But she didn't seem interested, so he guessed he was stuck with the purse and that was that. Catching up, he asked, "What books are you getting?"

"Math textbooks. Can you carry them too? Of course you can, you're handling my purse like a professional." If awkwardly holding it in front of him could be deemed professional, it'd be an accurate statement. And it dawned on him that she was joking, a smirk in the corner of her mouth.

"How far do you want me to carry them? And… how many do you think there are going to be?"

Pacifica pshed and waved her hand, dismissing his uncertainty. “The number doesn’t matter. It’s great you agreed, because you’re going to be my back-up in case my chauffeur isn't here on time to
tote them for me.”

Well, he was hoping Pacifica's chauffeur would be prompt this evening and spare him from any additional discomfort caused by the added weight of textbooks. A long day of sitting in class had lowered his threshold for pain, and hauling thick textbooks made him wonder if the option of compensation was still available.

"Why math textbooks? College algebra isn't too bad."

As if disdained, she shook her head. “You don't understand. I have to be the best in my class.”

"I didn't know you were that into math."

“No,” Pacifica said, dashing the fleeting hope his tutoring had been so inspiring that she was actually pursuing knowledge in higher mathematics. “I hate it with every fiber of my being, but no one can beat a Northwest.”

"You don't have to be the best," he offered, shrugging. "Isn't getting an A or a B good enough? Especially if this class isn't related to what you'll be doing in the future.” Granted, he personally didn't like Bs but academics were his niche, his specialty that he was comfortable in. Healthy or not, it guided his perception of worth.

Pacifica laughed, “I wish. I’m not surprised you’d settle for that, new money always settles. Live fast, die young, those types. Can't even remember their names half the time.” That elicited a questioning noise, but she went on before he could comment. "My parents want me to study mathematics and get all these stupid degrees, and as a Northwest I have to be the best among my peers. I don’t have a choice.”

"So… it's your parents?" he clarified. "You're doing this for them?"

“Please, try to keep up. I’m doing this for status, and if new money cared, you’d be doing the same.”

Dipper fought the urge to roll his eyes at 'new money'. Generational wealth over a century or more wasn't in his family, but he didn't see what that had to do with this; it was simpler, a matter of: "Do you care? It doesn't seem like you're doing this because you like it, so..."

“No, I hate math. This… tutoring thing has been fine, you're okay. But math? Who does that?"

"It's not that bad," he said, "but I guess higher mathematics are tough. It's not a subject to go into unless you're dedicated, and maybe—uh, hear me out on this and my 'new money' suggestion —maybe you should find something you actually like?"

“I have an image to uphold,” Pacifica told him, matter-of-fact like it'd been decided and done with, an unfortunate implication if her family controlled her future prospects. “I can’t disobey my parents. I need to maintain our status as being successful in booming, powerful industries, and preferences are distractions.”

"Are you personally going to be making money? I thought your family ran on investments."

However, he didn't linger on the thought and reiterated, "Still, shouldn't you be doing what you want? You aren't your parents, it's not their life."

Abruptly, Pacifica halted in her tracks to stare at him, the intensity of it making his palms sweat in the cool of the night. “Instead of telling me this, you should listen to your own advice.”
Alarm pierced Dipper at the shrewd observation delivered in such savage casualness that it completely stunned him. "What?"

"Think about it. You’re trying to preach to me that I should follow my dreams and do what I want. My parents don’t control me. But you’re no better, you might even be worse—your parents tell you ‘do physics’ and you’re doing that instead of…what, plants?"

"Hey, physics is a very… lucrative field, sort of." It depended on what he did with it, but he hadn't given that much thought since he couldn't be less interested in the subject. "It's not just my parents, I'm doing it because I'll have to get a job out of college and support myself and my sister…" and he realized those were excuses, so he stopped, sighed, and reevaluated. They could return to that when he had developed justification for himself, but Pacifica wasn't permitting him time to dwell since she'd taken him by the sleeve and was dragging him forward.

A few prompts later, he was back by her side, the library in sight at the end of the street. "Also, 'plants'?"

"Aren’t you like, super into nature and stuff?"

"Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean I want to do that as a career. Physics is…fine, I guess. I don't hate it, usually." Most days, he absolutely loathed it and loathed his situation, so he wasn't sure why he bothered defending that choice.

"Don’t lie to me, you’re bad at it." She seemingly passed no judgment but moved on quick enough to make his head spin. "You hate physics, you want to do…what was it, art?"

Skeptical, he raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you just guessing at this point?" he asked, entertained but simultaneously wondering if she was right about what she'd said before, if this was a product of his parents' wishes. It was and there was no denying it, but…there was more to it! It was complicated.

"Look, I know for sure you don’t want to do physics."

"I don't know what else I'd do." Despite the claim, the doubt was as good as planted, taking shape as he tried to imagine himself doing something different with his life than the route he'd assumed he'd have to take. "If you could do anything, like any career, what would you do?"

"I don't know, I never thought it’d be my choice to make."

Dipper kicked at a stone and watched it roll away toward the gutter. "I did well in physics in high school so when my parents pushed me toward it because of my cousin's success in the field, I thought it wouldn't be that bad."

"Find something new."

"Like plants?" he teased.

"If that’s what you’re into." Pacifica made a face of disgust, and Dipper rolled his eyes.

"Weeds mostly."

"No wonder your family is new money, they’ve probably been arrested too many times to build an empire."

"Should I be flattered that you see potential in us," he started, musing, "or offended that I think
you're calling us drug dealers?" Dropping the subject, Dipper resumed his thoughts of a career and future, considering the possibility of writing since drafting a screenplay had come easily to him, and he'd been filling his time with shorter mystery stories.

A logical mind rapidly deduced the issue: the lack of financial support. It'd been a dumb idea since the beginning.

With a sigh, he said, "Look, I'd love to take my own advice here, but I don't have someone else's wealth to live off of." Then, his tone lightened into something less serious. "You know, the struggles of being new money and all."

"Ah yes, they don't want to run out so they're not willing to spend it. I know how it is. New moneys are all the same."

"So that's the problem, I need something to produce steady income, and that… happens to be physics right now. I'm—" Although about to say that he was decently far into the studies at this point, he caught himself and opted to shake his head in dismissal. Pacifica didn't need to know he was academically a third-year student or so, being under the impression he was taking a beginner course. "I'm not sure what else I'd enjoy doing that can still make money."

Pacifica tapped her foot, appearing impatient as the library's grand architecture loomed over them once they rounded the building's corner, but finally slowing her pace near the steps. “I’m sure you could find something. You could be a plant doctor.”

"I'll think about it."

"You do that,” Pacifica said, then peered to the parking lot, undoubtedly seeing the limousine standing apart from other vehicles. “Ah, my chauffeur is here, so you’re excused. My purse.” It wasn’t a question, or asking nicely– it was a demand, and she snatched her purse from his grasp. Although she seemed ready to leave, Pacifica hesitated, then he was sure there were the faintest hints of a smile on her face. “I.. will see you around, Dipper. Thanks for escorting me.”

Physics homework that was due tomorrow could step aside for his screenplay due in a month. It was a breeze to work on, progress flowed smoothly and darkened the document inch by inch with text. The subplot was forming, it was… still romantic, a little odd for a lover of the mystery genre but it worked. The spark was undeniable, and the characters had chemistry, so who was he to deny them of this fictional fantasy? Besides, it added depth, a brave and daring twist since this was about two guys who weren't soulmates.

But maybe they could be.

The ideas were raining on him, so many to include and not enough pages to pour them on. It was exciting, refreshing, thousands of times better than staring at dull math equations. Although he'd spent his life destroying multiple novels per night, he never thought he could produce a text of his own that seemed halfway decent and was enjoyable to work on.

It distracted him to a fault, forgoing eating and neglecting other responsibilities, but it wasn't enough to hold his attention when his phone buzzed and didn't stop. Intrigue and delight fluttered in the pit of his stomach upon seeing Bill's name because this was the moment of truth, a call about the first therapy appointment. Bill had promised an update, and Dipper's fingers were crossed for positive news in hopes of avoiding a repeat of that night at the bar, though luckily Bill's injury had healed well and was no longer bothering him.
Taking the call, Dipper brought the phone to his ear.

“Hey cutie!” Bill’s voice resonated before could utter a sound. “Did you want to know how therapy went? It went… well. Good. Weirdly so. That lady counselor, she’s really something.”

"Hey, that's great," he said, brightening, screenplay forgotten as he tried to envision Bill right now. This was a good mood, so he’d likely burst into his apartment with extra energy in his step, and there'd be a genuine smile on his face, not the smirk, that'd grow wider as Marigold greeted him at the door. "I'm glad it—"

“You know, I kinda wonder if we’re soulmates.” As if everything else had faded around him, Dipper zeroed in on that sentence, eyes widening, wondering... "It’s stupid, but we connect perfectly, and she’s super understanding." Oh. His counselor. Huffing a laugh, he relaxed again under the assurance that Bill was none the wiser. "I feel like I could tell her anything and everything."

"Do you actually think she's your soulmate?" he asked, veiled as amusement over genuine curiosity. "What did she say to you when you met?"

“Does it matter that much? She listens to me. It’s nice. Plus, she's a babe.”

Biting the inside of his cheek, he debated asking if that meant he was born with the soulmark since his counselor was likely older than him, but had an inkling the discussion would upset him. Or… he could do this in a roundabout way. "It's annoying, isn't it? I feel like the older soulmate has an advantage," he said, aiming for casual. "Being born with the soulmark makes it that much harder. At least they have the courtesy of developing it." It was almost painful, the desire to blurt: did yours appear August 31st, eighteen years ago? But he couldn't, knew it'd invoke disaster.

“Uh huh.” Bill seemed disinterested. “I wanted to celebrate getting my life on track, making positive changes, even got a job interview. You in?"

"...Wait, back up. Job interview? I didn't know you had a job interview."

“Well, I did have a job interview, and guess what, doll? I got it. Hired on the spot. Those guys love me."

Bill's joy was contagious, and Dipper found himself smiling at his pen like a lovestruck nerd as he toyed with it, fingers dancing over ridges from chewing. "Dude, that… is also super amazing. What is it? What's the job?"

“Celebrate with me, and I’ll tell you at dinner.”

"Ooh, cliffhanger," he commented, grin growing. "Are you afraid I wouldn't go otherwise?"

“You never answered me earlier. I had no choice but to pull out the big guns: a mystery.”

Glancing to his laptop and the unfinished screenplay, he hummed but knew what the response would be, not that there'd been any question about it to begin with. He was already feeling the tendrils of elation tugging at him. "So dinner," he repeated, "I could make that. Tonight, or…?"

“Tonight at seven. My treat.”

"And people say chivalry is dead. Want me to come over?"

“I can always pick you up, sugar.”
"Yeah, that works. I mean, how could I resist a ride from you?" Despite the implication there, it was true. Bill's convertible was breathtaking and relatively not bad for the environment by vehicle standards. Needless to say, he'd warmed up to it over the past few months. "Text me when it's time, okay?"

"Will do. It'll be soon, so don't get too cozy."

That text arrived at 6:21. By 6:22, he left the dorm and locked the door behind him, the extra minute devoted to preening himself in the mirror to look like he'd tried. He exited the residence hall and was in the parking lot by 6:23, in which he estimated it'd taken him somewhere around five seconds to approach the car, one second to note the unexpected person accompanying Bill, and an extra second to process it as he stared, bewildered.

After that, he'd lost track of how long it took him to give a greeting to Bill, then one to Wendy, and pretend he hadn't been assuming he'd be riding shotgun as he awkwardly took the backseat.

Dipper didn't know how to begin. This… wasn't his version of the night he'd imagined beside Bill, watching the Los Angeles traffic as they chatted over the sound of eighties music in the background. It wasn't the inside jokes and laughter, the tender moments of playful affection, tuning out the world as they indulged in each other, it wasn't anywhere close to that.

It was a crash of disappointment.

Bill turned expectantly to Dipper as the car reversed. "Are you ready, Pine Tree?"

Questions of why Wendy was here, why she was accompanying them to their dinner were on the tip of his tongue, yet the mumbled "yeah" didn't capture it.

"Let's hit up the town," Wendy said, enthused, but Dipper couldn't be more the opposite: hunched over, hands holding his face. "You know, Bill's been pumped about this— dude, are you okay? You're not gonna get car sick on us, are you?"

"No, I'm…" He raised his head, forcing a smile that wavered and ultimately vanished. "I'm fine, uh, got dizzy for a moment. That's all."

"Don't puke in here, man," she warned. "Bill will literally never let you live that down."

Bill had redirected his focus to the road. "You'll owe me a new car if you do, and your 'tuition cap' wouldn't save you from that bill."

Wendy didn't seem to appreciate the pun. "Boo. Lame."

"A new car?" he questioned with hitched eyebrows. "That's a lot of semesters of working as your shadow-grader. I might have to start a side-hustle, or whatever people call that, to pay it off."

Bill beamed at him, devious and arrogant. "Are you joining an MLM, doll? Terrible financial decision, unless you're like my family and founding the pyramid."

"Why are basically all of your family's business ventures gray-area illegal?"

"Gotta elicit money to make money." Dipper was pretty sure he heard Wendy scoff. "We have a lineage of money from the good old days, where you could own a man and make him do all the work for you." Instantly frowning, he winced and then wrinkled his nose as a realization occurred to him.
Sarcastically, he muttered, "Yeah, times have sure changed." It was far from the same situation, not even comparable, but the chance to point out hypocrisy wasn't about to slide through his fingers.

“We have to pay them now.”

"You're not paying me at all."

“I’m paying you in ‘debt forgiveness’.”

"That's stupid," Wendy commented, and he saw an arm cross over the console to punch Bill in the shoulder teasingly. "I thought therapy was going to help you not be an ass." It almost was reminiscent of a remark he might make but now it was merely a bitter taste in his mouth.

“It’s not stupid, it’s strategic. You don’t make money by letting things go.” Bill shook his head, his frown visible from the rearview mirror.

The banter carried on without his input, without permission, it just… happened, and as much as he tried to ignore it, he hated the flow of the conversation and natural bond they seemed to have. It was enticing the blaze of jealousy, and he berated himself for it since he liked Bill and Wendy, wanted them to be happy if this was more than friends — and from the kiss they shared as they parked at the restaurant, he assumed it wasn't platonic.

Unable to think in the midst of overbearing, unrelenting questions bogging his mind, it was clear he shouldn't have agreed to this. It was burdening him with misplaced irritation and envy as he wished he could've known before getting to Bill's car. Now, he was significantly less joyous as he was leaving it, wandering into the restaurant behind the lovebirds as the hostess called them, then plopping into the seat across from them. If it wasn't bad enough that he had to be here, he had to stare at it for the entirety of the meal. An hour or more of watching them and their dumb affectionate gazes, Bill's arm over her shoulders, flirty exchanges that felt as though they were more appropriate between him and Bill.

It was… frustrating, the influx of emotion exhausting, and he isolated himself from most of the discussion.

Until he had a plan, a potentially-regrettable plan, but it would distract him from this misery and suffering through heartbroken turmoil. God, he sounded like Robbie. "Hey Bill," he said, thumbing the menu. "Do you think your drinks are better than these?" The lukewarmly challenging inquiry didn't allow for speculation when the menu was opened to the array of alcoholic beverages spanning the rainbow.


"I don't know," he said flippantly, fingers skimming the lamination. "Are you going to let me be the judge of that?"

Bill stole the drink menu, scouring it through a narrowed gaze. “Sure, you’ll be disappointed by the mass-produced, corporate-decided trash. Nothing beats my originals.”

"Jesus Christ, dude. Relax and buy me a drink."

"Are we doing booze?" Wendy asked. "I'm totally in. It's Friday, time to party it up with a drink."

Bill's eyes gleamed. “Let’s make that five.”
Wendy seemed wedged between interested and uncertainty, but Dipper was halfway through the word, "Yes."

From there, time seemed to escape chronological fluidity, measured and passing in a sequence of events. The drinks arrived, were chugged, and Bill's prompt convinced Dipper to stroke his ego, saying they were nothing in comparison to his. But in reality, he hadn't the slightest clue. They were gone too fast to register the combination of flavors, and it didn't matter. They weren't to be enjoyed, they were his freedom from this night by getting too intoxicated to remember it.

Fortune may have switched sides somewhere during the evening because it took effect shortly after. Dinner and the accompanying discussion was jollier and lively, not nearly as internally tumultuous, more so as the drinks kept piling up. Bill offered, Dipper accepted.

He was fairly social, everything came easier and without as much anxiety. The three drinks over the course of an hour and a half did wonders for his mood and confidence, but the drive from the restaurant dampened the outing as a fight sprung up in the front seat, Bill and Wendy becoming increasingly animated. Although he couldn’t remember its starting point, busy watching the blanket of stars absorbed in his own complacency, strained pitches indicated mounting tension.

"...So, you're gonna have to remind me. Why did you keep buying them?"

“He wanted them. What was I supposed to do, say no?”

Discerning it pertained to him, Dipper was tempted to apologize but brushed off the thought. Their fight wasn't his fight, and it wasn't a big deal, he was fine. The alcohol dulled the edge of tonight’s knife of betrayal, or more precisely reserved pain for later.

"I'm normally chill about this, you know? But Dipper didn't need to have that much. Think he's okay?"

With as good of a time as ever to chime in, he managed, "Yeah, I'm okay." Fending off drowsiness and blurred vision, but everything was still coherent.

“See? He’s alright. He even said so. Pine Tree’s less of a light-weight than you think,” Bill snapped, terse.

Wendy whipped around the headrest as if checking, then she said, "Glad you're doing okay." When she turned away, he assumed what followed was directed at Bill. "But no, man. Dipper could hardly walk to the car."

“That means he’s having a good time. Stan drinks a lot too, Red, and he's good as new after some rest. Stop worrying about him, and get out of my car because oh look, we’re at your place.”

The annoyance had disappeared from her voice, but she still asked, "Are you two gonna be okay? Like, this isn't one of those things you can be irresponsible with, but it might be too late for that."

“We’re going to be fine, Red. I'll take good care of him.” Dipper could’ve melted at the promise, surrendered to the old rush of giddiness incurred by being in Bill's spotlight. Then, it was washed away by the cold reality that the spotlight was divided. At best. It likely belonged to his girlfriend and Dipper was back to being a friend. Where glee had been, emptiness poured into the void, the alcohol facilitating the rapid change that dropped his mood off a cliff.

“Are you taking me home?” he inquired once they were on the road again. “To the dorm..? I... I don't know what time it is.” Leaning over, he squinted but couldn't read the electronic clock,
swaying until he collapsed onto his side. Maybe he did have too much.

“Nah, I gotta keep an eye on you. You’re going with me.”

"With you..?" Dipper mumbled, running a hand through his hair. "To your apartment?" A night with Bill would've been sublime, but his heart plummeted at the glaring flaw in being with his crush. When Bill had been in a relationship before, jealousy wasn't on his radar, and he theorized this new adjustment would grow easier over time, but the massive letdown was nowhere near faded yet since he guessed he must have thought possibly Bill had feelings for him too. A thousand things he should've done differently were alongside a thousand reasons why he believed this envy was invalid, starting with the obvious: there'd never been a chance for him and Bill.

He was such an idiot.

Watching lights climb over the dashboard, Dipper's eyes flicked from the interior to the window, where they were passing his dorm. "Mabel?" The question was 'what about Mabel' but translation skewed its contents. Mabel wasn't home, he knew she couldn't be because she was closing at the diner, but it wouldn't be long until she saw he wasn't there. Lightly groaning, he said, "I don't want to be seen by her like this."

Bill regarded him warmly, “Then it’s good you’re with me. I’ll let her know you’re staying overnight.”

"Thanks." The relief was palpable, and he shot Bill an affectionate look before he remembered no, fuck. He couldn't do that. Just friends, no possibility of something more and he honestly did not want to ruin Bill's pre-existing relationship. But... he did want to know why. "So you and Wendy, huh? You guys're dating?"

There was an element of resentment to his words. “Yeah. Since you and Robbie were having such a good time—”

"Wait, me and Robbie?" He didn't know why he'd accidentally parroted Bill's tone on autopilot and huffed exasperatedly. "Goddammit. Is that actually the reason?"

“We patched things up. I'm on the road to getting better, self-improving, so might as well give it another go.” He shrugged, maneuvering skillfully into the parking lot.

Dipper scoffed bitterly. Of course they did, he should've known they were going to get back together from the moment they broke up despite Bill saying they wouldn't. It was what they did, everyone had warned him. "That's cool, I guess." Ugh, that seemed melodramatic and moody, and he couldn't even blame it on his chronic pain because it wasn't bothering him. "Thought you said you weren't getting together again."

“Things change, doll.”

That wasn't good enough, and contempt was pooling at the surface, threatening to spill over. "Oh." Despair under the guise of annoyance couldn't be contained any longer, and Dipper said, "Thanks for dinner. That's exciting, the job and therapy. I'm happy for you."

It didn't take Bill long to catch the jab. “You're not happy for us?”

Yeah, he wasn't going to cooperate with this. "Oh, Bill." Dipper gushed in snarky monotone. "I had no idea there was anything between us. How exciting, man."

“You’re seriously doing this?” Bill demanded, grip tightening around the wheel. “I’m tempted to
"Why is this so important to you? Do you need my approval suddenly, or something?" Agitated, he didn't leash his tongue. He didn't want to be the person they went to when the issues inevitably restarted since he could barely stand to be around them as it was; it wasn't them, per se, it was the constant mocking of his foolishness in believing he actually could've been with Bill. "Sure, whatever, I'm happy if you two are."

As they pulled into the parking spot that was indisputably Bill's, Dipper muttered 'thank god' under his breath, glad to be at the apartment complex and no longer on a car ride that bred nausea.

"I thought you would be supportive of me turning my life around, like you promised you would be," Bill said. "Apparently I was wrong."

"No, it's... look, I am happy for you." Kind of, not really. It was selfish and so entitled to think that it should be him instead, particularly if they did manage to glue the relationship pieces in place. "I just... didn't expect it, okay? I figured there'd been enough fights and breakups."

"I'm not convinced you're happy, Pine Tree. You've been sour this whole time." Bill swiveled in his seat as he roughly yanked the gearshift, fixating on Dipper with unwavering scrutiny that made him shrink down, feeling so insignificant in comparison.

"I was perfectly nice at dinner to you two," Dipper retorted, warily glancing at Bill even though the contours of his face were shifting, blurring, softening his naturally-defined and angular features. "Give me a break."

"You drank twenty-five dollars' worth of alcohol." His anger hadn't dissolved, throwing open the car door.

In a slowed mind, he didn't know what that was supposed to mean, if Bill was upset by the behavior or the cost. "Sorry, I'll pay it back."

"You can't afford it. You didn't even get actual food."

"What? I had food."

"You ate half of my fruit."

"Yeah, see?" Hauling himself upright, Dipper struggled to unclip his seatbelt. "I totally ate, but I don't know why that'd matter to you. I mean, it's not like I'm your girlfriend. Shouldn't you be worried about how much your girlfriend ate tonight?"

Bill's voice elevated, cracking with agitation as he tensed. "Why are you being such a little bitch?"

Alcohol seemed to ramp up his passive-aggressive side, the aspect of him that logic and rationality drowned out. "I don't know, sorry," he said, sighing, pinching the bridge of his nose. And he was, he knew his behavior was awful. "Can we just go inside?"

"Fine.." And Bill was out the car, the door slamming behind him while Dipper scrambled to follow but was failing in every possible sense of the word. Everything was blurred and moving, his coordination was off. "Are you coming?"

Frustrated with himself, he all but flopped from the vehicle as he stumbled forward, then straightened himself. His balance was still there, but shaky. "I'm trying." Grateful that he wasn't too intoxicated to walk, he closed the distance between them in a couple paces.
Bill wasted no time, blasting into the apartment complex and unlocking his door. “Yeah, you’d better try. Not sure if you deserve to be helped up if you fall.” That wasn't worthy of a protest because Bill was right, he'd dragged both of their nights down in a single swoop of jealousy and moodiness, so he wobbled after without a word.

At least Marigold's greeting at the door brought a tiny smile to his face, and he murmured affectionate words to her as he knelt down on his haunches, almost falling over in the process. Jesus Christ, he shouldn't have done this to himself.

As Marigold stayed for the attention and rolled onto her back to receive belly rubs, Dipper scanned the room for Bill and saw he was messing with the coffee pot in the kitchen over the half wall. "Hey," he said, guilt permeating his voice. "Sorry... again. Thanks for letting me stay here, though."

“Uh huh. Are you going to stay on the floor all night, Pine Tree?”

"Mm-hmm, let me be a peasant."

“You’ve always been a peasant.”

"Did you hear that, Marigold?” he murmured in a coo and fluffed the golden curls, wishing this could be it, this moment. Bill making coffee, Marigold giving her best dog-smile. No dinners, no ocean of booze, no partners, just him and Bill and a very adorable dog. "Bill is calling us peasants."

“No, she has access to my wealth. You have access to no one’s," Bill said, sparing a scowl to deliver the blow, "broke-ass college student.”

Sharply, he asked, "Is that why you bought me all those drinks tonight?"

“Don’t make me regret it more. You spent the car ride being upset with me, being a dick.”

"Yeah." Mind traveling to dinner, he wished he could recall specifics of the discussion. "Do you think Wendy noticed? Do you think she knew that I... you know, had too much?"

Bill exhaled through clenched teeth. “Oh, yeah. She’s pissed at me and she’ll probably tell Mabel.”

Dipper's gaze swapped to Marigold, who was inching her way closer onto his stomach in search of more snuggles and scratches. "Noo, don't listen to them," he said to her, landing somewhere in the middle of serious and not. "Wait, did you say Mabel or Marigold?"

“...Mabel. Stay away from my dog, you’re going to scare her.”

"What are you talking about? She's fine, and we're having cuddles on the carpet."

“She’s fine for now but you sure as hell aren’t.”

Wasn't that the truth. If he looked half as bad as he felt, he was an absolute mess of a human, consumed by existential self-loathing as he stared at the pattern on the ceiling, wondering why he had to do this with his night. He should've declined the offer of going out. The alcohol made everything better and worse at the same time, eliminated the small problems only to magnify others and remind him of why he was such a wreck. His beloved analytical thinking patterns couldn't save him.

"Did I..." he started but didn't have time to think about what he was saying, the words coming regardless. "I didn't ruin tonight, did I?"
Bill sighed. “No, you didn’t.”

The worries didn't stop there. "Did you have a nice time? I know you're not— like, not having a nice time now but did you?"

“I did.”

It wasn't the reassurance he thought it would be, guilt firmly intact. "Oh." And he didn't have to ask, already knowing the answer to the question: are you mad at me? It was in everything he did. Watching him, his movements were stiff and calculated, expression guarded in spite of the fuzzy colors blending together to create a gentler image, and his replies were brief. Dipper didn't know how he was going to compensate for this, but he guessed he could be less of a thorn in Bill's side.

“Hey, did you want any coffee?"

"No, I'll pass. I should sleep, huh? Yeah." There wasn't a break for Bill to reply, the inquiry not for him but a white flag indicating he was done being terrible, had expelled his steam and was wallowing in a pit of self-claimed pathetic sadness over Bill's new relationship and his own mistakes.

“Don’t sleep on the floor.”

"Where, then? Can't sleep in your bed," he said but there was an edge to the comment, a reminder to himself that their days of too-close friendship had concluded for the foreseeable future.

“Why not?” Bill asked, feet thudding on the floor as he approached.

Staring up at Bill, he watched as the boundaries seemed to glide into one another and squeezed his eyes shut to make it stop. "Wendy. Your relationship. Being taken. Kind of can't… do anything like that anymore."

“You're wrong." And then he was airborne, being lifted by Bill and carried away into his bedroom, and he didn't speak as he watched his surroundings shift and turn until he was falling, crashing upon the softness of Bill's mattress. In the darkness illuminated only by a wedge of light from the door, Dipper dragged glazed-over eyes to Bill, pleading, searching for something that he couldn't quite voice until it occurred to him in a flash of clarity.

"Marigold," he said, the name rolling lazily from his tongue, "can she…?" There was a half-assed motion at the spot beside him. Bill tapped the bed, and then she was there, curled up in a ball with her muzzle pressed against his hand. "Has she always been there?" How long had it been? Dipper couldn't remember.

“I patted the bed so she'd jump up beside you. She followed us in.”

That was new to his foggy mind and once again, Dipper despised himself for inflicting this stupor. He should've gone to Mabel, she would've cared for him while the quiet disappointment cut deep and that's what he yearned for, to know he'd messed up so badly. Bill was too nice to him, they both were. The question of deserving them arose in his thoughts but wasn't ruminated upon, the cogwheels of his cognitions cranking to a gradual end after moving at half-speed.

Bill had been kind enough to take him to dinner, include him in his celebration of a successful therapy meeting and a new job... "What's your new job?" he asked, words slurred with tiredness as he yawned and forced his eyes to stay open long enough to finish speaking. "Never did say."

“I'll tell you tomorrow once you've sobered up. If I told you, you wouldn't remember later.”
That was satisfactory for now, his exhausted state persuading his curiosity to give it a rest as he mumbled out an unintelligible reply, eyelids drooping closed as sleep started to overtake him.

Chapter End Notes

Before any riots are organized, we promise their dysfunction is temporary 💜
Chapter 26

Waking up and stumbling to shower while tossing a grouchy bark of a 'morning' out the bedroom door did nothing to ease his massive headache. The sunlight was too bright, sounds agitated it, everything was the worst. Minus the shower. The shower was tolerable, but only because the hot water was energizing and Bill's rubber Elvis-duck among the soap lifted his spirits.

Marigold was another source of marginal comfort as Dipper collapsed on the bed beside her in a pile of numb melancholy, staring into space and fiddling mindlessly with a button on his shirt—well, Bill's shirt that he hadn't bothered to button completely but threw on since it was fresher than his own clothing. It was big on him, extending almost past his boxers. Soulmark concealed by fabric, wearing a fancy dress shirt, and slightly hungover with the headache to show for it. Frankly, he may as well be Bill.

As if on cue, Bill's silhouette obstructed the light of the doorway. “What are you doing? ...Are those my clothes?”

"Hey, sugar." Yeah, no. The sleepy hoarseness in his voice didn't help him pull that off. Dragging his attention from the ceiling, Dipper cast a glance at Bill and examined the porcelain mug in his hand, the dark circles of his eyes, briefly debating which one of them had the more worn appearance but declared it a tie. "Just your shirt," he said, "and also you have a sweet bedroom.” In the daytime, he could actually see what was here: star posters, an extra large mirror, pictures of family (mostly dogs) and photos of his performances in plays, in piano recitals, in academics, newspaper clippings about his achievements, a shelf of constellation knick-knacks. It was exactly what he thought it'd be, the perfect representation of Bill that made Dipper's heart hurt.

Though one artifact had been unexpected. "Didn't know you were a football player." There was an unmistakable picture of a football team framed on the wall, and a jersey to show for it.

“Yeah, it didn’t work out. Why are you in my clothes.”

"My shirt smelled like booze, your shirt smells like you." Dryly, he half-asked, half-stated, "Guess which one I'm going to prefer." A pang of his headache elicited a pitiful moan, his head tipping to alleviate pressure from his temples. "Hey, Bill. I'm dying. Nice to meet you.”

Bill purposefully waltzed inside the bedroom to present a mug to him. “Have some coffee.”

Interested, Dipper sat upright, eyes brighter. When Bill handed it over, he could've melted since the drink was definitely made for him, almond creamer and sugar and a couple ice cubes mixed into the beverage. "Thanks, that's— uh, generous. I didn't know it was for me.”

“Why would I offer you my coffee? You’d spit it out.”

"Yeah." Sitting cross-legged and trying to ignore the still-glaring headache, Dipper sipped the coffee and hummed approval, murmuring his appreciation for Bill. The gesture was kinder than what he deserved given the fragments of last night that haunted his memory, and guilt stabbed him as he recalled acting like a selfish child. Irresponsible, petulant brat was a contender too.

A sudden urgency flooding him, Dipper asked, "You texted Mabel, right?"

“Sure did. Told her you’d be staying the night and that you were safe. She said something about a ladies' night sleepover.” Dipper nodded, understanding, aware Mabel had been planning something similar but intended on doing it during a weekend so Candy and Grenda could stay overnight, but
this sufficed.

Finishing off the coffee in a couple gulps, he flopped against the bed, spread eagle and relishing in the comforter. Softer than what the dormitory provided — which was no softness, to be precise. "I'm pretty sure my head is about three seconds from exploding, and my legs are going to kill me. At least I'm not puking."

Bill tsoked at him. “Don't drink so much, Pine Tree.”

It was a waste of breath when that'd been the sole thing on his mind for the majority of the morning. "I know. So much for being responsible, huh?"

Combing a hand through his damp hair, he closed his eyes and wished he could blot out last night. The unfortunate sequence amounted to a positive deduction: he'd been downright insufferable. "Jesus Christ. You deserve an award for dealing with me."

“I need a gold star.”

There was an audible groan as it occurred to him, the extent of the chaos he'd inflicted. "...You were going to go home with Wendy, weren't you? Since you took us out to dinner and she's your girlfriend and everything." Saying it aloud solidified his hypothesis and the intense nausea attached to the notion, and Dipper was almost afraid he'd spoken too soon in regards to vomiting.

“It doesn’t matter.” Bill circled the bed to pat Marigold, nuzzling her when she raised her head in response, but Dipper couldn't admire the scene when he remained trapped on his prior conjecture. It was even worse that the answer was yes, and he was relieved by it, to know he'd inadvertently foiled whatever could've happened between them if not for his intervention. As per his soulmark's wisdom, what the hell was wrong with him? Being the worst friend in history, guilt eating him for breakfast was a fate he'd earned.

"No, it does," he insisted, tainted by regret. "Is there anything… I don't know. Can I make it up to you guys somehow?"

Bill scratched behind Marigold’s ear, and thankfully, his posture wasn't taut to suggest a grudge or anger. “I don't think so, unless you have a time machine.”

Wincing at the guilt trip that wasn't even veiled, he was about to protest but then muttered, "Okay, okay. I deserved that."

Bill halted petting his dog to stare at him, critical and analyzing. “You were a dick half the night.”

"What did I do?" It was a request for information, not a challenge to the claim because there was no denying his atrocious behavior, but the specifics alluded him beyond generally being upset about the relationship and passive-aggressiveness.

“You threw a fit and tried to steal my dog.” Bill deflated, shifting to lie beside Marigold, who Dipper groped the bed for in search of her fluffy paw. When he coiled his fingers around it, he was powerless to the smile that took over as she rested her head on him.

"Looks like I succeeded?"

“Fuck off, I put her here because you were begging for her companionship. I bet this is the first time you’ve slept with a real lady."

"Her or you? Wait, did you sleep last night?” Dipper couldn't determine from the sheets, rustled
from his restless slumber and rolling on the bed now that he wasn't dead to the world.

“No, I didn’t sleep at all.” Peering to Bill, he frowned as he saw the truth in bruise-like skin under his dulled eyes, bags accumulating. A moderate scowl perched on his features, he seemed exhausted and haggard, the illustration of insomnia. After his evaluation yielded pity, Dipper shuffled closer and pulled Bill to the bed, falling into the script set by nights of cuddling and Netflix. Tightening his grip, it was a veritable side-hug as he nuzzled him, but it didn't last as dread replaced the usual exhilaration. Retreating, Dipper's stomach dropped as he wondered if this had been a mistake.

“What are you doing?”

"I don't know. Sorry. I thought…” that it'd be nice? But it wasn't, and he reviewed it again: Bill was with Wendy. Wendy, not him. They couldn't do this anymore. Swallowing thickly, Dipper backed off with an awkward pat and cleared his throat.

“Well, you can’t just stop it.”

Bill was dragging him closer, urging him to nestle beside him despite his confused squeak. Dipper went limp. “There.” It hurt. While normally having Bill nearby fostered feelings of safety, today it was eviscerating him from the inside out and the worst part was, he couldn't assemble the strength to move away with some lame excuse like, 'probably shouldn't do that.'

All he managed was a pitifully miserable, distressed murmur of, "Bill." Here he was, back in the depths of self-hate and wishing he hadn't screwed this up so badly. Without the alcohol sugar-coating it, he knew more than ever that it'd been foolish to believe he could've been with Bill, and being unlikable last night didn't do him any favors.

“Hey sweetheart, are you okay?”

"Headache." It wasn't a lie. His head was still killing him, throbbing in pain. "It's like my brain is bleeding, man."

“Do you want ibuprofen or something?”

"Sure," he said, then was fairly certain he died inside when he realized he'd have to retrieve it, which required departing from Bill's bed and being a part of the world. "Where...? Is it in your medicine cabinet?"

“It’s in my pocket.” Akin to a magician, Bill swiveled his hand and produced a few tablets from a shirt pocket. “Here, cutie.”

Suspicious but accepting the medication, Dipper asked, "Do you carry these around?"

“I figured your head would be killing you, so I brought them with."

It would've been endearing if not for the internal shouting that accompanied Bill's compassion by incessantly reminding Dipper it meant nothing, it wasn't him and Bill anymore. "Uh, still need something to wash it down with. The coffee's gone."

“There’s a glass of water beside you.”

"Wait, what?" Dipper didn't notice that but upon the nightstand, as promised, there was a glass of water for him. "When did that get here?" Thirsty and achy and eager to amend that, he didn't need Bill's reply to pop the tablets into his mouth, then take several drinks of water to ensure they went
“I put it there while you were sleeping,” he said. “I’ve been hungover before, doll. I know what to expect.”

"Before?" Dipper scoffed at the understatement, but it was verging on hesitantly teasing, appreciative of his proactive involvement in making this less unpleasant even if Bill's familiar care incited bitter envy. "You're the expert on it. When's your memoir coming out?" If Bill and Wendy were staying together, he supposed he should be the first to read it because there were identical evenings ahead—

No.

Dipper discarded the thought. As much as drowning his sorrows in alcoholic beverages appealed, it wasn't the answer. He could be happy for his friends, supportive of their relationships. Jealousy was senseless when his chances with Bill were approximately as real as his common sense was last night.

“In fifty years once I finally croak,” Bill told him. “I have a ghostwriter on it. It’ll be fantastic, a tale for the ages.”

"Make sure they put in a good word for me. Do I get to be your cliche sassy friend who has amazing fashion sense?" Plaid shirts and jeans didn't lie, nor did… whatever the mess was that he had on. Boxers and Bill's shirt - what a heartthrob. "Or maybe I'm the nerdy awkward friend who's secretly lovable and a total underdog."

“That’ll be up to the writer, sugar. I’ll try to put in a good word, but after your drunken exploits they might not portray you in the most complimentary light.”

"Ouch," Dipper said, lips curving upwards, "I can settle for cuddle partner and wannabe girlfriend who vies for your affection." Healthiness aside, it felt better to phrase it like that, as if it was a flippant, joking remark and not the source of everything that'd gone wrong recently.

“Seems accurate. You fit the jealous girlfriend cliche really well.”

"Mm-hmm," he hummed, shifting onto his stomach, "how could I sit complacently as you're stolen? I'll never find anyone half as handsome." There was a hint of despondency to his flirtatious reply, knowing they shouldn't when Bill was taken. No matter how he tried to grow accustomed to hearing it, telling himself that, it didn't get better or ease the intensity of the hurt.

Bill scoffed and folded his arms. “Well, you seemed to move on fast, considering your date with Robbie. When’s your next one, tonight at eight? Bet he’s taking you to the morgue this time.”

Surprised by the revival of that topic, Dipper's eyebrows raised as the teasing mood dissipated. "Hey," he chided, poking Bill's cheek, "I already told you that wasn't a date. Robbie and I agreed it wouldn't be, so I think he was just trying to ruffle your golden feathers."

“Yeah, it accomplished that. You and him both had a great time.”

"Robbie and I are staying friends. And honestly?" Dipper drew in a deep breath, mustering courage. "I mostly had a good time because I was talking to you, and… plus, it wouldn't be fair. Netflix with you afterward was better, hands down." It was the reassurance that'd calmed him before, but it appeared Bill wasn't sold.

“I don’t know,” Bill said, dubious. “If you liked hanging out with me, why date him to begin
with?"

Although he should've seen that question coming from a mile away, it nevertheless surprised him, caught him unprepared and left him stumbling for a clear explanation. It was muddied by Mabel setting them up, Robbie feeling as if he wouldn't find love, Dipper's own anticipation that it'd grow on him. "Because Robbie seemed interested?" said Dipper, a sigh spilling into the conclusion. "And it's not like I was going to turn him down without even trying to see if things could work."

"I— what? You ran off with him because he showed interest?"

Perceiving it as a cheap blow at his desperation, he defensively mumbled, "I guess. He seemed nice, and I figured we could give it a shot. I mean, we ended up going out as friends rather than dating, but I don't think it was unreasonable."

Bill staggered upright, rigid and wild, slamming his clenched fist into the mattress hard enough to abruptly seize Dipper from his thoughts. "I was interested in you! And you fucking went out with Snivelsworth."

Dumbfounded, Dipper blinked before it fully processed. It might as well have slapped him across the face.

"What?" he asked, nearly screeched, jolting so rapidly that his headache caused him to flinch as he reared back to stare incredulously at Bill. "You— you? Seriously?" Skepticism bled into him, creating a snapshot compilation of every instance Bill did or said something that suggested otherwise. "I… you know I wasn't doing that thing where we joke with each other, right? I mean actual dating." The clarification burst from him, a jumble of tensed words that rose in panic, his pitch heightened an octave.

"Yeah, I'm serious." As if Dipper's eyes could get any wider or his heart could beat any faster. "Then you— fucking went off with him and I'm back with Red. Fucking damn it all to hell."

"It was one da—" he stopped himself, reiterating through a voice crack, "it wasn't even a date! And I was thinking about how much I'd rather be with you during basically all of it. I didn't— how was I supposed to know? I thought… you were hitting on all these women and—"

“And? You weren't exactly shooting me bedroom eyes, Pine Tree. A guy can't wait forever hoping things'll change after you went for everybody but me.”

"You never said anything!” he huffed, throwing his arms out in exasperation. "I was… trying, kind of. I mean, there was a lot of flirting." Attempts. In his case, they were more correctly labeled flirting attempts, as they apparently hadn't conveyed the message. "Then you got together with Wendy and so… yeah. Probably shouldn't have treated that with alcohol." The end of that teetered and quieted, and he scratched his upper arm.

Bill’s lip curled, disdain crossing his features. “You were with Robbie first. It’s not like I jumped to dating Red. It was a tough decision, us getting together, and now I have to break up with her again.”

It took every ounce of his willpower to say, "No, you really don't." If there were feelings and a compromise had been attained, he'd count his losses and walk away knowing he was too late to the draw.

“Yes, I do. Then I’ll mention you and she’ll propose her stupid poly idea.” Utterly lost, he awaited details that were prompted by a questioning noise, so Bill heaved a long breath and said, “Months
ago, she brought up inviting you into our relationship, but I’m strictly a couple. Not a.. thriple.”

Smiling faintly, he settled closer to Bill, testing the proximity. "Oh. Yeah… I get that." There was a pause as he tried to think through the surge of giddiness, keep himself collected; they had to approach this rationally, and his anxiety edged higher as their gazes locked. "You still don't have to end things with her on my behalf if you guys are happy and a relationship with Wendy is what you want."

“I want you.” The sincerity of the statement and devotion glinting in Bill's gaze had his heart soaring.

Breathless, he asked, "Yeah?” Okay, scratch the previous plan. Composure on the back burner, he wasn't going to bother wrangling the tentative grin that mirrored his delight, a rush igniting him with adrenaline. Although he debated it, wondered if he should even indulge this, the tender confession didn't wait for permission, "I want you too."

Bill shook his head, fingers throttling the sheets. "It's been so fucking frustrating, not being with you."

But he knew they couldn't, not like this. Dipper forced himself to focus, squeezing his eyes closed to pacify his racing thoughts. "That's what you meant? I— I thought," his throat felt impossibly dry, "you chose Wendy, and… I don't know." It was like they'd missed their opportunity, the window shutting when neither had dared to divulge.

Bill sealed Dipper’s hands in his, pads soothingly tracing his knuckles. “I didn’t want Red. I’ve wanted to hold you close, to keep you by my side.”

"Maybe… we should wait," he suggested, averting his gaze, swallowing hard. His hands were clammy in Bill's, trembling and breaking into a cold sweat. "If you're genuinely breaking up with Wendy this time. I thought you were after you tried to kiss me, but then you guys stayed together, so I'm not sure anymore." Bill did say he was going to, but that didn't always apply to his actions.

“I’ll dump her.” Bill sounded determined, a bright gleam to his eyes. “We’ve had a wealth of practice.”

"That doesn't sound good, dude. Are you going to be able to? Gracefully?" Hesitance struck him. "I don't want her to be mad at me, or you. Do you think she will be?" Wendy was a marvelous friend, and he didn't want to lose her over this.

Bill's hands clutching his silently conveyed he need not worry. “She’ll be fine, she’s been with me before. Red should be used to this.”

"Is this like the other times?" he questioned, guarded. "You guys usually get back together, and I was kind of hoping..."

“No,” he said. “You’re permanently stuck with me. There won’t be any breaks in our future relationship, just like how there are no breaks in my fondness for you.”

Dipper felt an additional flood of affection overwhelm him and snaked his arms around Bill. “That’s good,” he murmured, breathing in the scent of spicy honey but wasn’t sure if it was from Bill or the stolen shirt he donned, “because I don’t think I’m talented enough at drinking to survive many more nights like… well, last night. I can’t believe how jealous I was, it was dumb.”

“Dearest, you were a jealous ball of rage.” Dipper laughed at that, watery and muffled by Bill's shoulder as he buried his face in the crook of his neck, elevated by the stream of unadulterated
exhilaration. "It's shocking you didn't make more of a scene while you were at it.” Bill exhaled indolently, arms rounding his frame.

"I know. I shouldn't have done that, but I was totally blindsided and didn't realize Wendy would be joining us, much less as your date. A little heads up would've been nice, I was hoping you were asking me out— which sounds stupid in hindsight." However, his hurt feelings from the previous evening weren't as harsh, not when he could hardly think beyond holyshitBillhasfeelingsforme and the high that came with it. Trying to remember the evening, he asked, "Was I... lying on the floor at some point? I remember staring at your living room ceiling for a long time."

Bill chuckled. “You decided to get on the floor and stroke Marigold, then argued with me about using my bed.”

Peeved at himself and his drunken antics, Dipper scrambled back to bury his face in his hands as if that would hide him from the shame. "Yeah, never drinking that much again." It made socializing easier, but he'd discovered other methods of humiliating himself. "I was such a jerk to you." His and Bill's recollections corroborated each other's and unearthed an irrefutable bottom line: he'd been a terror.

“I wouldn’t worry so much about it, Pine Tree. I still like you plenty.”

Quizzically, he asked while being uncertain if he wanted the answer, "As much as you did before I drank my bitterness away?" Not that it'd gone away, it'd gotten louder and more vocal.

Bill smiled at him warmly. “Of course. You’re my favorite, you know.”

"I'm your favorite?" he asked, tilting his head. "Wait, like, your favorite person?"

“Yeah.” Gleeful and astounded didn't begin to describe it as that sunk in, and Dipper murmured an awed 'oh wow' as he slumped against Bill, who rumbled his resolute confirmation of, “You are.”

"That’s..." Scratching the back of his neck, he didn't know what to say to the candid confession, at a loss but more flattered than he could've imagined was possible. "Really sweet of you." A personal inquiry was on the tip of his tongue, and he gauged Bill's expression, watching him, trying to determine how to ask it or if it was even applicable.

Buying himself time, Dipper raised his hands to Bill's shoulders, flattening them over the fabric of his shirt and trailing his fingers downward, steadfast in articulating a distinct fear. He could do this. "So, you know how you and Wendy were intermittent? This— what you want with me isn't because you need to have someone in your life, right?" Bill's loneliness wasn't a secret, it was transparent in almost every choice: inviting himself to places, into groups, tagging along on outings, ensuring he always had a partner. If they pursued romance, he refused to be disposable or a partner of convenience until he found somebody better.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “My relationship with you is because I want to be with you.”

Although it was reassuring, the concerns didn't stop there. "Are you going to handle it without freaking out or... or fighting me?” Dipper asked, various scenarios playing through his mind and wincing at the thought of a messy separation. "Okay, so I know I was kind of responsible for the fighting thing, but the rest is seriously worrying because I suck at knowing what topics are sensitive for you."

“I’m going to be fine, Pine Tree. I have therapy, remember?”
"It might not be immediately effective. You should probably expect it'll take a while to get results, and I don't want to break up over a stupid argument that we'd forget in an hour."

"We're not going to break up." Bill booped his nose as it wrinkled with the sense of approaching impact. "Relax, cutie. We'll be okay."

And then there was the most complicated element, the soulmate angle to their relationship that he couldn't decipher if Bill even knew about. If he did, he had a feeling he wouldn't have admitted to desiring such an arrangement in protest of their potentially-matching soulmarks. While aware it couldn't stay in the background forever, Dipper thought this was already a gamble with Bill's unpredictable moods and his own flighty tendencies. Maybe it wouldn't make a difference.

"You think so?" he asked, Dipper's hand trailing down his side to seek Bill's, their fingers curling together.

"Oh, cutie," Bill clasped it reassuringly, "I know so."

"I mean, I know that sounded cynical, but logically…" Dipper faltered, fretting. "There are a ton of components to consider, things that could go wrong and all of the standard relationship pitfalls are bad enough as it is but there are also extra potential causes of a breakup because we have a history and—"

"Pine Tree, shush." Bill leaned in, planting a kiss to his hand that warmed him to the core, had his pulse drumming. "You're overthinking this."

As always, he was. Closing his eyes, Dipper inhaled and let the tension melt away with the expelled puff of air, promising himself that he would research how to be in a successful romantic relationship later. Knowledge would mentally equip him.

Fluttering his eyelids open, it was amazing how seeing Bill was a comfort, thankful for his presence and the steadiness he radiated throughout this small eruption of relationship anxiety. "Thanks," he said with a sheepish beam, admiring Bill for a couple moments. "So how long?"

"How long?" Bill echoed in confusion.

"Oh, uh, how long have you…" Dipper trailed off there while he searched for the right word, "...wanted to date me, I guess." That was safe, not putting scary, commitment-implying words like 'love' into Bill's mouth.

"For a very long time, sugar."

Elation engulfed his heart and spread through his veins with each beat. "You know, you could've asked me on a date instead of going to the trouble of threatening me with academic suspension and forcing me to grade your papers," he said playfully, mind traveling to the day they'd met and the subsequent joke. "Hey, I thought you weren't into 'children who ruin vehicles' or whatever you said."

"I've said a lot of things, honey. Things change, told you that last night. Though you better not silly string my car again."

*That was Mabel*, and it was so tempting to tell him, but he held his tongue. "I've reformed over the semester. This labor has put me on the right track, thanks Warden Cipher."

Dramatically, Bill used part of the blanket to mimic the movement of a flogger. "I don't know, Prisoner Pines. You've been a very naughty boy."
"Oh my god. No. No, we are not doing that," Dipper laughed nervously, failing to make eye contact as he instinctively grasped his arm. "I didn't think that would be the first scenario that was going to come up, to be honest."

His smile faded as he peered at him, eyes slitting. "Is that a no to getting a whip and some rope then?"

Hands coming up as if to block further discussion, he said, "Look, I'm all for talking about preferences and what you want to do in the bedroom," he started, his respect for Wendy rising to the top of his reservations, "but should we be doing that right now? It feels weird when you're actually dating Wendy to be talking about how you… want to…" He didn't think he could end that, so he stopped there and shrugged. "Maybe we can save that for afterward, once you've finished breaking it off. We can decide what we want to be, if we want to do the, uh, relationship-romance thing."

"Should I call her right now?" Bill asked, his free hand blindly searching for his phone on the bed. "This should be something that you put effort into doing right, not a call to break up after, what, a day of being together?" Dipper winced, contemplating through chewing his lower lip. "It's considerate to do it face-to-face, especially if this time the breakup's going to be permanent because she needs to know that."

It didn't appear as though the message was getting through when Bill concluded, "I think I’d prefer calling her, Pine Tree. Wendy never liked the face-to-face breakup, we exchanged voicemails."

"Okay, but… do it delicately?" That might be too much to ask, so he lowered the bar, "With basic decency."

"I’ll have you know I’m the epitome of total decency."

Although hoping Bill would be kind in broaching the subject with Wendy, Dipper moved on with a lazy smile and remarked, "Or the quintessence of an over-inflated ego and exaggerated sense of self importance."

“Nah, that’s Stan.”

It was quite possibly true of both of them, so he let the conversation dissolve as he remained close to Bill, burrowed and relaxed by the lingering embrace, wondering how he'd gone without this for so long. The best aspects were the protective squeeze of Bill's arm draped across his waist and how he maneuvered his body to align precisely alongside him, creating this cocoon of secure tranquility.

Realizing something, Dipper pulled back to point out, "You never did tell me about your new job. Unless you did and..." It wasn't that uncommon of an occurrence for Dipper to be hooked on a train of thought, wholly absorbed. Daydreaming muted his surroundings and drove him on autopilot.

“Oh, that!” Bill puffed his chest, the sight glorious. “I’m a car salesman.”

"Wait, really?" Dipper's eyebrows shot up, envisioning the stereotypical young car salesman type: excitable and stylish, full of bravado, loud, fast talker, demanding attention, manipulative, charming. Then his gaze slid to Bill, the connection snapping into place. "...Yeah, I can totally see it."

“It’s grand. They hired me on the spot. That bar is missing out on my excellency.” Working as a car salesperson for fun was outlandish, but then again, Bill was seemingly a perfect candidate for the role's demands of extroversion.
"Congrats— I think I might've said that before, but seriously. That's exciting," he said. "Does that mean your hours are going to be normal? Getting texts from you at four in the morning was annoying." But the words were laced with affection since he wasn't that upset by it, not now. It was sort of a different story when he was half-asleep and looking for a phone that wouldn't stop vibrating while Mabel groaned to make it stop.

"Yep, no more four a.m. texts from me." Bill talked over his mutter of 'thank god'. "My shifts are on the weekend, and I said I could possibly come in during the week if I'm not teaching a class or in class."

"Wow, I'm... glad to hear that getting fired sort of panned out for you." Bill's cheerful demeanor suggested he was looking forward to this change in jobs. "What did you do before becoming a bartender here?" Dipper asked as he squirmed from under Bill, glancing around the bedroom to locate his phone and see what time it was. Now that his headache was easing up, he couldn't stay here forever, though cuddling on Bill's bed and shielding himself for eternity would've been ideal.

"Hm? Oh, I was employed in a coffee shop. The coffee was good, but I was annoyed by the customers." Bill had also moved, but only to sit up on the bed.

"You know, impatient middle-aged women purchase vehicles too," he warned, "so you're not escaping them, you're giving them a new manager to speak to." Picking up his phone, he noticed texts from his parents and Mabel, the latter making sure he was fine and wishing him well on his sleepover. His parents' texts were typical, updates and asking about his college life, sending images of their cat and cockatiels.

It reminded him, and he asked, "Hey, have you met my parents? ...Wow, that sounds weird aloud." This unique situation bypassed the more common offer to meet parents or an inquiry of when, as it was possible Bill had already done so.

"No, but my father has."

"Yeah," he said slowly, grimacing, "A business matter, right?" Picturing it, he visualized Bill's father sitting at a table in a conference room with his parents, discussing politics or government affairs linked to financials or funding, or a mega-corporation. The conversation would gradually go awry as Mr. Cipher urged and his parents wouldn't budge, and they dismissed in a stalemate. The trade of icy letters would ensue. "Was that before or after the insider trading fiasco?"

"Does it matter? I didn't think your parents liked him regardless of the circumstances."

"Not really, but it isn't only their political differences. It's... the legal stuff too, and funding for West Coast Tech. Is he still trying to get that?" asked Dipper, nose scrunching. "I figured if he was going to, he'd use our enrollment as leverage since this university is a business venture to him." 'Our' referring to him and Mabel, but he hadn't heard anything about it in a while from either parent. "So what's going on with your mom? Have you heard about all those conspiracy theories on the Internet?"

Bill cocked his head to a side, intrigued. "Which ones?"

"You don't know?" Bill's widening smirk suggested he did, but wanted to be entertained. "People think something happened to her before he moved out here. Nobody's seen her in public with him for a long time." As was true of most conspiracy theories, Dipper was semi-knowledgeable on its developments.

"It'd be pretty weird to see them together."
Although about to suggest divorce, he held his tongue because that was precisely the reason most believed she had been killed. Soulmate divorces were taboo and would've been a blight on both of them, tanking the business. "Yeah? Why?" He prodded for answers as he shuffled from the bed, sifting for his own shirt to slip on over Bill's in acknowledgment that he'd have to go home soon.

“She’s probably avoiding him, because they hate each other. She’s the wicked witch of the west, Pine Tree.”

"Wow, alright," he said warily as he pulled on his clothes and shucked Bill's undershirt in a fluid motion, "glad to know she's okay, but... uh, I'm not going to ask about the rest of that. Also, you're not from this coast."

"Her status changes depending on her location. She got promoted to west when we moved."

Dipper spared him a look, questioning and veering on disapproval. "What? I’m being honest.” A beat passed. “Gotta say, cutie, disapproval isn’t a good color on you.”

"Honesty doesn't excuse being a jerk," he said, then finished buttoning his plaid shirt that smelled like booze from last night, and like dog. Both were reasons to do laundry when he returned to the dorm, but because that wasn't a switch in scenery that he was eager to adopt, he took a seat on the foot of the bed.

“I’m not a jerk.” Bill seemed annoyed, and he turned to Marigold, cooing as he pet her, scratching behind her ears. Dipper didn't want to get involved with his family and shook his head, willing to drop it but Bill was verging on discontent. “I’m not, Pine Tree. Am I?”

"I don't know. It's just weird to talk about a parent like that.”

“You’d say the same thing if you met her.”

"If you're serious about us... I might," he said, fingers interlocking apprehensively, "if you want me to. I'm assuming you would, wouldn't you? Is the divide in our families that bad?"

"If you want to meet her," he said, “but she’s not what I’d deem 'fun' to be around.”

"Okay, I'm... looking forward to it, meeting your family, I mean. Political differences aside." They could be civil and keep their personal lives separated from the rest, and that was the moment that a twinge of concern kindled in him as he wondered if Bill shared his family's traditional views. Filing it into the recesses of his mind, that was a discussion for later, like the soulmark.

Upon clearing his throat, Dipper said, "Are you still sure about this? About... everything."

“Of course,” Bill said. “Are you?”

He tapped his heel on the wooden panel of the bed. "Seems weird. You and me, me and you, us thinking about getting together... being into each other, mutually."

“Do you not like it, Pine Tree?"

"I think I like it," he reassured, noting that it'd take some time to acclimate. "Why? Do... you not like it?"

“I do like it,” Bill told him, reaching to caress his hands, a gesture that accentuated the size difference. “Just wanted to make sure you did, Pine Tree.”

After deliberating on the complexities of what a relationship between them would entail, he
admitted, "I feel kinda bad about you and Wendy. Maybe not so much if you guys weren't working out, or..."

“I don’t get why you feel bad.”

"Ruin your relationship."

Reducing the pierce of shame, Bill shrugged, raising his hands with his palms facing upward like a scale. “I don’t care, we’ve always been better off as friends. The two months from her were nice, but then I thought you were rejecting me- us. Had to move on somehow.” That didn’t account for how Wendy felt about it, but Dipper inwardly promised to check in with her afterward and hope things were alright.

"Okay, well," Dipper said as he stood and stretched, missing the alcohol's effect on lessening the pain in his leg, "keep me updated on how it goes, but I should head home. I think Mabel's expecting me."

“Oh, okay. I’ll see you later, Pine Tree?” It wavered like a question, vulnerable. "Do you want me to take you home?"

As he headed into the living room with Bill trailing behind him, Dipper said, "I feel like we've talked about this before. It's literally across the street and takes like, a minute tops."

Shoulders stiffening, Bill visibly tensed, a flicker in his eyes that Dipper identified as panic but didn't grasp why it'd be there. His jaw was tight. “I can drive you.”

The insistence was eyebrow-raising. "What? Why? I'm not that sore. Also, do you have any idea where my shoes are?"

“No,” he said, curt and cagey. “I don’t. Maybe Marigold took them?” At the mention of her name, Dipper heard bed springs and a thud, then she entered the room with her tail wagging. Because she didn't seem inclined to show him where the shoes were, he scanned and lapped around the apartment, gathering one battered shoe, then the other.

"If you want to walk me home, that’s..." thoughtful of you, Dipper had been about to say, but lost his nerve and changed his mind. "I think that'd be fine. I don't want you to start your vehicle for this."

“Are you sure, Pine Tree? We could roll up to your dorm in her.”

"I'm sure. Besides, Marigold can come with,” he said as he leaned over her, scratching her neck and watching the golden curls tumble over his hands in rippling amber. "What do you say?"

Bill's dazzling grin told him all he needed to know, and Dipper grabbed the leash.
“This is going to be great,” Mabel said excitedly, plopping a dollop of strawberries onto her bowl of pudding. “I wish they had strawberry syrup though.”

"I'm surprised they don't. Maybe they ran out?" Dipper suggested and peered over his shoulder at the crowded dining center, everyone showing today presumably for the dessert, vanilla pudding with an inconceivable amount of toppings available: sprinkles, syrups, cookie crumbles, butterscotch chips, fruit. And Mabel had a diabetes mountain on hers, while Dipper was slightly more conservative but still overboard from the perspective of a health-conscious individual. "Sorry, Mabel. I know you were trying to get here quickly."

“Yeah, trying is the keyword, Dip-Dop," she said but nevertheless appeared to be in good spirits, her demeanor bright. "But we kept running into people from our floor every ten steps. Don't they know it's vegan dessert day? No time for yakkin' when there's pudding to be snackin'... on." An accompanying hand gesture demonstrated the chattiness of her friends, and Dipper grinned. "As for the syrup, I don't think they ever have that. How cruel, right? It should be like, war-crime level of cruel.”

Amused, he said, "I think war-crime level of cruel is reserved for y'know, actual war crimes, but you could pitch strawberry syrup to them as a basic human right alongside equally important things like democracy and freedom."

“I might have to,” she said, resolute. “It is very important we have access to our lord and savior, strawberry syrup.”

"You could file that with the dining services, I think they have a suggestion box." Probably went into the trash, but pretending to hear complaints appeased angry, hungry students at least. As they neared a table and sat down with their plates of excessively-sugary treats, he said, "Or, and try to stick with me on this one, I could buy some for us."

“Spend our money?” Mabel shook her head, then bolded her voice, raising her spoon as if delivering a speech, “I say, the access of strawberry syrup should be for everyone, and if we’re paying a couple thousand dollars to this dining center, they should provide us with whatever we want.”

"It's more of a benevolent dictatorship than a socialist state," he said, "so for now, until they accept strawberry syrup as a human right, I'm pretty sure we're going to have to deal." Which... wasn't really an issue, as they had sufficient sweets to last them a lifetime. "How are you even going to eat that, by the way?" Dipper asked, a tilt of his head toward Mabel's bowl of endless desserts. "Do you think you'll actually taste the pudding with all those toppings?"

“I'll taste more than the pudding,” she said proudly, brandishing a spoon to heartily scoop a glob of sweetness. “I'll taste vanilla-goodness with caramel, fruity, strawberry deliciousness. It'll be like a
"Wow, you should write the menus for the diner," he said, referencing the laminated sheets that Mabel's workplace claimed could pass as menus but did little more than inadvertently remind customers they were in a fifties-themed diner with how outdated the design was. "I'd probably buy anything if it was described like that."

"Mm-hm! I would too," she said through a bite of fruit slathered in caramel syrup, the contents of the pudding nowhere to be found but presumably buried at the bottom. "Can you imagine how awesome my descriptions would be?"

"Way better than the current ones. What, were they created in the seventies or something?" Whenever the place was established, the menus didn't seem to reflect the times or what was actually available for purchase. "If they have any employee do it, I hope it's you because imagine what Robbie would write on there. 'The Burger of Despair', these two hopeless buns come together to suffocate the driest patty in the world, while lettuce and tomato suffer alongside it. There's cheese, but it's on the verge of breathing its last breath. Topped with a drizzle of mourning, and comes with hellfire fries."

"Oh, sounds badass! I'd totally get that if it was vegan." That had Dipper briefly glancing at her backpack, a large 'PIGS ARE PETS' pin on the front with a cartoonish drawing of a pig.

Sitting upright again, he said, "I'm not sure there'd be a lot of despair put into the making of it, though."

"It’d be filled with love and excitement. Ooh, and glitter! Things I don’t think Robbie really likes." Dropping her voice and cupping a hand to the side of her mouth, she fake-whispered, "I think he fetishizes his sadness." Upon resuming a normal tone, she asked, "Speaking of, how’d your date with him go?"

He frowned, mindlessly scraping remnants of caramel from the bowl while he mentally arranged the passage of events into something presentable. "It… wasn't quite a date. See, he was kind of bummed out when he picked me up, so I asked if he'd want to chill instead. We did that, and he talked about Wendy most of the time. I don't think he's ready to date yet, which was fine because we're sticking to being friends."

"That’s a shame," Mabel said. "I thought you’d be cute together, but oh well. Chin up, bro, I’ll find you someone else. Someone better. This Love Guru's not going to rest 'til you're perfectly paired."

The less-than-stellar results of the date didn't solely rest on Robbie's shoulders, however. He vividly recalled thinking about Bill throughout most of it, comparing the two as if he was measuring suitors for himself. Although ashamed of his inability to focus, it'd quickly become clear who his preference was, who made his heart skip beats and race a million miles per hour. And that wasn't Robbie.

"Maybe… it'd be better if you didn't set me up with anyone," he said carefully, debating how to approach this. Not only was he very into Bill, but Bill had confessed to feeling the same. "I'm sure you'd find some amazing matches for me, but I don't think that'd be a great idea." There were several reasons why that was the case, including an incredibly big one, but he struggled for a graceful method of breaking the news to her when he didn't know how she'd react, or if there was anything to break when 'subtle' didn't quite coincide with his attraction to Bill.

Bill had assured it was over with Wendy and seemed interested in being together, but Dipper's rational, cautious side was winning. History didn't swing in his favor, suggesting Bill would remain
with her despite promises of the relationship's dissolution.

Missing his point and misconstruing it as modesty, Mabel insisted, "No, Dipper. I get that Robbie wasn't right for you, but next time will be someone perfect. Give me like, a couple days. I'll have a list of bachelors and bachelorettes ready to sweep you off your feet."

"As, uh, wonderful as that sounds," he said, chasing a lump of pudding around his bowl nervously, "it's not that I'm against dating or unwilling to let you pair me off with someone, but it's more like… I kind of maybe have someone in mind?" It wasn't a question, but the statement was rendered one since its end raised in pitch and hesitation. "When I was out with Robbie, it wasn't just him not being ready to date that made things fall apart. I realized I wasn't that into it because I… guess I already have feelings for someone else, so it wasn't fair to him."

"Ooh? Who is it?" Mabel leaned forward expectantly, her brown eyes gleaming in intrigue. "Don't make me guess, Dipper."

"I don't think it'd be that hard," he replied and chewed the inside of his cheek. "You know everyone I hang out with, and it's not like it's a stranger…" When he determined he was rambling for the sake of stalling, Dipper stopped, sighed, and raised his gaze to Mabel's as he silently hoped this wouldn't be an issue. "It's—"

"Is it Wendy?" she asked in spite of her aversion to guesswork. "I always thought you'd start crushing on her. Ever since we went to the first Environment Club meeting and you could barely do your introduction."

Sputtering, he reared back as a rosy blush heated his face into the hues of deep crimson, utterly bewildered. "No, it's… I mean, Wendy is really pretty and everything and maybe if we had gotten to know each other better—" Halting the distressed stream of consciousness there, he shook his head, and hushed his voice as he continued, "I was going to say it's… I think I'm— I might have feelings for Bill."

It was like a record was scratched because all of Mabel's excitement was drained in an instant, and Dipper's hope plummeted along with it until he was sheepish under her wide-eyed gawk. "Bill? As in, Bill Cipher? Are you sure? He's– he hurt you. And when he overreacts, it can be kinda scary."

"Yeah," he admitted, "I've thought about those things too, and I don't know." Despite a rough past, Bill cared about him and illustrated that in actions, his method displaying affection and going out of his way to be kind. "He can be a jerk, but that's— most of the time, he's a sweet guy. Like on the camping trip, when he refused to hurt any fish. Or trying to give Stan and Ford financial help." Buying milkshakes for the diner staff, massages, driving him to therapy… Bill was stealthily generous and did his best to ensure nobody knew about that side of him. "But I get it, he's done bad stuff too, like calling me crippled," that was a mumble, something he'd rather not relive, "and the first time we met."

"I don't know, Dipper," Mabel said, apprehensively kicking her heel against the chair. "I don't want him causing you any more harm."

"This is unrelated, sort of, but he's actually going to therapy again. I can't remember if I mentioned that he agreed to go," he said and swallowed a spoonful of pudding, but now, it just tasted overbearingly sweet, verging on nausea-inducing. "So that might assist with his… uh, mood instability. He's excited about getting help."

Mabel narrowed her eyes, twirling her spoon idly, and Dipper frowned at the sight. Her similar disinterest in food was a strong sign of worry, and he wished he could do something other than
offer hopeful reassurances of a healthy relationship. “If you’re sure, Dippy, but I don’t want anything to happen to you. It’d be great if his therapy works out.”

"I guess I'm not sure," he eventually said through an exhale forced by the weight of the discussion. "I want things to work out too because I feel like he could be this incredible, amazing person—as in, being able to show that's who he is, not… someone who has explosive tendencies, emotional swings, and an entitled attitude. That's maybe where therapy comes in."

Gently clicking her spoon in thought, she asked, “Have you thought about using safewords with him? If he says or does something, you can use it to make him stop.”

"What if I tell him to stop?" Dipper inquired, cocking his head. "I figured that would be enough, but I don't know. It… could be useful since he does drag out arguments." Bill had his faults and hang ups over peculiarities, but Dipper acknowledged he shared the guilt by getting carried away, asking about sensitive subjects beyond their welcome and escalating it into anger.

“Would he listen to ‘stop’ if he was in the heat of the moment?” she asked. “If that works for you, go for it. But a safe word is unique, a real ‘please I need you to cease what you’re doing.’”

Submerged in analytical evaluation of the idea, he pointed out, "If he wouldn't listen to 'stop', I guess I don't see why he might listen to the safeword. I mean, I still get the value in it and if we need to, we could set up something like that." Although he'd been primarily musing to himself, he withdrew from his thoughts to add, "Oh. And… about me being into Bill, I think—like, I'm fairly certain he feels the same, and he said he's breaking things off with Wendy again."

“He’s with Wendy and told you this? Damn, that’s a mess.”

"Oh my god, it is," he groaned in agreement, hand sliding over his forehead and through his hair. "I didn't know a relationship was going to be this complicated. It's not that I thought it'd be simple, but there's the whole possible soulmate thing too which makes it worse. I'm glad he doesn't know."

"Has he shown you his soulmark yet?"

That wasn't even something that seemed possible in this timeline. "Shown me?" he repeated, chuckling. "Yeah, no. You've seen how he acts, claiming it doesn't exist and right now, I guess I'm fine with that. Besides, it's not like I have a chance of seeing it with how he keeps it wrapped in gauze all the time."

“You know, I heard that some cultures wrap the soulmark for dead soulmates. It’s a tradition. Ooh, what if that’s why he does it? According to an article I read, a bunch of countries do: Libya, China, the Philippines, Egypt. Speaking of, did you know Egypt has just under a hundred million people in it? Like, wow, that's tons of people, am I right?"

Blinking in surprise, his thoughts grew jumbled along the ramble of Egyptian facts. "Wait, what was that?" Dipper prompted, leaning closer in earnest. "About the soulmark-wrapping."

“It’s to cover soulmarks that are grayed out. I guess it’s a demonstration of respect, but I’m not too sure.”

With that sinking in, Dipper silently parsed, mind calculating. "Maybe his soulmate's dead…? I just… I thought—" Mulling over it for the past several months had introduced and assimilated him to the reality of their soulmarks matching, but he hardly had any more confirming details than when they'd first met. Noticing he'd trailed off before, Dipper softly confessed, "I thought we’d be soulmates."
“Well, you could be! Like I said, there’s nothing that guarantees he's following the customs of that culture. Maybe he covers it up because he has an embarrassing tattoo there!” As they departed from the table to return their dishes, Mabel clasped a hand on his shoulder, concern and affection emanating from the action. "...But Dipper, take it slow with him, okay?"

Nodding, Dipper attempted to drown anxious thoughts by saying, "Yeah, that's… I think that'd be a good plan."

"Hey, Bill's coming over," Dipper called to Stan in the other room as he pocketed his phone, the text from Bill lingering in his mind. It'd been a brief announcement that he would be joining them at Stan and Ford's apartment for dinner, and although he and Bill had been keeping in contact over messages, he didn't know how things had progressed with Wendy. "Also, the paella is done."

It was Stan, so Dipper didn't need to ask if he was hungry enough to eat it. There was no question.

“What the fuck is this?” Stan muttered, plodding over to tower above the food. "There ain't meat in it!"

"Yeah," Dipper replied, "it's vegetable paella with chickpeas and rice, but I promise your inner carnivore can take a vacation day. Anyway, did you hear what I said about Bill coming?"

“I don’t care about Bill, but this hippie food in my apartment? That doesn't belong here in Casa Stan, kid. See these?” Stan pulled his sleeve, muscles flexing. "Ya get those from real food. Man food."

Dipper wasn't impressed. "You mean something coated in grease that you picked up at the diner?" he questioned over the clank of unstacking plates, separating the portions onto them. "I swear this is good, dude. Homemade is always better," he said, then snarkily continued, "unless you're cooking."

“Hey, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with my cookin’, I got meat."

"I think Mabel would cite that as the problem with your cooking, if we're ignoring the random hairs and burned parts. And the whole, 'treat it like a scavenger hunt' game to see what else accidentally fell in. So far, I think we've found napkin bits, plastic, twist ties..." he counted, tallying on the fingers of his free hand.

“All of it is part of a nutritious meal, ya hooligan. If ya had more, you wouldn’t be so damn short.”

Although he heard Stan shuffling in the refrigerator behind him, he prepared Stan's serving, assuming he’d eat it alongside whatever he was retrieving. "I'm pretty sure you and Ford are literally two inches taller than us." He placed an extra plate for Bill in case he hadn't eaten yet because whenever the chance to treat Bill to homemade meals arose, he seized it. Cooking for others was a small source of joy in his life, but for Bill specifically it was a hobby that he could use to impress him by creating tasty food from common household ingredients. Unlike Stan, Bill never had complaints but gratitude to spare.

“We’re still taller, kid,” he said as he closed the fridge, followed by more movement behind him. “Ah, there we go. Fixed it.”

"What'd you— oh." Dipper's expression flattened when he saw the slices of meat stacked on top of the paella.

“What? Got a problem, kid? Don’t judge me an’ my meats.” Stan breezed into the living room,
Dipper trailing behind and sitting at the small coffee table. Stan didn’t opt for cleanliness, reclined in his armchair and digging into the food as if he’d been starved for weeks. Witnessing him shovel it in nonstop couldn’t be further from a majestic view.

Dipper warned, "Jesus Christ, man. If you choke on that, I don't think I know enough about CPR to help you." Ford might've been able to if he was here, but he and Bill had been alternating late nights at the grad student office with finals on the horizon.

Stan’s response was a grunt in the midst of mouthfuls, absorbed in the television now that the commercial break was replaced by a boxing match that seemed to spur Stan into animated, one-sided interactions with the competitors of each match.

It was a couple bites of food later that he heard a knock on the door, but Stan made no move to answer it, so Dipper took that as his cue lest they were aiming to go deaf from the inevitable, incessant knocks that’d increase in proportion to Bill’s impatience. Plus, the idea of seeing Bill already sparked jittery glee.

Leaving his food at the table to open the door, Dipper pulled it back to reveal Bill, and an involuntary smile immediately touched his lips, widening when he saw his fluffy companion by his side. "Oh, you brought Marigold too?" he asked and knelt down to greet her with an abundance of scratches before moving out of the way. "Also, hey. You should come in."

Appearing chipper, Bill straightened his spine and inhaled, that typical lidded eyes and twisted smirk expression that screamed 'classic Bill.' “Why wouldn’t I bring Marigold?” Bill wondered as they entered the apartment, kicking the door shut behind him. He crouched to remove the leash, patting her side to encourage her to scamper off, and she sprung onto the sofa. Stan seemed distracted, still yelling at the television but powerless to Marigold's pleading for attention as he reached to stroke her back. “Did I miss anything exciting? Something sure smells good.”

"Oh, that's just me," Dipper said as he ghosted past Bill, jolting at a brush of their hands but giving no other indication that the dynamic had changed. Such small contact shouldn't have shocked his adrenaline into action, but everything was so different now that he knew Bill had more than a friendly affection for him. "Seriously though, I made paella. Do you want some? I set out a plate for you, but it's cool if you're not hungry…"

“I’d like to try some,” Bill said, heading for the kitchen as Dipper scooted after him. “Paella, you say? Sounds diverse, and I love me some worldly flavors. Unless it’s Greek, tends to be overseasoned in my experience.”

Leaning in the doorway as Bill located his plate and loaded an additional portion onto it, Dipper commented, "Huh, I don't think I've ever had Greek food."

“Could’ve been the cooks, but I didn’t find the dish very appealing,” he said, speaking and moving with such energy that it was impossible to tear his eyes away. “Here's a thought: we should hit a restaurant in the area, see how that goes.”

"Yeah, we should sometime. I bet there are plenty of places to try in LA." When there was a measure of silence between them, Dipper hesitantly asked, "Is… that a date then?" He let that hang in the air, voice quieted to ensure Stan didn't happen to overhear above the sound of the television and his cooing at Marigold.

“Only if you want it to be, Pine Tree.” Bill winked at him.

It didn't seem like Bill caught onto the underlying question that was his attempt to judge if he
would be available as a romantic option. More frankly, if he'd broken things off with Wendy — Dipper didn't want to ask her outright, especially not if Bill hadn't done it.

"I don't know. Do you have a girlfriend that might punt me off a cliff?"

"Nah, there's nothing to worry about."

"So a peaceful girlfriend then?" he teased, strolling to Bill and closing the space between them until they were inches apart, threading the sides of the blazer's lapel through his fingers. "Or are you taking applications?" Tracing the cloth to his shoulders, Dipper was transfixed by the press of his hands over the sloping curve, tempted to dip lower to his broad chest. The rest of the world would have to wait.

"Well, I thought I had a little cutie lined up. Is that not the case, Pine Tree?" Bill quirked his eyebrow at him. "Because it seems to be."

"Evidence definitely, uh, suggests it's the case. If you're interested... because if you're not, I mean, I'd totally understand since there's a lot to consider—"

"Pine Tree. If you keep talking, your head's going to spin off. It's a date, sugar."

"That... is mildly terrifying." Clearing his throat, he stepped back and rubbed his hands together as if removing any traces of the tender intimacy only seconds ago. Thoughtful and curious, he asked, "So when you say 'date' is it more of a date... or an ongoing series of dates, which implies a romantic relationship...type of arrangement?"

"It's going to be a series of dates in which we go to progressively fancier restaurants and not those shitty cheap ones."

"You don't have to woo me with your wealth, just so you know," Dipper said as they stepped into the living room, and he swore his heart jumpstarted when Bill placed his plate alongside his own, suggesting he was choosing to sit by him. The rush over the tiniest of ministrations was pathetic and he knew it. "I can also cook for us, too. I mean, I made dinner tonight, so it's not like I couldn't handle it."

"Oh, I know. I love homemade food, but Red never cooked. She refused to, so going out was common. resentment trickled into the confession, "and she never wanted to go anywhere fancy."

"I like cooking, so it's not a problem." It also spared him from a cramped vehicle with the bonus of knowing exactly what went into his food. It was like a puzzle, testing various combinations of ingredients and flavors to obtain the best result, and researching recipes was a fun pastime.

As he deliberated on what Bill had said, he inquired, "Why didn't she want to go to fancy places? Was it the dress code? Because I get that. Suits... are basically the worst clothes to exist," he paused, "on me." Bill looked good in them, comfortable and stylish, so it seemed ineffectual to gripe about that.

"She didn't 'have the money' and wouldn't let me pay for it."

"Oh, okay. I totally get that," Dipper said, "since pretty much every college student ever is broke. I don't blame her for wanting to save instead of splurging on fancy restaurants." Evaluating the latter half of Bill's statement, the complicating factor of Wendy's aversion to Bill paying for it, he asked, "Wait, why wouldn't she let you pay?"

"I don't fucking know, it was a woman pride thing, probably. We'd always get in fights over it."
Red would be mad if we went there because she couldn’t afford it, and then she’d get even pissier
because I’d pay. But if we went to her fucking ghetto restaurants—look at me, Pine Tree. I don’t
belong there. I’m classy.”

The claim and almost-hysterical tone had Dipper laughing, but he grew more serious to say, "Wow,
that's... rough. I didn't know you guys had issues with that." Hearing the aftermath of arguments
pertaining to financials made more sense, but it was long past the point of relevancy.

Stan grumbled, “Why couldn’t Wendy’ve taken *me* out? I would’ve let her paid... for everything.
A real woman would’ve done that."

"Something tells me you're seriously hoping to get free meals," he commented dryly, then peered
to Bill. "Well, for what it's worth, I wouldn't start a fight over the tab regardless of where we eat. If
you want to throw around your money and pay for it, I'm not going to deprive you."

Bill tensed, annoyance swiftly splashing his features. “I knew you were going to say that. You’re
just like Re– wait, what?” The defensiveness had vanished, replaced by confusion, and Dipper
smiled faintly.

"I said I'd let you pay. If you want to eat at expensive restaurants and pay for the meal, I don't
really have a problem since Mabel and I are short of expendable income, so..." he shrugged, "it
kind of works out, if you're fine with that."

“Pine Tree, I’d like that.”

"Okay, great, then we'll go out sometime," acutely aware of Stan's presence, he awkwardly added,
"as friends, you and me hanging out like guys do." That probably couldn't sound more unnatural if
he'd tried, but he wasn't keen on talking about their relationship when they hadn't confirmed its
officiality. It was a task he intended to face, eager to pinpoint where they stood with one another,
though it posed a challenge since none of his daydreaming produced mental scripts that would
suffice in Stan's presence.

A cold nose bumping his elbow startled him from his thoughts, and staring at Marigold led to the
creation of a new plan: after they were finished eating, he'd take her outside and ask Bill to join
him, then they could chat openly about the status of things between them. The notion of that
conversation had anxiety churning his stomach, worried about the irrational possibility of Bill
suddenly becoming uninterested or joking when he'd admitted to feeling the same.

That was a terrifying thought and almost reduced his appetite to nothing.

However, Stan's displeasure threw a buoy that rescued him from the ocean of apprehension. “Why
do you get to hang out with him? I was friends with ‘im first.”

"I guess Bill is wooed by my, uh... mystery-solving, hippie charm," he said, resorting to pushing
the food around his plate as his cognitions swam with possibilities of how the 'what are we'
discussion would proceed. Trying to focus, he said, "But look, we can both hang out with him over
dinner. Not at the comedy club anymore, but we could go to LA some night.

"Oh, about the food," he started, directing the question at Bill once Stan disappeared into the
kitchen, "what do you think of the paella? If you need to, Stan has slices of meat in the refrigerator
because he apparently can’t go one single meal without that. I think he puts meat and oxygen on the
same level of importance."

“It's delightful, doll. I don’t need fake meat on it.”
Flattered and glad that Bill liked it, he said, "Since you appreciate my cooking, maybe... you wouldn't mind if I made dinner for you—well, us sometime this week? Mabel has a lot of evening shifts at the diner, and I kind of miss cooking for people." Living at home made exploring that hobby easy, but when his food generally came from dining centers... it wasn't as satisfying.

"That'd be nice, Pine Tree." This was tailed by Bill finishing his serving and flashing him a smile. "If you keep whipping up food like this, I might make you a permanent cook in my apartment."

"If you're in the market for a professional chef, I think you could do way better than hiring me. I'm just... I don't know, I mess around with it, but it's only a hobby. Besides, I don't mind cooking as long as you're paying for the ingredients and everything." Cheekily, he said, "Honestly, it's more interesting than physics."

"Sugar, I want a homecook, not a professional. It's another reason Red didn't work out—she never wanted to be a good housewife."

"Oh," Dipper realized with sudden clarity, "yeah. I kind of forgot that you guys were always fighting about that." This discussion illuminated the depth of their arguments. And god, he hoped he and Bill didn't fall victim to that. "I don't know. Cleaning is relaxing for me and I like cooking, so those aren't problems. But I can't do it all the time, I have other life obligations."

"Hm?" Bill's voice was teasing. "Like what?"

"You know, academics... and," Dipper faltered, brows furrowing, "mostly academics, I guess." It was startling to recognize that his life revolved around schoolwork, especially as finals were ahead. More sleepless nights devoted to studying. "I still go to Environment Club meetings and therapy too. And there's this total jackass who I have to grade papers for, but at least he's super handsome."

"Mm, I thought you enjoyed grading papers. You get to cook, clean, do some grading in between your homework."

"Yeah, that's true. I don't mind grading, it's like cleaning—repetitive, but relaxing. With how much homework I have, though, it feels like I always need to do something: reading, studying, reviewing, going to lectures. There's never a break from it." A series of clacks from the kitchen reminded him that Stan had never returned, and he shot a questioning glance toward the doorway. "Uh, I'm... going to go see what he's doing."

Collecting the empty plates as he rose to his feet, Dipper walked into the kitchen and found Stan draped against the counter, munching on food directly from the pan. At least he was civilized enough to use silverware, unlike last time. "Those were supposed to be leftovers, man," he pointed out but wasn't bothered by it, advancing to dump the dishes into the sink.

"Well, they weren't good at bein' leftovers, were they? There's none left, kid."

"What, are you leaving Ford to feast on crumbs tonight?" he talked over Stan's protest that he'd put aside paella for Ford. "I have no idea why you don't get more attention from the ladies, your generosity is astounding." The sarcasm was accompanied by the squeak of a tap, then foamy water began filling in around the dirty dishes, but Stan nudged him away.

A fond rumble drove his intention home, "Come on, kid. You don't have to do those, not since ya were nice enough to cook up some grub."

He acquiesced, making the inward decision that he could do them once another matter had been contended to, the issue that festered in his thoughts. Dipper crossed the living room to stand by the
door, and the position alone incited enthusiasm from Marigold as she bounded over in hopes of a walk or playtime. "I'm going to take Marigold out," he broadcasted to the household. "Uh, Bill… could you give me a hand?" It wasn't the most bulletproof plan he'd ever conjured, but it'd hopefully get him and Bill alone.

Bill took in the scene, confused. "She was out thirty minutes ago, why're you taking her out again so soon?"

"Because… she wants to go out?" Dipper suggested, motioning to Marigold's perked stance, wagging tail. "It'd be cruel to deny her. And me. Definitely cruel to deny both of us."

Bill shook his head, brow creasing as he grabbed the door handle. "Alright Pine Tree, let's go."

Clipping a leash onto Marigold's collar, Dipper slid into his shoes and left the apartment with Bill in tow as they descended the staircase. "So, I kind of wanted to talk to you," he admitted, "away from Stan. That's why I was trying to get you to come with."

“What did you want to talk about?”

"Uh," he swallowed, feeling his palms start to sweat as they walked toward the extensive, fenced lawn of the apartment building, "I thought we could talk about us? Like, the… possible romance-relationship thing because dating is sometimes separate, and I figured I'd check in on that so we're on the same page—"

“Sweetheart, my mind hasn’t changed. Has yours?”

Willing himself to relax, he shook his head. "My mind hasn't changed either. So, does… that mean — I know earlier, you mentioned you weren't seeing anyone, sort of, and so does that mean you're available?" Dipper asked, kicking at the grass while his hands clasped behind his back. He wished he didn't feel so shy about this, so insanely awkward, but he didn't know how else to approach it.

Bill chuckled. "Hey doll, are you available? Because I've had my eyes on you for a long time, and I'd like to go on dates with you over the span of many months. Maybe years, if you'll have me."

A flurry of giddiness burst through Dipper, and he couldn't do more than stammer a few awestruck words until his composure rebuilt, but not without leaving a red tint securely on his cheeks. When he finally got enough of a grasp on himself to form a semi-coherent thought, he said, "Yeah, I— of course. I'm totally available, and I think I'd really like to be with you." Remembering one particularly heartwarming bit of what Bill said caused him to break into a broad grin, overflowing with delight. "Seriously, you think we'll last years?"

“If you’d like us to, we will.” Bill winked at him.

"I mean, we'll have to see how it goes but,” he said, still flustered and struggling to articulate himself, "I think I'd like us to. Does that— are we…?"

“If you’re wondering if we’re an item, the answer is yes. If that’s okay with you, cutie.”

Heart leaping, it thudded in such rapid rhythms that he was certain it was bound to beat out of his chest. "Yeah, of course," he said, elated and breathless, "it's fine with me— I want to be with you. As in, like, a romantic relationship if that's what you had in mind."

“What else would I have in mind, doll?" Bill reached for his hand, and Dipper intertwined their fingers. “If we weren’t romantic, I’d be concerned.”
Puzzled, he asked, "You'd be concerned? Why?"

Bill walked over to Marigold, unlatching her leash to let her roam free. "Well, think about it. If we were friends with benefits, it wouldn’t work out. I’d want you all to myself. Sugar, I do monogamy, remember?"

When it clicked, he felt another flourish of warmth throughout him since that was what he’d been looking for as well. "Oh— right, I… I don't really want a friends with benefits arrangement. Definitely more like an actual committed relationship." Then, as he watched Marigold rooting around in the grass, a minor frown etched onto his expression as he worried his lower lip. "You know I've never been in one before, don't you? So… I might be bad at it. Honestly, I'll probably mess up."

Bill’s eyes were on Marigold as she lost interest in digging, moving on to sniff along the sidewalk. "Sweetheart, you’re not going to mess it up. Don’t worry about it, enjoy our time together."

"Uh," he fidgeted, "that… is a thought. Or we could make a list of the potential pitfalls that might occur in our relationship based on comparable dynamics, and using that we can have procedures of resolution ready if we need them? In the spirit of preparedness."

“You sound like Fordsy, honey.”

"Really?" Dipper perked up, concerns momentarily forgotten. "Thanks."

Bill chuckled, throwing his head back as he swiveled to face him. “I mean, there’s no need to thank me for you sounding nerdy.”

"It's not nerdy, it's…" Okay, maybe it was nerdy, but that didn't mean it wasn't practical or unworthy of their time to cautiously examine where their relationship might veer off track. "Uh, anyway," he went on, coughing, "I thought— I'm… it's a lot, y'know? For someone who's never been in a relationship, and this ending with a messy breakup sort of threatens our friendship."

“Sweetheart, we’re not going to break up.” He shook his head, stepping back over to return to Dipper’s side.

"I… I don't think it's that simple. You can't just— you probably thought that about Wendy too."

A bitter laugh shot that down. “Nah, I tried with her but I knew Red wouldn’t last with her ideals.”

It was a subject they'd have to crack in the future, but right now, it was likely that Stan would be on the hunt for them, wondering why they weren't back yet. Well, assuming he hadn't turned on his soap opera.

Mabel's advice and his own fretting chewed at his fears, gnawing deeper and inserting feelings of uneasiness about their new relationship, that still seemed odd to think about as an item. Sheepish but earnest, Dipper asked, "Do you think we could take things slow?" The vulnerable question was barely a murmur, a timid hope that Bill wouldn't back out of this entirely.

“Of course we can take things slow. How slow do you want us to be? I’m thinking we date for several months with minimal intimate contact, and during our twentieth date we share our first real kiss.”

Gauging Bill's expression for several seconds, he admitted, "I can't tell if you're being serious or making fun of me." Usually, Bill's smirk gave it away, or he'd start snickering partway through.
"Serious as hell." His voice was warm.

"Okay," he said, then waited, but Bill didn't budge or start cackling… so he guessed he was actually as serious as he claimed. "I wasn't sure because you… sometimes, you say these super sexual things to me, and I figured you'd want to do the physical part right away." Much like their soulmarks and everything that entailed, physical relations were an area of their relationship that he'd like to scout someday, but not before growing accustomed to the romantic involvement itself.

"Honey, just because I say things doesn’t mean I’m going to want to jump into bed instantly,” Bill said. “I'd like to take this slow. Don't look so surprised, this is new for me too.”

Relaxing, he let his shoulders drop with a relieved exhale and beamed, lifted by the notion that Bill's preference aligned with his own. "Slow is good. We can do that. Maybe on our ten year anniversary, we can celebrate by not only kissing, but making out."

"Make that our twentieth, and you got yourself a slow-paced relationship."

Teasingly, he said, "I can't wait to be almost forty and have my first makeout session. This gives me hope that I won't die a virgin."

Bill grinned, his eyes and nose crinkling. “If it makes you feel better, we can have sex when we’re sixty.”

"Whoa there, Speed Racer," Dipper raised a hand in mock surrender, "you're going to have to take this down a notch. We wouldn't want to go too fast." Although he was joking, this conversation didn't give him a grasp on how Bill actually wanted things to progress with them, but he thought that was something they could navigate as they went.

“Too fast? Oh, I’m sorry, doll. I meant to say we’ll be a hundred-and-fifty-nine before we even think about doing the dirty deed. Is that a deal?” Bill winked at him, a smirk still plastered to his face as he extended a hand. When Dipper seemed skeptical, he said, "I'd seal it with a kiss, but we mustn't be too hasty."

Laughing a little, he complied and shook his hand. "Yeah, it's a deal."

Chapter End Notes

No chapter next week, but updates will resume as usual afterwards barring any unforeseen circumstances. Thanks for reading <3
"Soos was on fire tonight," Dipper commented as they stood from the table, emptied plates and a paid tab the only evidence of their presence at the comedy club this evening. The set had lasted an hour, the perfect amount of time to share discounted appetizers and laughs at Soos's light humor with his friends, but he was ready to be leaving again. Humiliating recollections of Dippy Fresh aside, the club scene wasn't his preference, and he was glad to be steps from the exit. Holding the door open for Wendy and Robbie brought his focus to establishment's interior, the bar lifeless without Bill standing behind it. "It's weird, not seeing Bill here anymore."

Wendy whistled as she walked past, alcohol-flushed cheeks glowing in the neon light of the decor. "Haven't heard from him in like, a week. He doin' okay? He broke off our relationship so fast it made a new world record, and bam, radio silence."

A burst of anxious energy flooded him in contrast to the cool air of the evening. Maybe Bill wasn't the best subject, having no clue how he ended things with Wendy; though if she knew about his and Bill's relationship, she hadn't indicated that. "Yeah, he's doing fine." Short and simple.

Robbie scuffed his shoe over the pavement, dully kicking a loose chunk. “He hasn’t fallen into the depths of depression and Hell and despair yet. He’ll get there soon.”

Unfazed, Wendy shrugged. "Nah, he'll get over whatever's bothering him and probably hit me up soon, try the 'let's get back together' speech."

Nearing Robbie's van, Dipper hopped into the backseat with a semi-guilty, "Yeah, about that…" Well, it seemed Bill hadn't mentioned his new relationship, or that theirs was over permanently. Breaking it to Wendy made him feel queasy, but he supposed that could also be the scent of overpowering cologne, vaping, and remnants of booze. Much like the van itself, the smell inside was uniquely Robbie.

Nose scrunched, he retrieved his phone and fired an update text to Bill.

(9:40 PM) Hey, we're heading home. Set's over.

(9:40 PM) Also, did you ever tell Wendy that you guys were done for good?

But this… he wasn't sure how to approach it, not that it was *his* responsibility to tell her. Bill wouldn't, asking him to would be a dead end, and the logical side of him was at odds with mentioning anything without supporting details.

(9:40 PM) *i let her know we were done*

(9:40 PM) Yeah, you already told me that.
(9:41 PM) we’re finished

(9:41 PM) the us train has been derailed, we split apart like the titanic, our relationship was like a car wreck.. a tragic accident caused by alcohol

None of those were helpful. Especially not that last one.

Apparently, the silence had stretched too long because Wendy continued the conversation. "Hey, we barely ever get a night off with all of us together. It's bad enough that Mabel couldn't be around, but we should live it up in her honor."

"We should visit the cemetery," Robbie said. "Nothing better to remind us of our inevitable demise than the allocated space for hundreds and thousands of rotting corpses beneath our feet."

"Whoa, uh, maybe we could hang somewhere... cozy? Have snacks, watch a scary movie or something. For example," he said, nervously laughing, "a movie about cemeteries. So... we can avoid the whole 'actually being in one' thing."

"Six out of ten. Got anything else, you two?" From the back, Dipper saw the illumination of a phone screen upon the roof of the van and was about to ask if she was searching for activities but stopped when she said, "A while ago, Tambry told me there's this sweet place to explore. 'The Sunken City', or something?"

"Oh, that's... yeah, Sunken City," Dipper confirmed but was scratching the back of his neck. "That's not open to the public, not really. It's super shady, plus a lot of people have tried exploring it and died."

Robbie slapped his hand on the steering wheel in a rare show of excitement, an emotion Dipper hadn't realized was within his capacity. "Instead of the Sunken City, what if we hit that asylum? There's a fucking cult and ghosts and shit."

It took Dipper a second to register what he was referring to, his local's knowledge and past explorations with Mabel proving useful. "In Downey? There's always a cop or security parked outside."

"Boo," Wendy called as she leaned over the console, hands cupped over her mouth to echo. Then, she nudged Robbie and chanted, "Sunken City, Sunken City! Come on, man. You know you want to."

"If the asylum’s crawling with cops, what’s stopping them from scouring Sunken City? Dipper said it wasn't open, Wendy."

"Urban exploration is neat, but they're both fenced off. So maybe... the snacks and a movie idea isn't looking as bad?" Sensing that wouldn't be satisfactory when Wendy prompted him to break the tie, he evaluated the probability of getting a slap on the wrist for trespassing, trying to determine which of the two was the lesser of evils. It stirred the lasting wish that his favorite adventuring partner Mabel could've joined them this evening, though their hobbyist urbex had been reduced to nothingness after chronic pain took over his life.

"Who can resist ghosts and a cult? I bet they’re doing ritual sacrifices, summoning demons from Hell to condemn our mortal souls."

The thought of stumbling across that caused him to grimace. "I guess Sunken City." Slightly safer, no cults, just minor crime and deadly geography.
Turning around, Wendy raised her hand for a high-five that Dipper returned, watching as she fist-pumped the victory into the roof of Robbie's beaten van. "Nature is way better than some lame ghosts."

Robbie rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "Better be some badass ghosts on the water. A bunch of people drowned over there."

Dipper said, "The deaths are mainly from falling off the rocks. Do you guys have a flashlight or something that we can use?" Phone flashlights would work as a last resort, but bigger was ideal because he knew what awaited: unsteady footing, high cliffs, sharp rocks below.

"I have one in the back. A big motherfucker, should serve us well."

Dipper hoped so, though self-preservation had him checking his texts again to send another, this one an update too but fringing on directions to him if there was an emergency.

(9:45 PM) I guess we're actually going to Sunken City.

(9:46 PM) no you're not

Puzzled, Dipper gawked at the text, the unapologetic and total dismissal of the idea that rendered him floundering for an adequate reply since he hadn't realized Bill even knew what Sunken City was.

(9:46 PM) I kind of am since we're driving there now.

(9:46 PM) tell them to fucking turn around

(9:46 PM) Why? I know it's not ideal, but they wanted to.

It wasn't what he thought he'd be doing with his evening—quite frankly, he was still partial to the movie plan—but it was a chance to spend more time with Wendy and Robbie while they could before finals came around and murdered any free time between work and class schedules.

(9:46 PM) i don't want you getting hurt

(9:47 PM) We'll be fine. We won't go in if it's too dangerous.

(9:47 PM) maybe i should meet up with you?

(9:47 PM) Sure, if you want to?

Although Dipper had his doubts that Bill would follow through with it and viewed his promise as empty, he thought it was only fair to warn, "Hey, Bill might be joining us at Sunken City." This elicited an audible groan from Robbie, seemingly more for show than annoyance, but Wendy nudged him.

"He better not complain the whole time."

"Who cares if he does? This is gonna be freaking amazing," she said, then led into the chant for Sunken City which she finally got Robbie to partake in, albeit begrudgingly.

Considering the various aspects of what they were doing throughout the remainder of the fifteen-minute drive, Dipper made a small internal checklist to ensure the best possible outcome: in this case, that was getting in and getting out without incident. A flashlight was a start, but they would
have to keep tabs on their surroundings, watch for other trespassers, and above everything else avoid tumbling off the steep, craggy cliffs.

All too soon, they were there, crossing the lot to the towering fence lit by the beam of the flashlight. "Wait, uh… we might want to do this in shifts," Dipper suggested, slowing with hesitation, "so someone can stand by the vehicle, keep watch for nearby police and alert the others." The large red print on the posted sign ensured everyone who entered knew this was an illegal offense prior to proceeding, so there was no question about the possibility of a fine if they were discovered.

"Who’s gonna take first shift?" Robbie asked, tempting Dipper to volunteer for the lookout position in a last ditch effort of retaining his physical comfort when the terrain wouldn't be kind to him. “I’m not missing out on the action, man. I gave up my asylum dreams for this bullshit cliff.”

"Yeah, yeah," Wendy replied with a dismissive wave of her hand, "I get it. Dipper, it sounds like you know your way around here."

"I really don't."

Regardless, Wendy gave him two thumbs up and turned on her heels to stand by the van. Over her shoulder, she called, "Guide Robbie on the adventure of his dreams or whatever he said, then show me the best of what this place has got. I'll text you guys if you need to come back and pretend we were doing some polyamorous makeout sessions."

"Is… that seriously going to be our cover story?" asked Dipper as he and Robbie split off, sight on what laid beyond the fence: a sandy, worn expanse heading through the rocks and edge of the cliffside toward the beach.

"I’d be into it. Anything to get close to Wendy again. You know, we were going to get married. But then she tore out my heart and stomped on it until it was a bloody pulp on the ground."

"I don't think she was implying that we were actually going to have those makeouts, just… as a heads up," he said, then motioned to the fence. "So, do you want to go?"

“Yeah, yeah." He adjusted the flashlight, then grabbed hold of the fence to haul himself over. "It feels hollow, knowing she’s not into me. It makes me want to endure the most toilsome torture for her." Robbie sighed and pivoted over the fence, seemingly unaware of Dipper's horrified expression left in the wake of the confession.

"Uh, wait," he said and snagged the hem of his oversized hoodie to stop Robbie from descending. "Are you— thinking of taking your own life? Because if you're suicidal, this… probably isn't the place for you."

“I never said anything about suicide!” Robbie tensed, then he shuffled out of his grip and landed on the other side of the fence before walking into the field of dried grass. “Christ, I’m not like that!” Scrambling after, Dipper scaled the fence in a clumsy maneuver and dropped roughly, biting down a pained little grunt from the shooting pain in his legs.

Once he regained himself, he sarcastically mumbled, "Hard to tell when you were literally voting to visit an asylum inhabited by a cult."

Dipper matched his speed with Robbie's as they walked together, eyes scanning the landscape on high alert; however, they didn't have to question where to go when they stayed on the semi-beaten trail leading toward where the ruins of pavement and former homes would be strewn atop the
cliffside. Although the area was placid, paranoia convinced him to rest a hand over his pocketed phone. No texts from Bill or Wendy, and the absence of communication cast a shred of doubt on his previous conclusion that Bill wouldn't drive here, yet it was also a reassurance that Wendy hadn't spotted anything concerning in her lookout duty.

“One of these days, I’ll join a cult. They’ll understand my pain and sorrow,” he said, pulling Dipper from his thoughts.

"Are you sure you can't settle for like, a new emo band or something?"

Aside from a half-hearted shrug, that didn't receive a reply and launched them into relative silence, the sole noise their shoes crunching over grass and increasingly more rocks until Robbie spoke. “So, Wendy’s available again.” They were drawing closer to the edge, the air was thicker and colder, and he could hear the water swirling over rocks below. Over the environmental acoustics, he added, “I always wanted to lose my virginity to her, you know.”

Dipper gave him a strange look, internally questioning where that had come from but not pursuing the inquiry. "You didn't?"

“No?” Robbie barked a laugh. “I was saving it for my soulmate, but.. as you can see, that’s not working out. God my life is over.”

"I… thought you said that you guys dated in high school."

“Things were slow.” Bitterly, he tacked on a mutter of, "I guess I don’t encourage boners to pop like Bill does.”

"Yeah, uh,” he averted his gaze, watching the cliffside while he struggled to figure out what to say when he couldn't pinpoint what that meant, "that's why I thought you guys… y'know, did stuff. Because Wendy and Bill were most of the time they were together.”

“I wish. I heard the second he tried to ‘go slow’ or whatever bullshit, she jumped him.” Robbie began to climb down part of the steep cliff, meanwhile Dipper trailed behind him, cautious upon the crumbling sediment. “I don’t know why she had to reject and abandon me to spill crimson all over these rocks. I’m bleeding out, and she’s.. she ran away from me.”

If this conversation carried on, Dipper was going to run away from him too. "Let's just… see if there's anything worthwhile.” Things were quiet between them as they scaled the path cluttered with litter and chunks of pavement, thorny bushes on each side. Chunks of graffitied concrete and forgotten structures surrounding them with greater frequency, they were closer to the water now, and the crashing of waves reflected their proximity.

Looking over the ocean, Robbie’s posture straightened. “Did you see that?” he asked in awe. “I bet it was a ghost.”

Curiosity piqued, Dipper squinted in the beam of the flashlight but didn't see anything unusual. "A ghost?” he inquired, pulse drumming faster. "Uh, maybe? We could try checking it out.” The innate desire to explore and learn fueled him as he brushed past and navigated the trail that took them to the beach containing the desolate asphalt jungle, Robbie ardently keeping pace and more eager than before.

“You know, there are stories about this place. Of hands of the dead that reach up from the waters to drag trespassers down to join them.”

He raised an eyebrow. "Whoever told you that, I don't think they're from around here."
“It was Bill...”

"Oh yes, our very local Miami tour guide," he replied, grinning and shaking his head, the claims as good as dismissed given their origin. It was still odd that Bill knew this spot and its legends, but the probability of Wendy voicing interest in it chipped at the mystery.

“Well, Stan told me about the woman who wanders the cliffside. She wears a white dress and is hunting for her kid, but there’s blood running out of her eyes, and she attacks men.” Once Robbie had surveyed him, he included, "Maybe not you.”

Thinking about that for a couple seconds, he drew from his knowledge of hauntings and legends to say, "That's like La Llorona, kind of. Until the attacking men part, that sounds like Stan hit on a woman and it didn't go well, so he made that story. But uh, Stan's also not from here— he and Ford are from New Jersey."

“Stop ruining my stories, man. Anyway, Tambry was talking about how you can hear the screams of the people who fell—”

Skepticism and inquisitive nature catching up to him, Dipper questioned, "How do you know all these ghost stories?"

“I asked about haunted places in the area after doing a lot of research. This one always came up, but the asylum seemed better.”

"If you're into legal exploration of haunted places, try the Queen Mary," he suggested and hauled himself onto a ledge to sit, watching the tides below while his mind wandered to the gravel chunks stranded on the beach, colorful graffiti splattered over their surfaces. Not quite supernatural, but fascinating nonetheless.

“I don’t think that has cults, man.”

"Probably not."

“It’d be awesome if it did. Imagine how those ship ghosts would react.” Although he didn't know why, he chalked it up to the term 'ship ghosts' that had him chortling, but before he could respond, his phone was vibrating beside him.

Checking the message from Wendy, he paraphrased, "A car went by, driving slowly. Wendy doesn't know if it was a cop, but she's suggesting we get back soon. Was there anything else you wanted to see here?"

“No. This was lame, dude. We didn’t even get spooked.” Robbie exhaled melodramatically and turned, heading up the cliff. Understanding that as the cue to leave, Dipper hopped from the ledge, wincing at the sudden pressure but taking a few awkward steps to fall in alongside Robbie as they departed.

"Are you going to go with Wendy? I can keep watch next, if you want." Robbie shrugged. “Sure, I guess. Maybe she’ll find something interesting, but this has been a bust. Dirt and water is real boring.”

"Rubble and graffiti," he added with a gesture toward the slabs with spray-painted lines over it. "But there isn't that much here." He had been about to continue but another vibration alerted him to a new message. "Guess the car is circling back, but she didn't get a good look. Wendy says to hurry up,"
“Maybe the ghosts can scare them,” Robbie muttered as they reached the top of the cliff but kept onward to the path, fence in the distance. The white metal links reflected the shine of a headlight that hadn't been there prior, and he sighed, agitated and anxious by the notion of a police officer waiting.

"Do you think we should approach?” he asked but kept his voice down, scrolling through the texts from Wendy but disheartened when there was no subsequent communications. "We might be able to wait it out unless they search for us."

“I’m not afraid of them. They can suck a necrotic dick.” Undeterred, Robbie had made it to the fence and was hustling with renewed vigor.

"Dude, wait!” Dipper hurried to crawl over the fence after him as alarm thrummed within the core of his being. In the parking lot, he saw the vehicle clearly now parked alongside Robbie's van and breathed a sigh of sheer relief as he instantly identified it as Bill's, though he was surprised Bill followed through on his suggestion of joining them.

Beside the vehicles, Wendy and Bill were chatting, neither of their tones implying trouble awaited yet Robbie visibly bristled. “I thought they were done.”

"Dude, they're talking," he said, examining Wendy's relaxed posture, lazy smile. Bill, ever refined and prestigious, was in his formal attire and stiffer than a board. "I don't think that means much, but come on. Let's find out what's going on." As they drew closer to the pair, Wendy noticed them and waved, Bill soon catching sight of them as well. His eyes lit up, and Dipper brightened too. "Hey, you actually came."

“Of course I did,” Bill said. “I told you I would.” With more concern, he added, “Are you okay, Pine Tree?”

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his arm but smiling slightly, "didn't you see me vaulting over the fence like a pro?"

Before he could reply, Wendy prompted, "So, how was it? Did you guys see some cool shit down by the water? Don't spoil it if there's something freaky, I want to see that for myself."

“It was stupid, like a crumbling museum of graffiti,” Robbie said. “but the designs were totally inferior to mine.”

“Oh, please," Wendy teased, light. "Remember the time you were fined because you got caught spray-painting death poems and— wait, how did you describe the drawing that accompanied it again to that poor cop?"

Grinding his shoe into the pavement, Robbie muttered, "Satan bringing me into his bed of fiery spikes and eyeballs, fucking me until the depression becomes numbness."

"Yeah, that's the one. 'Satan take me in your red-hot, sweaty grasp and brand me as yours for all eternity,’” she said and snickered. “Not sure if that would be hanging in any fine art museum, crumbling or not.”

Dipper was still processing what that drawing might look like while he and Bill shared a glance, and he cleared his throat. “Wow, uh… I guess the Satan-love thing is kind of neat. You could turn it into a bodice ripper novel, Sinning for the Devil maybe. Mabel would read it."

Robbie scoffed. “I don’t.. I don’t write stuff like that, okay? Mine’s much more grotesque anyway.”
"Erotica can be grotesque," he mumbled in protest. "Write stuff like, 'his bloated fleshy meatrod plunged into the woman's spider cave, filling her lifeless corpse with his ghastly fluid. And um, also… there are maggots.' Good thing they were taking things slow in their relationship, that phrase alone was a libido ruiner.

"I really didn't think anyone except Bill could make sex gross."

"Fuck off Red, you’re the one that made it gross. There’s a reason I lost interest first."

Wendy rolled her eyes and jested, "Yeah, because you wanted to put your fleshly meatrod into Dipper."

“I’ll be putting my throbbing, hot, fleshy meatrod in him.”

As Dipper let out an squeak of Bill's name at the obscenity of that, he could hear the noisy combination of gagging and ‘goddamn, dude.’ Bill wore a shameless grin that expanded from ear-to-ear. “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true, and you’re going to fucking love it. Eventually.”

"God, why don't you guys just date if you're gonna be flirting," Robbie cut in once he'd returned from tossing the flashlight in his van. "At this rate Wendy and I will be fucking invited to your wedding."

Sharply inhaling, Dipper shot Bill a quizzical gaze, unsure if they should break the news when he hadn't told anyone but Mabel about their relationship. In the agreement to take it slowly, he'd assumed that meant only their closest of friends would be learning about them as an item, and he didn't want to slip up if Bill had a similar thought.

Wendy apparently noticed the prolonged, gauging stare because she said dryly, "Don't tell me that you two are actually engaged."

“Can’t handle that we’re making better progress than you, Red?” Bill's response had Dipper dripping gratitude because it redirected the discussion, for once his saving grace rather than a nuisance used to dodge topics.

"I don't always need to be in a relationship, Bill," she said. "One of our many fundamental differences."

“I’m not the one who can’t keep her legs together—”

Since the Bill-Wendy banter seemed to be steering them toward a fight, Dipper tried to distract them before it could happen. "So, uh..." he had been about to make a lame comment about the weather or landscape but was hushed by the sight of a black and white vehicle cruising down the street, indisputably a police car. He blinked, taken aback.

"What is it, man?" Wendy asked. "All the ghosts are down by the water, not in the parking lot."

"No, it's just… I think a cop car went by."

Stealing a peek for himself, Robbie scrunched his nose. “Those pigs are watching me like hawks ever since I improved that bridge’s design.”

“It’s not a design, it’s shitty ‘art’ that a child could draw better.”

Because he didn't hear sirens or see flashing lights appear, his concerns about law enforcement were dissolving and Dipper cocked his head, eyebrows hitched. "You… did— what did you do to
the bridge? What bridge?"

“The bridge by the university.”

"Oh!" It clicked, memories of passing by the bridge and the spray-painted graffiti. "I was wondering who did that. You're the muffin guy?" Wendy burst out laughing at that, bending over from the force of it as Bill chuckled, body shaking with the rumble.

Above the sound of laughter, Robbie said, “It was an explosion! A mushroom cloud, like the one over Hiroshima.”

Smile disappearing, Dipper pawed his neck in the sudden discomfort and said, "Yeah, I… didn't get that at first."

“I'm fucking awesome at bombs. I should be a professional artist at drawing them. And dead people.” He mimicked drawing ‘x’s in the air.

Flatly, Bill said, “You're a professional muffin artist, congratulations.”

The light-hearted nature of the chat was shattered immediately by a piercing siren in the night, the telltale scream of a police vehicle accelerating. Dipper held his breath and watched the others demonstrate similar signs of stress in Wendy's shoulders locking up, Bill's expression turning icy, Robbie mimicking a deer in the headlights.

“Fuck everything to Hell,” Robbie moaned. “I always knew the pigs would come back and ruin my life.”

Clutching a fistful of his shirt, Dipper asked strainedly, "What do we do, guys?" The cop car had arrived on the horizon line, lights flashing in the darkness and reflecting off a royal blue sky. "I think he's coming over here." Rough inhales and broken noises illustrated his panic, Dipper's fingers curling over the fabric tight enough to make his knuckles whiten, and he was certain he could feel his heart beating through it if he tried, may as well have been clasping the organ itself in how they labored to meet halfway. "Oh god, yep," he rasped, "definitely coming over here."

On the scene in seconds, the officer parked beside them, exiting his vehicle and bringing his hands to his hips in an authoritative stance once brief, stilted greetings had been exchanged. “What are you kids doing out here at this time of night?”

“We're just talking,” Bill interjected smoothly before Dipper had a chance to think beyond the cloudy, muddled mess of thoughts. “Enjoying the stars. You have no reason to be concerned, sir.”

Finding her footing, Wendy chimed in, "Kicking back, enjoying nature. You know how it is."

When the cop's critical evaluation of the scene came to him, Dipper swallowed thickly and felt like he could hardly breathe, minus tiny puffing gasps that merely made him dizzy in the humid air.

"Son, are you okay?"

"Um, yeah," he choked out, hand twisting at Wendy and Bill. "Just… stargazing. Like they said."

“Why do you cops always ruin everything?” Wishing that Robbie would quit digging them deeper, Dipper was wary, wide-eyed. "First my art, now this."

Bill elbowed Robbie hard in his side, before offering the officer a pitying shake of his head. “Ignore him, he’s always overly dramatic.”
The officer didn’t seem convinced, eyeing the crew. “You realize you're hanging out in the parking lot of a restricted area, correct? Trespassing beyond the fence is punishable by a fine.”

Robbie was swift in defending them. “We didn’t trespass, asswad.”

"We were chatting," he reiterated, swapping his attention from Robbie to the cop, "...sir. We can, uh, leave if that's a problem." Sensing an out, Dipper held onto it and was hoping that would be his escape before this escalated. "Actually, why don't we do that? I think we've had enough stargazing tonight anyway, so..."

“Before you go,” the officer said, raising his volume to halt Dipper from going further toward Bill's vehicle, “I’m going to check your IDs, if that’s okay.”

Bill flashed him a grin. “Of course, officer.” In a practiced motion that oozed flair, Bill produced his, giving it to the cop with a dazzling smile that could win over any heart.

As Wendy was reaching for hers and Robbie fished his wallet from the classic skinny jeans, Dipper rocked from foot to foot because he didn’t have anything to give, as he couldn't drive and never needed it anyway. "I don't carry mine on me."

“What’s your name, son?”

"Dipper Pi— Mason. Mason Pines."

The officer narrowed his eyes. “Is it Dipper or Mason?”

Dipper was pretty sure he was going to sweat a mini-lake in this parking lot. "Mason, it's just... my friends—" he motioned to the others, "they call me 'Dipper' because there's a birthmark and a whole thing with that, um. It's Mason."

“You said ‘Pines’, huh? Any relation to Shermie?”

Recognition lit in him. "He's my cousin." Usually, when people asked about family it was about his parents as politicians, or Ford in the world of academia. This was new, but he supposed he never had been confronted by a member of the police force that'd naturally have contact with Shermie.

“Let’s see, shall we?” The cop retreated to his vehicle and reached through the open window, pressing the button to speak into the radio. “Sherm, we got a kid here claiming to be your cousin.” As he went on to describe his height, build, and defining traits, he believed he heard him add "sort of nerdy" and Dipper huffed, arms folding. "...said his name was Dipper but changed it to Mason. Sound familiar to you? Over.”

There was a staticky, familiar voice responding, then the officer put his device back in place. “Alright, kid, you're in luck that Shermie could confirm your identity. You're good to go, and so are you two.” But then, he shifted to Robbie, "However, you are not.”

"What? What did he do now?" Dipper didn't know why Wendy had to ask after Robbie's confrontational attitude throughout the interaction, going so far as to call the cop an 'asswad', a memory that made him wince when he could visualize the resulting disdain on the officer's face.

“He has fines for vandalism that he has failed to pay, so I’m taking him in to the station until the matter is resolved.”

“They’re due in January!” Robbie objected angrily. “You can’t force me to pay them now.”
“He’s not wrong,” Bill said. “It’s illegal for you to detain him without cause— and having fines that aren’t due will not hold up.”

The cop narrowed his eyes, staring at Bill with a hard expression for what seemed like a minute, but he eventually conceded by telling them, “Alright folks, have a nice night. I suggest you clear out and stay far from that restricted zone. You’ll be in a heap of trouble if you’re found trespassing.”

After taking their licenses from him, they stood like statues, numb and radiating nervousness, until the cop had disappeared into a speck in the distance. Only then did Wendy say to Bill, "Thanks, man. I think you might've saved Robbie's ass on that one."

“My ass would’ve been fine!” Robbie disagreed. “I didn’t need to be saved..” though under his breath, he added, “thanks.”

“All in a day’s work.” Bill puffed his chest, proud and confident. When Robbie and Wendy started traversing the parking lot, he went on, “Besides, you should probably worry about putting some of that money into your van. It looks worse than normal next to my car.”

Robbie huffed. “Psh, whatever. My van is a masterpiece, and your mockery of her shows that you don't get it like a real artist would.”

Wendy snorted. "It's a masterpiece alright. Lee and Nate have been working hard putting some avant garde dents in her ceiling."

“It adds character!” To Bill, he said pointedly, "Like in Romeo and Juliet, where Tybalt fights and kills Mer--”

“If you keep talking,” Bill interrupted, “I’m calling that cop back and telling him he can have you.”

Amused, Wendy said, "As if that’d keep them apart. Robbie's love for his van is like two star-crossed lovers in feuding families. He’d die before the cop takes him away from his one true love.”

“Red, I’ll tell the cop you went into the restricted zone. Keep that filthy subject away from my car.” Coming up behind him, Bill gently set a hand on Dipper's back, nudging him forward to his car over Robbie's van which seemed unnecessary when there'd been no uncertainty as to who he was leaving with. "Let's go home, Pine Tree." With that, the group broke into two, Wendy giving both of them an amiable wave then ducking into the van.

Once they had filed into Bill's vehicle, Dipper melted into the seat and sunk against the cushion, eyes closing. "You seriously have no idea how nice it was that you could come tonight, not that I actually thought you would.”

“Yeah, you would’ve been spending tonight with the cops, or at least watching Emo McEmoface getting hauled in.”

"That's a little optimistic— not Robbie getting detained, but spending tonight with the cops," he said, peeking an eye open to smile at him, "I think I would've been held with the other big-time felons: illicit substance users.”

“Didn’t know you ran with thestoners.”

"No, but that's legal here."

“Since when? Shit, where do I sign up? Florida only allows medicinal.”
Dipper watched as Bill drove them from the parking lot and shortly was on the freeway to West Coast Tech. With every second ticking by, he was growing more comfortable again since Bill's anger from earlier seemed to have dissipated. "It's very dangerous according to my tenth grade health teacher, so be careful otherwise you're going to turn into a poverty-stricken, homeless person on the streets asking for alcohol money. Weed, man. The root of all evil."

"Bonus if you've also gotten some hooker pregnant because of its influence. Great, you've not only wrecked your life, but hers. Thanks, cannabis."

Perplexed by how this didn't appear to align with Bill's beliefs or his family's, he mused, "Because of the pregnancy or because of a possible kid? If you thought it was going to be a life-wrecker, I don't see why you were trying to get a housewife doting over your spawn." The grimace was second-nature. "I think I mentioned that I was child-free, right? I'm still child-free." Saying that aloud to Bill in the most complete sense of sincerity was different from the day at the diner after their fight. This was real, and he apprehensively wrung his hands as he recognized he may have provided the catalyst for World War III and an early but inevitable destruction to their relationship if this was something they'd never agree on.

Already, Dipper was preparing for the worst and when Bill let out a hum as they rolled down the highway, he didn't know what to expect since this wasn't the entitled reaction he'd braced for. About to reaffirm his position, it took him a couple moments to comprehend when Bill admitted, "I never wanted them either."

"Wait— really? I thought…" Disbelief scrawled over his features, he could only gape, diminished to speechlessness by this turn. "I thought that was your whole thing. Pressuring your SOs to have kids for you, securing an heir or something." Dipper couldn't recall, but he knew it'd be a horrid fate to endure if it was solely to create an ongoing lineage.

Bill tensed, fingers tightening on the steering wheel. “No, I don’t want kids. I don’t want them at all, but you don’t understand how crazy my parents are about continuing our family name.”

Any excitement he'd entertained was lost on the elaboration, and Dipper said, "You're… not obligated to have them, and— if you're still thinking this might be a long term thing between us, I… I don't know." He hesitated, holding his tongue in fear of sabotaging this when he'd been enjoying their newly-established romance. So instead, he settled on a biological fact, "The bloodline part isn't going to work."

"Yeah," Bill said sourly. “It’s like if I don’t have kids, they’ll remove me from inheriting anything and my father will probably seek some cheap maid to continue his lineage with and give it to that child.”

"Oh." This issue ran deeper and had more complexities than he thought, the traditional view not belonging to Bill but to his father with tangible consequences. Ever the practical overthinker, he said, "I just… I don't want you to waste your time, if this is something you see in your future." It was a weighted statement delivered softly, fearful Bill was going to take him up on it. Which he knew would be better and healthier for them like ripping off a bandaid, but it would hurt.

“I don’t want to think about it,” he muttered. “Let’s not talk about this, okay?” The discussion died for a couple brief minutes with nothing particularly notable occurring in between, though Dipper might not have noticed anyway since he was watching the still-busy streets and city lights dance in the reflection of the passenger window. Before, he hadn't heard the eighties music lowly playing on the radio but now could enjoy the obsolete hits of Bill's seemingly-favorite decade. "Let's talk about, I don't know. Maybe your trespassing in a dangerous area, or Robbie’s stupid ass van, or something.”
"I feel like those are widely different subjects," he said but then assumed the trespassing was another bandaid to rip off. "I didn't know we were going to end up in Sunken City tonight, kind of like I mentioned over text. It wasn't that dangerous, but I get why you'd be mad at me for being dumb."

"You went at night, with the ground being unstable. It could have crumbled beneath you, and then what?" Despite his demand for answers, he wasn't livid, just upset, and Dipper felt the sting of guilt again. "I'll tell you: whoosh, no more Pine Tree."

Kicking his feet against the flooring, the squeaks of his shoes broke the tension while Dipper collected his thoughts. "Cliff rescue," he said, the rational answer emerging above addressing Bill's point. "Mabel and I used to come down here often— not... Sunken City, but we'd go to this place nearby and see the crews out there."

"The crews remove dead bodies. Not many get out with scratches. How long do you think it'd take for them to find you? No one knew where you were. If you hadn't texted me, I wouldn't have known where you were."

Although about to claim it wouldn't have been a problem under the circumstances, he paused and realized Bill had been given very little information overall on what'd happened. "I guess Wendy could've alerted them. She was on lookout while Robbie and I went through the ruins, which— yeah, I know it's a bad idea at night to explore down there. I'm sorry, I should've..." he trailed off, unsure, remembering he'd tried to suggest a movie but had been swept up in appeasing his friends. He threw his hands in exasperation with himself, voice cracking, "I didn't want to be that guy, y'know?"

"Was it worth putting your life in danger?" Bill prompted, disapproval obvious but without the typical anger. Taking a gamble, Dipper reached over to settle his hand on Bill's, the affection bringing Bill to rephrase the question more vulnerably, "Was it a fun outing, Pine Tree?"

"The comedy act was good, chilling with Robbie and Wendy was fine, uh... the Sunken City part wasn't great with the cop and all. Seeing you was nice, though." That appeared to soothe Bill's mood, taking the edge off which similarly calmed Dipper enough to go on. "Oh, and learning about Robbie's artistic endeavors, that was interesting. If he doesn't cash in on my Sinning with the Devil idea, I might. I mean, I could even write it from first-hand experience with all the premarital cheek-kisses we've been sharing."

"Oh?" he questioned, faintly smirking. "Am I going to be your Satan, with my bulging hot meatrod?"

"I can't think of any role you'd play better, and," he laughed, a pinch flustered, "I don't know, you tell me. Do you want me to feature your, um... that, in the story?"

"In graphic detail." Bill winked at him.

"Well, I haven't seen it and we're taking things slow, so I guess this novel will be out in about forty years."

"Make it eighty. Can't rush things, honey."

"But you're— you'd be..." Dipper tapered off and analyzed Bill, mentally calculating. "Should I have you exhumed for the purpose of this book?"

"What?" Bill seemed appalled. "Why would I be dead?"
Being one hundred three would do that to a person, but Dipper ran with an alternative. "Because Robbie is jealous about the Wendy thing and now me, so I think he's going to murder you in about five years as the guilt and envy catches up to him. He'll convince your family to have your funeral at his parents' funeral home— they're morticians, they're going to get rid of all evidence of foul play, then they'll have you buried in Miami."

There was a pause, then Bill said, “Write a book about that too. Use it as evidence of the truth in my unfortunate passing that the world will mourn.”

"Wow, I guess you're in all my pieces of writing." And when he realized he'd said that, he cleared his throat and hoped Bill wouldn't ask, wouldn't remember that he was writing a screenplay that happened to feature a character very similar to Bill… who the protagonist was in love with by the end of the narrative.

Luckily, Bill didn't catch it. “If your writing isn’t about me, I’d have to sue you. I’m the most interesting person you know.”

Dipper let out a sigh that he didn't know he was holding, and he loosened his too-tight grip on Bill's hand, curling their fingers together. "You really are."
Chapter 29

After the dismissal of his final class of the day, Dipper was halfway through the physics building en route to his dorm but swerved to take a last-minute detour to investigate what Bill and Ford were doing. Bill's texts claimed they'd been busy with student conferences but because the workday was coming to a close, he assumed he wouldn't be interrupting as he rounded the corner to the grad student office. An open door, that was a good sign. The voices of Bill and Ford discussing research emanated from within, further reassurance that it wasn't imperative.

Knocking, Dipper peeked in and was entertained by the unified, chair-swivel toward him. "Hey."

"Pine Tree!" Bill's greeting was enthusiastic, and Dipper smiled at the sound of his loud voice, system jolting at the pure acknowledgment. God, the giddiness was so irrational but intoxicating even now that they were dating, his body responsive to everything Bill said and did, from the slightest smirk to his sultry winks.

"Oh," Ford seemed surprised, "good evening, Dipper. Please come in, take a seat." The invitation's formality didn't discourage him from entering. "We were in the midst of a riveting discussion about the logistics of collecting data for an upcoming conference presentation, but I suppose that can be put on hold. Can we help you with anything specific?"

Setting his backpack down, he leaned into the desk but didn't sit. "Uh, no, not really. I was just seeing what you guys were up to since I know you've been preparing for finals week. If you're busy, I—"

Bill must have sensed the direction. "No, no. Don't scurry off, it’s good to see you, sugar. Always is."

"While I'm here, do you have anything to grade?" As he asked, he was already approaching Bill's desk to collect the stack of papers on the side. "This is the chapter review you assigned on Monday, right?"

"Those're it," Bill said and reclined in the chair to grin lazily at him. "Hey, do you want to grade them back at my place? We could have some fun." Dipper's eyebrows shot up, their agreement to take it slow jeopardized.

Before he could respond, Ford cleared his throat pointedly. "I realize you are under no ethical obligation to maintain a professional relationship, but I sincerely hope the only 'fun' you're having is an enthusiastic game of D, D, and more D."

"Mostly cuddling."

While cuddling was sublime, Dipper had been sort of hoping for the D, D, and more D.

"Yes, well," Ford adjusted his glasses, "be responsible about it. Cipher, will you have your draft sent to me by this evening? I believe our deadline is coming up in…" he scoured the calendar, eyes narrowed, "two weeks, and requesting another extension could prove to be problematic."

"Sure, Fordsy. Whatever you want." To Dipper, he said, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah." He instinctively searched for Bill's hand, a normal gesture of affection even when they hadn't been involved. But it occurred to him that they were in full view of Ford's intense gaze, and he awkwardly pretended he'd been reaching to smooth down Bill's vest. "Just.. uh, had a few
wrinkles there. Anyway," he grabbed his bag, "let's go."

The department offices and physics building vanished behind them as they stepped into the brisk coolness of a sunny day, Dipper's gait staggering upon catching sight of Bill's golden vehicle in the parking lot. Trailing after, it became clear Bill was eager to utilize the gentlemanly charm, beating him to the passenger’s side to open the door.

"There you go, doll."

"Wow, thanks. I guess you really know how to treat a date right." Dipper was thankful for the lift since it saved on several minutes of walking, but it raised the question of Bill's daily habits and potential environmental damage. As Bill climbed in the driver's side and both buckled their seatbelts, he asked, "Do you always drive to the grad office?"

"Now I do. It’s nice, isn’t it?"

"I mean, it's nice this time because you might've ended up carrying me if we had to walk, but we don't live that far," he said. "I wish I could walk to and from classes everyday, but… it's not that feasible so that's why Mabel drops me off."

After a breath of silence, Dipper peered thoughtfully to Bill, an idea hatching based on the knowledge that driving had become part of Bill's routine. "If you don't mind going a little earlier, maybe—I don't know, this is only a thought—but maybe you could drive me. Mabel wouldn't have to get up super early after working late then, and we could spend extra time together." In addition, it'd lower his and Mabel's costs, and the emissions would be reduced.

"Hm," Bill mused as he pulled the car in reverse, backing up and out of the parking lot. "I do like alone time with you, away from Fordsy’s obliviousness."

"Kind of figured with how you immediately suggested leaving. I could have graded papers and retrieved coffee for you and Ford while you two worked on… whatever you're doing, creating a research report?"

"Not sure, Pine Tree. I was tuning him out." As Dipper shared similar fascination in supernatural occurrences and other oddities, he winced, unable to imagine willingly ignoring Ford. Maybe he could understand if the topic was physics-related, still despising it. However, his sessions with Pacifica were reacquainting him with the foundations of college physics, proving useful in his courses since it was filling in knowledge gaps, making the process easier and improving his scores.

"So… did conferences go okay? I think some of the students were nervous about it when you were handing the sign-up sheet around last week." Which he couldn't blame them for, one-on-one time with Bill to review their progress was intimidating. "I can't believe Pacifica thought I was trying to dodge them and made me sign up when she didn't see my name on there. I hope you enjoyed the twenty minutes of break time that you got from my 'conference'."

"I had two cups of coffee in that time," Bill said. "Made everything more bearable."

"If I had that much caffeine in twenty minutes, I'd get a seven on the Richter scale."

"I’d give you a twenty out of twenty on the cuteness scale," Bill said, renewing the smitten glow in a single comment, and Dipper shoved him lightly in the shoulder to mumble something about how he shouldn't flirt and drive. “As for the conferences… they were okay, kind of boring. Typically are."

"How was Pacifica's? We've been working on advanced concepts during our tutoring sessions, and
I think she's getting most of it. Did her review go alright?” Dipper asked, progressively leaning closer, elbow on the console as he inched into Bill's space.

“Hm?” Bill glanced at him, rearing back somewhat when he became aware of the infiltration. “Went fine, it was one of the best, actually.”

Joy and excitement exploded within, and he vocalized the thrill of her achievement through a high-pitched noise as a tidal wave of relief swept over him, glad they hadn't put in so much time and effort for no payoff. "I know she's pulled her grade up over the semester," he said, "but do you think she'll pass the final? You're not going to make it impossible, are you? That'd be kind of cruel, since these students are taking it for general education—"

“I’m sure she will. The conference was superb, and she’s done awesome on her tests over the second half of this semester.”

At that, Dipper smiled and sincerely hoped it'd go excellently for her, she'd receive a passing grade without help from her parents and move her education forward without their input. "It's funny, I've been tutoring her and… weirdly enough, I think studying the material might've helped me because I'm doing better in my physics classes too. That and the book you and Ford loaned me, the teaching edition one." And he should be happy about his newfound success in his field of study, but when he spoke it was empty, like he was trying to urge some semblance of rapture but couldn't.

Cheer was rare in a subject he absolutely loathed with every fiber of his being, perhaps more so now that he didn't have an excuse to be upset with it beyond simply lacking interest. If he was improving grades and passing courses, the future that he'd dreaded was drifting into the realm of possibility, but doing physics for his life until retirement was one damn depressing thought.

“That book is magical,” Bill agreed. “You never fully understand physics until you’ve had a teacher’s edition.”

"I guess that's true. It's nice to not be lost during lectures, but… I don't know." Shaking his head, he wasn't ready to think about it, much less aloud; this was a dilemma that required several pieces of notebook paper, and a mental map of why he wasn't feeling as ecstatic as could be, followed by potential solutions never to be enacted, not when supporting himself through other means would fail during the time he struggled to get another degree. His parents were expectant, Mabel was counting on him, planning her future around this—

Jaw clenching, Dipper felt his chest constrict painfully into a heart racing a mile a minute and tried to focus on the electronic mini map embedded into the dashboard. Watch the car move across the road line, nothing else.

The moment of silence was ended by Bill drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “You don’t know what, cutie?” Startled by the question, Dipper swung around to stare at him with a panicked gaze, traces of fear melting away as he forced himself to relax, get a grip. Things would be okay, possibly, just needed a plan.

"Uh… I don't remember what we were talking about." Thoughts of their discussion vanished, replaced by helpless fear attached to an inevitable future of hating the remainder of his professional life.

“Physics and your understanding of it from teacher's editions.”

Suppressing a shudder, he collapsed into the passenger door and sought to steady his rattled identity by staring out the window at the road, swiftly transforming into a parking lot as they
approached the university's residences. "It wasn't important." A future he didn't want to be a part of, feeling so much worse and more real than it had when he was envisioning failure. "Thanks for loaning it to me, it's been helpful."

"Of course cutie. If you need anything else, let me know." Bill parked in his signature spot and climbed out once the car's engine wound down, but when Dipper didn't, he was prompted, "Come on, doll. We have a couch to claim."

"Yeah, I..." Dipper had no clue where that was going and combed his fingers through his hair, trying to stay present and distanced from the crisis that was his major, another year from degree completion and fifty more of the same boring topic. Oh god.

Before the rise of anxiety could rebuild, Dipper clumsily shouldered from the vehicle and grabbed his pack, grip tight enough on the stack of ungraded assignments that it'd likely crease. "I still have to grade these, remember?" he said, walking alongside Bill over the crunchy grass of the lawn. Some mindless work sounded excellent—after he was finished grading, perhaps he'd do additional cleaning to occupy himself.

Posture straightening, Bill softly sighed as the building's evening shadow engulfed them. "I know, but I wanted to spend time with my boyfriend."

Although about to hesitantly comply, Dipper blinked at the label and blurted, "We're boyfriends?" Quickly, he amended, "Not that I don't want to be, and I guess since we're dating that would technically mean we're boyfriends, I guess I... never thought about it before." It hadn't truly dawned on him that they were **boyfriends**—Bill, as in the Bill Cipher, was his boyfriend, and a flush dusted his cheeks.

Huh, that was happening a lot lately.

"If we weren't boyfriends, what else would we be, honey?" Bill held the door open for him as Dipper slipped inside. No Marigold to greet them with licks and panting, and his mood dipped slightly as he determined she must've been returned to Bill's estate.

"Soulmates," Dipper joked, tumbling from him easily when it felt more natural to tease about the prospect since they were dating.

Bill chuckled. "No."

"No? You don't think I'd be a good soulmate?"

"I think you make a fine boyfriend."

The heavy implication hanging in the response was that he wasn't a good soulmate, but... Overthinking as always, he evaluated Bill for any trace of knowing that might be clinging there, but found none. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, sugar. Someone's got to tell you how damn great you are with me." Brushing past after blowing a kiss his way, he made a beeline for the couch and plopped down, watching him through eyes that may as well have been smoldering. "Are you going to jump into grading, cutie?"

"In a minute, have to..." he trailed off semi-distractedly as he removed his shoes, then placed his items near the spare desk. "Okay. What are you going to be doing?" he asked idly, spreading the sheets over the wooden surface and selecting a chewed-but-still-functioning pen from his backpack. Good thing too, his pens had been in more peril than usual with finals coming.
“Sending the draft to Fordsy, maybe I'll peruse it for errors.”

"I think he'll appreciate that. Honestly, he probably wasn't expecting something until like… almost midnight, since he says you procrastinate." Working with Bill was both a frustration and a delight, according to Ford; brilliance but with an ego and entitled attitude to rival his smarts, yet great on panels and as a presenter.

“I want to procrastinate,” Bill admitted, while Dipper was already starting to grade. No answer key this time, he decided he could make his own. “It’s boring, doing this. I could be doing something more productive, like pulling a Stan and watching TV.”

Frowning, he replied, "I don't think that'd be more productive, or… beneficial to anyone. Stan has to work two jobs that he intermittently hates, and he's addicted to like, ten soap operas and adds a new one every month." As he was speaking, he sifted through the assignments and eventually found Pacifica's, scanning it critically and letting out a breath of relief. The last few worksheets had been significant improvements from the beginning of the year, but he was still worried, as irrational as it was.

From there, grading was a mundane task. Dipper could only assume Bill was working on the draft that he and Ford were composing together since the exchanges were minimal as an hour ticked by, the stack of ungraded papers diminishing to none. He was successful in avoiding stress over his future but not so successful in vanquishing bothersome notions of a recently-past conversation.

It was wearing on him, the concern that Bill didn't want to be his soulmate after how he'd responded. Although playful, it'd seeded doubt that turned into full-fledged distress over the course of undisturbed time with his thoughts.

Arranging the homework assignments into a new pile to deliver them onto Bill's desk and retreating to his chair, he folded his arms over his chest, unable to hold it in any longer. “Do you really think I'd be a bad soulmate?” Dipper asked seemingly from nowhere since the sole noise had been the clock for the past fifteen minutes.

“What? Where is that coming from, Pine Tree? You being a 'bad soulmate'?”

"Earlier… what you said about it," he clarified, experiencing the echo about being a good boyfriend with no indication of feeling the same about the soulmate aspect. "Do you actually think that?"

“Sweetheart, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The clicking of laptop keys broke the quiet, and Dipper watched as Bill typed, but his eyes were on him. “If it’s about what happened on the walk here, I don’t know why you’re stressing. I never said you’d make a bad soulmate.”

"It… you intentionally dodged answering it, and if you don't think I'd be a bad soulmate… then," he tapered off, eyebrows furrowing as he reanalyzed the interaction, wondering if he was dwelling on this to an extreme. "Is it about us? Do you think we'd be bad soulmates?"

“Pine Tree, my views haven't changed. I don’t care about soulmarks or soulmates. It’s something I don’t want to involve myself with.”

Dipper squeezed his fingers against the desk, deliberating how to dive into this when Bill had been initially reassuring in that he hadn't meant to imply a poor soulmate, but it was worse that he wished to remove himself from the concept. If they were soulmates, he wasn't naive enough to think he'd be the exception. "Okay, that's… that's good. I was going to ask what would happen if you— well, if one of us found our soulmate while we were together, what you'd like to do since I
know it's pretty common for that to lead to a breakup. Just hypothetically," he said, tense, "what if you cared for your soulmate? Would you still not want anything to do with them?"

“Impossible, I wouldn’t care for them. We’re not going to find out.”

"It's a hypothetical. I know it's super unlikely, but if you did. Say, a friend surprised you one day and claimed they were your soulmate."

“Is she hot?”

Blankly, Dipper stared at him, noting they'd have to revisit the gendered part later. "Um… yes."

“Well in that case…” Bill hummed. “I wouldn't do anything, because I don’t want stupid fate to dictate how I live my life. You’re my boyfriend, and that’s what matters. Not some dumb blemish on my body.”

"So as long as you made the decision, it wouldn't bother you," Dipper confirmed slowly, mentally calibrating what he'd said, configuring it to apply to their relationship. It would be alright if Bill didn't end the relationship on the spot to feel in control of his fate, however Dipper wasn't taking a chance anymore on such a risky gamble, unwilling to potentially destroy what they had over marks that maybe matched. "You're right, it doesn't matter. We shouldn't break up if we find our soulmates because that'd be illogical, wrecking a relationship based on speculation of what it could mean.” Nervous rambling dwindled to a halt, and he rubbed his upper arm as he reviewed the conversation, debating if it had been too conspicuous. Now more than ever, he hoped Bill was oblivious to what could be binding them.

“I’m glad you agree,” Bill said. “Soulmarks aren’t even worth it anyway. I don’t understand why people make a big deal out of them.”

Speculating, he replied, "Enamored with the idea of having this perfect romance? Not that anyone knows what it's for, but yeah. I think they like the concept, and see people having successful relationships from them. It's comforting, or an exciting mystery, y'know? Mabel is looking forward to locating her soulmate and being friends with them, and I’m curious about mine too.” The admission was quieter, tentative. He felt like he already knew.

“I don’t get it,” Bill rephrased, averting his narrowed gaze. The creases of his features pointed toward stress. “I don’t understand those desires. Seems dull to me.”

"What? Why?" he asked, strolling over to the sofa to perch on the armrest and in Bill's line of sight. "You don't think it'd be kind of cool if we were soulmates?" The falter in his voice was difficult to fend off, but he kept his composure, sounding as lukewarm as he could.

“Why would it be cool?” Bill questioned.

"Because," he began thoughtfully and hovered closer, wedging himself against Bill's side, "it'd be neat to have that to tie us together, right? And there are other benefits, like widespread social acceptance, tax cuts, less paperwork… Some people claim there's a special bond between soulmates too, but I don't know if that's really a thing."

“You’re not selling me on this, Pine Tree. And neither is my cousin— have I told you about him? The crazy fucker met his soulmate a week ago and they’re already setting a date to get married.”

"Seriously? I know that's—I guess it's normal since everyone expects soulmate relationships to move quickly, but… wow. They're getting married? I've had a longer relationship with my screenplay." Which… he realized he should probably get working on, but that was future Dipper's
problem, as was the soulmate business with Bill.

“He'll be visiting in a couple weeks to see my father. Do you want to meet him? The guy’s strict in his beliefs about the ‘Creators' bullshit, and he thinks partnerships outside of soulmates are as sinful as you can get.”

"From what you've said, I don't think we'd have much in common."

“You can piss him off with me.”

Dipper shrugged and rose to his feet. "I don't know." Making a decent impression upon Bill's family required further consideration, so he ducked from this topic by looking to the clock. "Hey, are you hungry? I think I'll make us something to eat because it'll be dinnertime soon, and Mabel might get off from work early enough to join us."

“I'm starving, doll. What're you making?” Bill shifted, splaying over the seats. It was humorous in and of itself, watching Bill completely spread out but still dwarfing the sofa in how his legs dipped over the edge. Dipper observed him, the picture of old charm and passed days in his black slacks and suspenders, a yellow shirt — paired with his open laptop and fancy couch, it was fitting but a stretch from modern.

Tearing his eyes away, he exhaled, a breath of air he'd forgotten to release. "Whatever you want? I don't know what you have.” As he walked into the kitchen, he examined what was available and almost as a joke inquired, "What about fried avocado tacos?"

To his surprise, Bill seemed intrigued, maybe even delighted. “I'd like that, honey.”

A well-deserved midday nap was interrupted by his phone buzzing incessantly — not from the alarm, but text messages that appeared one after the other. Dipper rolled over with a groan and fetched it from the makeshift nightstand made of cardboard boxes, his and Mabel's own budget-conscious version of dorm furniture.

"I guess Mom and Dad are both home this weekend," he said, yawning but sitting up to peer at Mabel, who was seated at her desk. "Do you want to visit?” Hopefulness resided in his tone since it'd been a while; not only did he miss their human family, but he missed their cat and cockatiels.

"Can't this weekend. I promised Candy and Grenda I'd be there for the girls-only community meeting at their residence hall, then I'm sleeping over. I'll visit this weekend sometime, but if you want to go tonight, I'm sure they'd like it.”

"Oh." He couldn't believe he'd forgotten about that. "Sorry… just— with finals and everything next week, it's been hard to keep track." It was a jumble of noise in his mind, feeling like he was navigating a crash course by focusing on what was directly ahead of him with everything else pushed aside and piling up in the background. "I'll still probably stop in, hang around a while to chat with them."

“Sounds like a super duper fun time," said Mabel, brightening. "Can you text so I know you arrived safely?" About to speak and say he didn't have a ride, she beat him to it. "Or do you need me to drive you? I'm fine with it if you need a ride, but I won't be able to stay too long.”

"Uh, nah," he replied but the corners of his lips twitched up, grateful nonetheless, "you can chill with your friends. I'll get Stan to give me a lift since he likes going over that way to jeer at the mansion homes."
“If you’re sure. Keep me updated, okay?”

"I will."

And he did.

The first text-update was a message describing how he'd called their parents and received the confirmation that an evening visit would be fine, so he'd prepared to ask Stan for a ride. The following update was less jubilant as he said he'd texted and called Stan, no answer at first, then received an explanation from Ford that he was working tonight and would be until late.

Unwilling to interrupt Mabel's time with friends, he texted Bill:

(5:04 PM) Are you busy?

(5:04 PM) what's up pine tree

(5:04 PM) are you exploring illegal areas again

(5:05 PM) Worse. I'm in a West Coast Tech residence hall.

(5:05 PM) My parents are home this weekend, Mabel's busy, and I could use a lift.

(5:05 PM) If you could take me? If not, that's not a problem.

(5:05 PM) sure, i'll give you a ride

(5:05 PM) Thanks. Are you picking me up, or…?

(5:06 PM) i'll pick you up

Bill arrived shortly after and honked the horn to signal his presence, even though Dipper was halfway into the passenger seat. It was habitual to enter the address into the GPS now, because if he didn't, Bill would complain about the quality of directions and how they were incomprehensible.

"I appreciate the ride, man," Dipper said. "You might already know this, but I probably won't be around for the rest of tonight, so if... uh, a grading emergency comes up, I'm not going to be here."

"Pine Tree, what're you talking about? You're not leaving me."

"When we get to my parents' place, I'm pretty much leaving you. Why? Do you need me to get someone to supervise you or something?"

"No. I'm coming with you."

"What?"

"I'm coming with you." The declaration was brief and concise, so sure of himself until... "Are you okay with that?"

As it connected, a combination of confusion and alarm was inbound, gazing over Bill's expression to discover the hint of vulnerability hiding beneath. Bill wanted this more than he was willing to verbalize. "You'd like to meet my parents?" he clarified, still in disbelief that he'd genuinely be hoping for that. "I... yeah, I guess that's fine. I just didn't know you'd want to. Are you sure?"
Bill broke into a grin. “I’m sure. I’ve been waiting for this day.”

This was quickly losing its endearing charm, and Dipper skeptically asked, "Wait… like, because — we're dating or because you want to meet them as politicians?"

“Yes. I can have multiple reasons, sugar, and you nailed them. Who cares? They’ll love me.”

"Okay, well… you're not meeting the senator and mayor, you're going to be meeting my parents," he warned, then eased off with a faint smile, exhaling. "But yeah, they'll probably love you. It's surprisingly hard to avoid."

“I can talk politics and make them love me,” said Bill, the subtle confession overlooked in the midst of his zest. “They won’t know what hit them until my truth bombs explode.”

"I don't know if bombs and politicians really mix. Can't you visit them as my boyfriend, not… 'overly-spirited twenty-three-year-old looking for a fight'?"

“I’m enthusiastic! I thought they’d appreciate that.”

"So," he pawed the back of his neck, "your family is already out of sorts with them. They don't blame you or think you're— um," a lying, cheating, system-breaking criminal that’d dodged punishment seemed like the obvious choice, but he wasn't an overly-spirited eighteen-year-old looking for a fight. "Like your father, but they're going to be wary."

“Let them be.” Bill deeply inhaled, a puff of his chest. "They won't be able to resist my charm, and neither will you.”

Dipper quirked an eyebrow. "We're dating. It'd be safe to say I've been thoroughly enchanted by your charm."

“One of these days, you're going to be so enthralled you'll want to marry me.”

In that moment, his mind turned to mush, a flurry of incoherency following and verbalized nonsense. When Dipper pulled himself together again, he was breathless, a little anxious and sweaty but starstruck. "Well," he tugged his collar, "I— yeah, I probably will…?" His voice was raised, pitch higher with flustered joy and apprehension. "If everything keeps going nicely, and… and you want to. I didn't know you would."

“We'll see. You're a bit too young to ride the marriage train, Pine Tree. Borderline illegal.”

Shakily humming, he agreed, "Not anytime soon. Definitely not soon. I meant whenever we both feel ready for that step." Which wasn't on the horizon, their relationship in its infancy. An irrational thought occurred to Dipper on the topic of marriage and their unique situation with soulmarks, if Bill would fall into the traditional viewpoint that a fast courtship preceding marriage was the correct method of sharing a soulmate bond, and that sent a shiver of dread through him. Luckily, it was dismissed as illogical because Dipper refused to divulge their possibly-matching marks, and Bill would likely reject the idea.

Even so, his curiosity had been gathered, and Dipper attempted to be casual. "Your cousin is getting married, right?"

Bill's face twisted in disgust. “Yeah, that tool is only doing it because they're soulmates. There's no chemistry.”

"Soulmate courtships are pretty rushed," he said, an edge to the statement. "They're not enough to
get to know someone, so maybe that's why it doesn't seem like they have chemistry." Soulmates were believed to be romantically made for one another, so extensive courtships were a waste of time.

"It is," Bill said. "They didn't get to know each other."

"How long have they known each other anyway? Have they courted that whole time?"

Bill shrugged. "About two weeks, and they've been courting since they discovered they were soulmates on their first day together. Can you believe that?" About to reply, Dipper's train of thought was derailed to laughter as Bill asked, aghast, "What if they breed? The horror."

"The horror," he echoed, curling fingers around Bill's arm to hang off of it, leaning onto him from across the console. "But I thought you'd be happy since your family is big on everyone finding their other half."

"That side of the family is insane," Bill told him, though Dipper was hesitant to believe it after Bill's exaggerated claims. Exhibit A: Robbie wasn't the devil waiting to turn them into sinners, and Wendy wasn't a soulless ginger succubus. "It's 'soulmate this' and 'soulmark that.' Their beliefs ruined any sense they had."

Fingers tapping over Bill's wrist in apprehension, Dipper questioned aloud, "Is that why you're secretive about yours? Because you don't like religion? If so—"

Bill bristled, arm snatched from Dipper abruptly. "I don't want to talk about mine."

That was an improvement from instant fury and a rant stating he didn't have one, and despite the urge to know more, Dipper wasn't naively expecting to poke the bear and get nothing less than a mauling. Respecting Bill's wish, Dipper asked, "Do you want to talk about mine?"

"Are you prepared to talk about yours?" Bill questioned, serious. "From when it first appeared, going into detail about the curves of the writing and what the handwriting reminds you of. Redrawing it on some paper, word for word, as you tell me your hopes and desires of the outcome of the soulmark."

The intensity of the request had Dipper smiling, a tickled chuckle tumbling from him. Although unsure if Bill would recognize aspects of his mark, the beginnings of a lukewarm takeaway resounded in Bill's statement. It felt so very characteristic of the older soulmate to simply assume everyone else was, and he couldn't help but wonder if that was why Bill asked. "I thought you knew I've always had my soulmark."

"That doesn't answer my question, Pine Tree."

"What? Do you mean the other questions?" He'd forgotten most of them but knew it minimally encapsulated appearance.

"When?" Bill prompted, blazing eyes on Dipper. "When did it appear?"

"Oh." Dipper relaxed, relief spilling from him now that it was confirmed he didn't have to grapple with giving an elusive answer. "When I was born."

"When."

Dipper swallowed. "...Like, the date?"
“What else would ‘when’ be?”

His hands were suddenly shakier and sweatier than he remembered. "My birthday."

“That isn’t the date.” Bill huffed, pulling back.

Reluctant to disclose more in case it ended in Bill's disastrous realization they could be soulmates, Dipper didn't acknowledge what he'd said. "What do you want to do tonight?" he asked. "I'm sure they'll have dinner ready, but after that."

As if the stormy cloud evaporated, Bill slumped in a shrug. The rigid air ceased to exist. “We can decide that when we get there. Do your parents like games? I could financially ruin them in Monopoly.”

"Yeah," Dipper said, glad for the swap. Then, he nodded, restating, "Yeah, that'd be good."

Bill's arrival went as smoothly as Dipper could've hoped. Although surprised by the additional presence, his parents were accepting and warm, his dad noting with mild interest: "You look like your father." But nothing more was said of the matter, not even a question of what they were to each other throughout dinner.

Chatter drifted between work and school, and learning about current happenings, but were repeatedly pulled to the central subject of politics on behalf of Bill. His parents tended to move on gracefully to avoid debate during the meal, and Bill's insistence earned him a few sharp nudges under the table. Dipper was merely thankful the harassment of his father hadn't dragged on after Bill got the hint that they weren't going to be partaking in heated debates or business discussion, but it had been hard to suppress his laughter whenever Bill's leading statements were met with unruffled recommendations to send a letter to his local representatives.

Once they'd finished, his father stood to collect dishes but hesitated to offer, "I could take care of this? Since you made dinner…” It was a request for permission, his demeanor a little more uncertain in the unfamiliar presence, and Dipper recognized that she'd always been his sense of stability and grounding.

She nodded, though her attention rested on Dipper and Bill as she spoke. “Do as you’d like, dear. You two,” she addressed them, Dipper intrigued by her more professional attitude in front of Bill, "would you accompany me in relocating to the living room?"

They parted ways, the clatter of dishes resounding as they treaded over soft carpet toward the sitting room, plush furniture encircling a television and sound system. Soft browns and earthy colors gave the room a cozy feeling, and Dipper relaxed, at home literally and figuratively. In the far end of the room was the cockatiel cage housing their two companion birds, and he looked to Bill with a glimmer of excitement, then took him by the wrist to pull him over.

"I know you didn't care for Meownaise earlier," the interaction had been Bill inching away and cringing at the meowing, shooing him, "but these two are sweet." The new person had the birds distracted, bright faces on Bill with tiny curious coos.

Bill scrunched his nose. “They’re just birds. Why do you even like them?”

Wavering at the dismissiveness, Dipper's smile drooped. "The same reason you like Marigold…?"

“Dogs can do something. These birds.. what, whistle at you?”
"What? They do more," he protested, watching them shuffle on the perches. They were both gauging Bill's occupancy in their space and unaware he didn't seem to appreciate them, much to Dipper's disappointment. "You can talk to them, take them on walks, hold them, train them to do tricks."

"You're not going to convince me these birds are somehow good. I can't believe you'd get them over precious Golden Retrievers." From a few feet away, Dipper’s mother cleared her throat, and both of them looked at her over their shoulders almost in concurrence.

"Dipper, Bill," she said in the same affectionate-sternness that he was accustomed to, "please take a seat on the couch for a moment. I’d like to talk with you."

"Oh, uh, sure." Dipper motioned to the sofa, equally prompting and inviting Bill to it. But he determined the error of his ways when that left him in a peculiar situation, the decision of sitting by his mother or Bill but finally going with the latter after moments of silent debate, judging by the likelihood of his father being forced to take the remaining spot and placing him by Bill was an impending disaster if Bill was incessant in striking up the political talk again.

Once they were settled, she cut to the point. "It's not everyday that we have the pleasure of a Cipher visiting us. What is going on between you two?"

It was blunt but not jarring given the source, and although it seemed directed primarily at him, Dipper hoped Bill's natural charm would swoop in, save the day. They hadn't discussed the matter of telling parents or anyone beyond Mabel, so he waited in hopes Bill would outline the boundary.

Bill flashed a champion's smile at her, posture straightening and chest jutting as he spoke. "Isn't it obvious, ma'am? Your son and I are romantically involved, and nothing will keep us apart."

Oh. That was more intense than he thought it'd be.

Regaining his composure after uncomfortable fidgeting, Dipper said, "That's strangely confident for someone who doesn't like my cockatiels."

"Your threats won't make me like those birds any more than I do—"

"You're a Cipher," she reminded Bill sharply, but with no malice. "Doesn't your family expect you to be committed to your soulmate, or has your father set foot in the twenty-first century?" Dipper's jaw clenched, similarly Bill froze at the question.

"Technically speaking, he does expect me to, but that doesn't mean I'm following their expectations."

If they'd been alone, he would've jokingly swooned and hung off his arm for dramatic effect, awing over the rebellious spirit to stroke Bill's ego. But in front of his mother, he wasn't so daring while she was in the process of vetting him. Recalling their conversation, Dipper added, "We've talked about it. If we meet our soulmates while we're together, we've agreed not to act on that." To Bill's parents, he expected that'd be blasphemy but in the presence of his own, it was accepted with an understanding nod.

"I see. It's heartening that you've been communicating about the possibility." She softened, appearing more at ease. "Has he treated you well?"

"Mm-hmm," he replied, a small laugh hanging on the end since it was kind of silly, imagining Bill treating him anything but marvelously… but after what they'd been through, maybe it wasn't far-fetched. "He's been a gentleman, seriously. We're taking things slow."
“Good. If he acts poorly, Dipper, remember what I've taught you and Mabel about asserting yourselves.”

"I…” Dipper's fingers twitched and dug into his knees, eyes darting, "I don't think I'll have to do that."

Amusement lighting his features, Bill was enchanted by this and measured him up for a stint. "What, is he going to wha-pah me?"

Dipper's beam mirrored Bill's, unable to resist as the tendrils of giddiness dusted his expression. "I think the one time I kicked your— butt was enough, actually."

"Hey, I kicked your ass too! Don’t act like you beat me."

His mother furrowed her eyebrows, hand sliding over her chin. “You fought?” The next piece was quieter, almost a challenge that she didn't say directly to them. "I hope you won, Dipper.”

Yeah, that hadn't happened if he remembered correctly. Bill had him pinned, but he brushed it aside to devilishly confirm, "...Yes.” It was a verbal poke, playful, as he knew he couldn't contest it too easily.

“You, win?” Bill huffed. “If ‘being pinned beneath me’ counts as winning, sure. He likes winning.”

At his mother's tentative disapproval that treaded near disgust as she misinterpreted the crass boasting, Dipper swooped in to say, "That— it wasn't what he meant. He wasn't referring to us doing anything like that, but yeah, we are taking things slow since all of this is sort of new to us.”

In the entryway, his father peeked in, then advanced to sit near his mother on the sofa. "I apologize for the interruption," he mumbled, likely in reference to the exchange that'd died down once he arrived. A seeking gaze settled on them, flicking between the two. "What's new to you? ...What did I miss?"

Afraid Bill would cue more politics since his father was here, Dipper answered, "This… us. Our relationship.” Clearing his throat, he toyed with the fabric of the shirt he suddenly felt confined by, a warmth flushing over him. "Bill and I are in a relationship.”

“Speaking of us being in a relationship,” Bill chimed in. “How much do you want for him? We’re not quite at the bride price stage, but I’m guessing we should have a boyfriend price given his parents are important political figures.”

As his parents' reactions ranged from confusion to utter discontent, Dipper shot Bill a glare, elbow colliding with his ribs.

"That won't be necessary. And Dipper, I think you should release this one back where you found him.” The line of her mouth went taut, taking a step toward them as she stared Bill down. “While I recognize your upbringing may have led you astray by teaching otherwise, my son is not some object for sale, Mr. Cipher. I strongly suggest you remember that before you speak any further.”

Dipper could feel Bill tensing beside him, indicating the original proposition was an ill-timed joke, which relaxed Dipper but appeared to do nothing for his parents.

His father gulped, his hand resting over hers. "Mary…”

“Now, there’s no need for that,” Bill began. “I know your son’s not property, I was teasing.”
"Well," his father started, seemingly trying to chip at the awkwardness overtaking them, "I'm happy for you two and wishing the best. I have to say, though, I didn't expect our family to be romantically tied to the Ciphers..." Dipper examined the statement for underlying vitriol or anything except the usual resigned calmness of his father, but yielded nothing. He was glad for it, a rekindling of the rigid, icy relationship between their families would've put a massive damper on the evening.

Luckily, those feelings didn't seem to extend to Bill, and he was treated respectfully, even if they were wary of him and the remark he'd made in poor taste. At least the tension faded, transforming into a more peaceful evening — somehow, the idea to talk over board games had been introduced, though a vicious match of Monopoly was in stark contrast to the friendly discussion.

By the time the second round concluded with Bill as the winner and comments over his financial prowess were made in semi-sarcastic tones, a contagious yawn meant it was time to leave.

"In case you and Mabel get hungry," his father said in parting as they stood in the doorway, and he handed him a container of leftover food from dinner. After sharing a hug with his parents and promises that he and Mabel would stay safe, he watched as they exchanged polite words of departure with Bill and a distant but amiable handshake.

Eyelids drooping as they were on the road again, he draped himself against the passenger seat and watched the blurry lights pass through tired eyes, reviewing the best parts of the evening: his mother's welcome to the family at the end of the night with another austere reminder her son couldn't be purchased that seemed more joking than harsh, Bill's insistence on being the top hat in Monopoly, the transition from stilted small talk to informal banter, and Bill begrudgingly letting the cockatiels perch on him during one round of the game (Peaches had chirped at him, Bill made a point of chirping back to 'assert dominance.')

The impromptu change of plans that switched his evening from visiting his parents to introducing Bill to them had gone splendidly in comparison to how he'd thought it might, his overactive mind dreaming up worst-case scenarios. But this had been mostly alright, and he could only hope the same would hold true when it was time to meet the Ciphers.
“Pine Tree, what is this place?” Bill’s burst of anger resounded over the clicking of a turn signal and eighties rock playing on the radio. "The… Hearty Oak Lodge? That sounds fucking stupid. Joseph always picks these lame shitholes.”

"Kind of is,” he agreed, half paying attention as he texted Mabel the plans for tonight, his whereabouts with Bill that’d include a dinner in a restaurant north of LA. He shared Bill's “reservations” about the evening, a euphemism for rants about his cousin throughout the entire drive so far. Mabel expressed her condolences, but Dipper didn’t know if they were directed at him or Bill.

Tucking his phone away, he continued, "I've been there a couple times. It's not really an upscale place, but…” he searched for a descriptor Bill could quantify having no grasp of financial value, “it's where the middle class would go to feel fancy.”

“Oh. So it’s perfect for him. Too proud for Applebee’s but too poor for anything else.”

Dipper hummed, contemplating. "Have you talked to his soulmate? Or is this your first time meeting?" He was anxious, illustrated in the shifting of his weight, fingers combing through his hair and creating a ruffled mess. Although Bill reportedly didn't care for Joseph or his opinions, Dipper yearned to make a good impression on his family members in hopes of their acceptance, and he was convinced this visit could influence his future relationship with those closer to Bill, namely his parents.

That entailed masking his anxiety to seem self-assured, approachable, fun to be around. Not on the edge of a breakdown as he worried about botching this and Bill's family secretly hating him forever. And he'd dressed for the occasion, putting on his nicest pair of jeans and a vest slung over his usual plaid. It was his inexperience with fashion and distaste for formal attire, acknowledging that nothing would give him that dignified appearance as long as he was next to Bill "tuxes-are-for-every-occasion" Cipher.

Bill shrugged. “First time meeting her. I didn’t want to talk to them before, and I still don’t.”

"I don't know what your deal is with them, other than the soulmate thing.” That was a conceptual complaint, not specifically pertaining to Joseph and his to-be-wife. "I'm sure dinner will go fine. Just don't..." Hand drifting over Bill's, Dipper squeezed it as he sighed softly, chewing the inside of his cheek since positive spins for 'freak out on them and have a tantrum' were escaping him.

“Oh, Pine Tree.” Bill's hand slid from under his to grip the steering wheel. “When you meet them, you won’t think of it as some soulmate thing. You’ll understand.” Then, there was a pause as if Bill was evaluating what he'd said. “Do what?”

"Don't…” Dipper started, mustering his nerves, "do that one thing where you have like, a total meltdown. If you need to do that, can— maybe, could you indicate that to me so we can leave?” Making a scene at a packed restaurant well exceeded the amount of stress he could handle tonight, and he internally cringed at the thought of Bill breaking glassware and throwing punches as he had that night at the comedy club.

At least it wouldn't matter if they were banned from the Hearty Oak Lodge. Nobody he knew liked that establishment.
Bill inhaled, his fists clenching the steering wheel before he released the tension in an exhale. “I...fine. Sure, Pine Tree.”

Grateful, Dipper relaxed too. "Thanks. Um, not long ago, Mabel mentioned the utility of..." he paused and hoped Bill wouldn't deem the idea foolish, "of having like, a word that we know to get us out of situations. If we need to leave, or take a step back from fighting, if that happens..."

“Like a safeword?”

"Yeah, like a safeword," said Dipper. "If... you think it might be practical."

“Did you have anything in mind?”

"Something that wouldn't come up but wouldn't be out of place, I guess...? I don't know, I've never done this before," he admitted with a laugh, light and apprehensive; however, circumstances were the source of his tenseness, not the discussion.

“Did you ever own any fish?” Bill tapped the steering wheel in a mindless rhythm, and Dipper watched, eyebrows furrowing as he wondered where he was headed with this question, but was happy he was no longer squeezing the leather to a second death.

Still unsure and highly suspicious, he responded, "We've had dogs, cats, and cockatiels."

“Perfect. Let’s use ‘fish’ then. It’s quick and not misplaced for people listening in. They don’t know about our fishless situation.”

"We don't have fish that we keep as companions, but what about you? Don't you eat fish? Because that could be an issue and eventual miscommunication," Dipper pointed out, envisioning this going awry if they were to be using it in public places, such as at a restaurant where fish were served. Like the one they were going to tonight.

“Not anymore. The only good fish are what you catch yourself, and... we’re not doing that.” There was a swelling of pride and affection from the bottom of his heart as Bill reaffirmed his stance on fishing and eating fish, a change that Dipper couldn't be more thankful for after their messy argument about fishing for sport. It was an indisputable display of compassion which Dipper made a low and flattered noise in his throat to, an appreciative verbalization.

While Bill did so many things that accentuated an entitled attitude, moments like these reminded him of Bill's rightfully-aligned intentions that were only getting stronger.

The Hearty Oak Lodge's entrance was brown bricked and framed, evidently striving to achieve the log cabin appearance with its wooden paneling, fake pine trees, and shuttered windows.

The outside was fitting for the interior of warm, low light that spilled from antler-chandeliers, the same combination of brick and wooden siding lining the walls. If not for the taxidermy, it could've been homely, but Dipper was slightly disturbed by the excessive use of dead animals. Bears, foxes, deer, a moose head — they were mounted in various positions among painted scenery in beds of fake rocks and wood chips, surrounded by other woodsy artifacts like factory produced canoes or snowshoes.

Dipper tore his gaze from the atmosphere as the restaurant’s host escorted him and Bill to a table accommodating Joseph and his fiancee. Joseph was almost as tall as Bill and had the same build, yet darker hair replaced the sandy ash blond that seemed to run in the family, and the strikingly amber gold eyes of the Ciphers were far from Joseph's hazel. If not for their body structure, they'd
look worlds apart.

“Sugarplum,” Joseph was speaking to his fiancee, “have you looked at the catalogs I prepared for you? We ought to select silverware for the wedding— oh, Bill! It's been ages since I've seen you, what a blessing it is to have you with us today after seven years apart. I don’t believe you’ve met my darling soulmate, Zoe.” He beckoned to her, grins on their faces even as they noticed his presence. “Who is this?”

"Hey," he greeted with a wave, peeking further from behind Bill and then taking a seat, the creaking chair stiffer than he would've liked. "I'm Dipper Pines, and uh, you're… Joseph, right?"

While Bill had a constant state of alert about him that suggested he was observing nonstop, Joseph's aura felt more absent-minded and dreamy, but they shared the same mysterious quality. Hesitant, he extended a hand, but his attention shifted to the woman sitting prim and proper beside him, pale and light-haired with freckles.

“The one and only.” His features warmed with his smile. “I didn’t know Bill was bringing a guest. Where’s Paige?” This was to Bill, but Dipper was caught off guard and instantly confused, gawking at him for answers as well. “Was the distance too great of an obstacle?”

When the answer came, Dipper sincerely wished it hadn't. “It’s a little hard to go with someone who’s dead,” Bill said, dry and taut. “I’m not digging her body up and taking her for dinner.” Dipper's stomach twisted in a violent roll, processing that, the gravity of the revelation plummeting his mood. As he stared, puzzled, the name burned on the tip of his tongue and sunk into his soul, connecting two important conclusions: Paige was likely a former lover of Bill's or someone who was incredibly close to him as per Joseph's statement, and…

And she was dead.

Draining of color, Dipper felt weak and instantly nauseous, a turmoil of feelings springing within as he considered what else Bill wasn't telling him, if he was only seeing the top of the iceberg representing what Bill wished to disclose about himself in front of a given audience. The depth of this stung, how someone so valuable to Bill had died and there hadn't been a single word about it, no reference to her.

“Oh,” Joseph said after a moment. “The Creators be with her. I couldn’t imagine losing my soulmate.” He collected Zoe’s hand, and she seemed delighted albeit shy in the fond demonstration, but Dipper's stare was blank. Detached.

*I couldn't imagine losing my soulmate.*

Joseph's statement haunted him, a firm suggestion of an unbelievable conclusion. Ill-timing could be the culprit, but paranoia persuaded Dipper into presuming there was more to the sentiment, though it didn't add up with what he'd gathered from fleeting hints. In the middle of parsing each soulmark-related chat they'd ever had, sifting through the mind-boggling impossibility that Bill wasn't his soulmate (a conclusion he hadn't realized he was genuinely attached to) when Bill had eradicated doubt that his soulmate was gone in the past and implied they were out there somewhere, Joseph interrupted it:

"What would this world be without soulmates, hm?"

Focus lost and stuffed aside to keep his cool, Bill's promise that they were… very into the soulmate concept rang true. It was extreme, but not unusual within families that held long-standing traditions dear to their hearts and saw soulmarks as the declaration of impending, unbreakable love. Weird to Dipper, but unworthy of the hate that Bill had delivered over the course of the drive, especially
when it was largely a group that didn't take it to the level Joseph did.

"So, how… did you two meet?" Dipper asked, clearing his throat, trying to participate when all he wanted to do was call 'fish' and ask about Paige in private.

“We met at church,” said Zoe, joyous. “We were in the same pew and started talking since we had to share a hymn book.”

“One of the first things we did was check our soulmarks,” Joseph said, as if proud of the practice. “It was a match. Can you believe that? The Creators have our backs. Have you found your soulmate, Dipper?”

Put on the spot, Dipper's eyes darted between Joseph, Zoe, and Bill, then to Joseph as he grappled for an adequate response. Technically, he wasn't sure but didn't know how to articulate that when he wasn't prepared to divulge personal details during this mildly uncomfortable dinner that rivaled his date with Robbie. "Um," he started, pawing under the table for Bill's hand in a quest for reassurance, "I haven't. It's not something I'm too worried about." The worry had never been locating his soulmate. It was if his soulmate was Bill, and what that'd mean to their relationship.

Finally capturing Bill's hand, the familiar clasp of fingers over his own was marvelous.

“How can you not be worried?” Joseph inquired, Zoe nodded encouragingly. “This is your soulmate! Our Creators selected her specifically for you, and it’s your duty to find her. Waiting is a sin.”

Unimpressed with the change, he redirected it by clearing his throat, fanning a hand across the menu. "Yeah, so… what are you guys thinking of having tonight?" he asked them, then extended the question, "Bill?"

Bill was struggling, face buried in the menu to contain his smirk. “I’ll get a burger.” Beside him, Joseph looked at Zoe, who was peering back at him expectantly. It was a wordless exchange that Dipper didn't understand.

“We’ll be having a garden salad and the bacon burger.”

"Oh, that… works. Do you guys come here a lot, or…?" When he received confusion, Dipper clarified, "I figured since you seem to know what you want. I don't really know what'd be good or their specialties, or anything.”

“We’ve never been here before, but most restaurants have these items, and I always choose our food.”

Zoe piped in, "My porcupine-dumpling Joseph knows what's best for me."

Before he could respond, the waitress was with them and jotting down drinks, about to leave when Joseph requested she take their order for food as well. Dipper scrambled to select something, going with a salad, Bill asked for his burger, and Joseph did as promised by ordering for both himself and Zoe. Or, his 'boo bear' as he called her.

The pet names were enough to prevent Dipper from attempting to restart the chatter, his reserve of social effort running dry in the face of a strange couple much too into each other with their not-so-subtle touches and overwhelming flirting. The incessant talk of fate and their matching soulmarks confirmed that his decision to tune them out was appropriate.

Talks of divinity wore on him, but it appeared to have no adverse effect on Bill who was as smug
as ever, sitting upright as if Joseph's precious Creators were shining upon their golden child. It was better than a fight breaking out across the table, so Dipper couldn't grouse, but he'd retired his endeavors to steer the topic when it always landed in the same spot anyway.

Pulling Dipper into the present, Bill cleared his throat when the waitress arrived, refilling drinks with promises of the food being ready soon. “When was your wedding again?” Bill could try to sound interested and engaged all he wanted, yet Dipper was daydreaming, toying with his water glass as he stared with a glossy gaze which gravitated toward the speaker.

A wide smile breaking across Zoe's face at the question, she leaned forward. "Our wedding is—"

“Our wedding,” Joseph spoke over her loudly, a stern glance sent her way. “Is in two weeks. We’re having it up north.”

"Here in California?” Dipper asked, aiming to act like he'd been fully immersed, not staring into space and thinking about what he was going to do later.

“Yes. We thought it’d be a perfect location.”

The hum was affirmative, and while Dipper's curiosity may have enticed him to inquire where the occasion would be, he'd learned better than to ask and expect a reply that didn't make him regret it. "Well, congratulations on finding your soulmate and getting married soon. Those are, uh, exciting milestones."

“Would you like to come? We could make room for a couple more.”

"I don't know,” he said, swallowing. "I'm sure it'll be great, but I have a pretty busy week coming up and there are finals that I'll have to take… y'know, college student life stuff." Those would be over by the weekend, but he was desperate for an excuse.

“It's settled, you’re going. How wonderful.” Joseph didn’t seem to fuss over his reasoning, looking at Bill. “Both of you, of course. We’re having our wedding on a Saturday. The ceremony will be at noon with a short reception afterward.”

“Fantastic,” said Bill, echoing Dipper's halfhearted and questioning 'oh, thanks.' “Always loved the lack of a choice.”

As Joseph and Zoe proclaimed the pains of planning a wedding under time constraints, Dipper wished to remind them that discovering one's soulmate didn't require the exceedingly rapid courtship that prefaced marriage, but his mouth remained firmly shut being under the impression it would be ignored if they were as into tradition and customs as it seemed. Other than the infrequent hum and nod, Dipper was involving himself in the discussion internally and pondering the likelihood of Bill's parents' views aligning with these. While Bill was sitting on the opposite end of the spectrum with no interest in his soulmate whatsoever, Dipper was relieved, as that was vastly better than having a borderline obsession with it and rushing a relationship.

After the food had arrived and each plate was distributed accordingly, the meal fostered quiet since nobody was up for the inconvenience of talking between bites. It was a reprieve from the babble that Dipper struggled to maintain his side of and had mostly let the responsibility rest on Bill's shoulders as Joseph's family. Meanwhile, he was once again hit by the realization of how extensively he enjoyed talking to Bill. It was easy and fun, and he hardly had to think about it anymore. This was like pulling teeth, the comparison making it more of a drag.

Even when they were finished eating, Joseph hadn't quit talking, onto a story about how he and his
fiancée were 'alarmed' by the homeless population, panhandlers, and the street performers when they'd driven through the bigger cities of California. The light they portrayed them in was unflattering to say the least, and Dipper was teetering on exasperation with Joseph's holier-than-thou attitude.

"My bumblesmuffin here, bless her heart, said we should buy one guy a sandwich because he was missing a leg. A heart of gold, this woman," Joseph said, slinging an arm over Zoe's shoulders. "I'm lucky to be one with her. Our soulmarks are truly a merciful act of grace, bringing us together to celebrate our union."

Dipper wanted to gag, and it wasn't because the salad was subpar and stale.

"What was that, Dipper? Would you like to see our marks?" Before either he or Bill could agree or decline, they were showing off their matching marks on opposite arms. 'Do you come here often?' in blocky script and 'it'd be a sin if I didn't' in silky smooth lines.

For someone who didn't request to see the soulmark of near-strangers, he couldn't discern which praise would be applicable. "Those are… nice?" The statement was lifted as Dipper's shoulders did the same in a rigid motion.

"Very fitting," Bill chipped in, entertained. "Speaks to how you met in a church."

Zoe beamed, gripping her fiancé's arm and hanging off of it, the first time Dipper witnessed the doting girlfriend pose performed unironically and not in a Hollywood film. "Isn't it wonderful? It's like the Creators themselves were looking upon our courtship and gave their blessing."

"The Creators surely have us in their good fortunes," Joseph said. "We are perfect together. Isn't that right, poopsie scoopsie?"

"Yes, yes. I'm sure you both are equally perfect in your own religious ways," Bill broke in, dismissive hand dashing whatever they were going to say, "but let's talk about me."

Hands gliding over his face, Dipper mumbled into his fingers, "Oh thank god.." It was pretty sad when that was an improvement.

Joseph had opened his mouth to speak, but Bill's volume carried over him. "Alright, so my class has been going swimmingly. We're having our finals next week and I know most of my students will ace it."

As this topic was significantly more intriguing to Dipper, he perked up. "We should work on that this weekend, figure out what to put on it," he said, habitually inserting himself into Bill's teaching affairs after months of assisting with grading, keys, and tutoring. "But you're right, they'll do fine—I mean, they have such a great instructor." That was with a playful shove in Bill's ribs, a wide grin tugging at his lips.

"Fuck yeah they do. That's why they take my class, not Fordsy's." Basking in the upbeat tone of Bill's voice, Dipper's high was sabotaged by sharp daggers glared from across the table and dissolved his smile in seconds.

"Language," was the stern warning, and Dipper was beginning to piece together why Bill had hangups about spending time with them. Although seemingly decent folks, they were quirky and uptight, not the kind of crowd they were accustomed to in their friend group.

Avoiding a slippery slope to awkwardness, Dipper inclined toward Bill, a hand fastening over his shoulder as if to redirect the spotlight before it could sway into a morally-driven debate. "Did Bill
tell you guys that he got a new job recently?"

“Oh!” Bill's eyes flashed, his posture adjusted to externalize his inflated ego. “Yes, I’m a car salesman now. It’s much more enjoyable than being a bartender.”

Joseph raised his eyebrow. “It’s a good job for you, Bill. Shame it’s not more charitable. Have you thought of donating your earnings?”

“No, it’s my money.”

Annoyance engulfed him, not at Bill but at the audacious suggestion as if Joseph had the right to say anything about that. Studying him, Dipper cocked his head, took a deep breath to stay patient. "He's already 'donating his earnings' by paying for your meal."

“That doesn't promote the welfare of the community,” Joseph objected. “In addition, this was supposed to be a family meal, and I suggest you treat it like so, Dipper.”

"What? You've been treating it like church," he pointed out, then wished he hadn't opened his mouth at all because this was stirring into an argument. Giving Bill an earful on the importance of family and ensuring he was civil toward his cousin was meaningless if he was going to be the one fueling fights.

“I’ve done no such thing—”

“Pipe down, Joseph. I’m not donating to your stupid community. Pine Tree, I think we’re done here.”

"Uh, yeah," Dipper agreed, clutching his arm, "it's getting kind of late." Although Joseph and Zoe looked disappointed, they insisted on walking out together and guided them from the seating area. When they'd gone in, the sun had been setting but still casting its rays over the horizon, and now the stars were dotting the sky.

Final goodbyes and parting words were said in front of the restaurant, peculiarly amicable despite what'd happened, and he'd been about to walk to Bill's car when he was addressed. “So, Dipper,” Joseph began, and Dipper froze, twisting to meet his intense eyes. “What did you do to anger the Creators? Did your parents sin?”

He blinked. "What?"

“You walk as if the Creators have crushed your legs.”

Instantly, his mood dropped and the piercing decline coaxed him into a sour reply, "It's chronic pain, okay? My parents didn't sin. You two didn't get a booth, so I had to sit in an uncomfortable chair all evening." It was more bitter than he would've liked, but the subject of his injury was generally perceived as off limits to most respectable people with half a shred of common sense. Only kids that didn't know better would tug on their parent's sleeve, asking an innocent question, and Joseph's inquiry was neither innocent nor shifting the blame to the correct party.

“So you sinned. That's alright, Dipper, the Creators are willing to forgive you for your wrongdoings and cure you of your ailments.”

“For fuck’s sake, shut up with that bullshit. The Creators don’t do shit and they’re not going to ‘heal’ the injuries he got from that car accident he caused.”

The record scratch in Dipper's mind was so deafening that it had to be audible, and he reared back
from Bill. "Whoa, hold up— uh... what?" Flabbergasted, he couldn't even determine what to ask in regards to such a blatant misunderstanding.

“What? You think those fictitious Creators are going to magically—"

"No, the other thing you said."

"You crashed your car and got your license suspended for reckless driving. It’s fine, Pine Tree. You were fifteen, a young male driver. Shit happens.”

Incredulity was wiped away the second it registered, the thought that Bill believed he was to blame for the accident, for permanently injuring himself, for ruining his fucking life and wishing it would be over some days. Horrified astonishment became a whirlwind of harsh, unstoppable fury built upon by years of resentment for the accident and the true driver at fault. Jaw clamped, Dipper felt as though he was scorching the pavement he walked upon as he grabbed Bill by the wrist and stomped to the golden vehicle, heedless of Joseph and Zoe's perplexed farewells. He only released his death grip with a terse and demanding "get in" when they were at the driver's door.

Once he was in the passenger seat and had his arms folded over his chest, stormy glare pointed out the windshield, Dipper couldn't look at Bill. He couldn't stomach it, knowing Bill had thought— all this time, had been under the impression he did this, perhaps deemed him deserving of what'd happened. The urge to vomit pursued that realization.

“What’s with the long face, Pine Tree? I nailed it, right? I was pleasant. I behaved!”

His fists clenched in his lap until his knuckles had turned white, the grip choking the life from plaid fabric of his shirt tails. Acidic bile rose in his throat. If he opened his mouth, Dipper was certain a toxic combination of volatile accusations and rage would spill out, so he kept it tight as a vice, jaw aching with the grind of his teeth. “Is that a yes, Pine Tree? We can talk about this, don’t give me the cold shoulder. I know it must be hard, but young drivers make mistakes all the time. I'm not wrong, am I?”

You are wrong, Dipper thought bitterly, but nothing escaped him except a ragged, shuddering breath. It was on his tongue and begged to be said, positively ripped from his vocal cords like a scream to belt Bill with because he couldn't comprehend that he'd genuinely thought this was his fault. Everything.

“Hm,” Bill mused, deflating. “Are you upset about something else? Like Joseph and.. what’s her face, Zoe? Yeah, I don’t want to see them again, either. They suck. We should pretend like we’re going to their wedding.. and then skip. Bam, no more useless invites.” When it didn’t warrant a response, he swapped his tactic. “Hm... If it's not Joseph and his lady friend, is this about the dessert? Look, it’s not my fault I stole some of your dumb vegan cheesecake, okay? It’s the waitstaff—they didn’t bring my brownie in a timely manner! What, did you want me to starve? The cheesecake was taunting me with its delicious, crumbly crust and smooth topping. It was like it wanted me to gobble it up—"

"It's not the fucking cheesecake!" he snapped, the hurt and frustration reaching a breaking point with enough force to cause his voice to crack over the snarl. A couple erratic gasps later, he tried to steady himself and block the angry tears welling in the corners of his eyes, the pain of the accident and aftermath ambushing him full-force in the wake of this betrayal. "You don't know anything about— about it, what happened," Dipper finally sputtered, more accusatory than informative. Misery and hopelessness bled from him as he went on, "I can't believe— you think I did this to myself?"
“Well, it’s probably better you did this to yourself than someone else.”

A furious bark of "what?" came out more like a heated demand than a question, blazing brown eyes roasting Bill with their glower. "What are you even talking about?" Dipper didn't give Bill an opportunity to explain, he didn't want to hear it. He'd listened to his share bullshit about being at fault for an accident he had very little to do with, except being present and caught in the deadly mistake of someone else. "I wasn't driving," each word was low and severe, drawn out for maximum comprehension because he wasn't about to repeat this. "And he hit us by crossing the median. He killed my grandfather, and he maimed my grandmother so she died in the hospital. He caused the crash that broke several bones and shattered my hip, gave Mabel PTSD, and now we can't fucking have normal lives because of that asshole drunk driver, who never even started to see justice since he killed himself."

That seemed to shut Bill up, and his voice had grown infinitely smaller. “Oh. I’m sorry, Pine Tree.”

Dipper wasn't done. "My license isn't suspended, it's expired. I had a learner's permit and never bothered doing more with it after the accident when I gained so many medical restrictions that it wouldn't make sense to. That changed my whole life, almost everything I thought I would do and have in the future because I can't do typical activities like comfortably walk a mile without aching, or operate a vehicle, or sit for long periods, or..." Once he'd ran out of steam and tapered off, Dipper curled in on himself and exhaled, squeezing his eyes shut. "It's... I don't know. It's not your fault. I didn't tell you." But then again, he hadn't thought Bill would jump to that assumption.

“I'm still sorry, Pine Tree. I shouldn't have.”

Although Dipper agreed, he didn't make any indication of that as he slumped forward and pinched the bridge of his nose, jostling years of turmoil to the back of his mind where it usually festered. "I wish this— kind of wish you didn't have to find out like this." An emotional explosion of distress and vehemence wasn't what he'd had in mind when detailing this private experience to his boyfriend.

Bill shrugged, turning away. “I wish I didn’t put you in this position.”

"I guess you were going to find out eventually," he said, rubbing sweaty palms together, drinking in the temporary peace. When he spoke, his voice was a mixture of a watery croak and venomous amusement, "I didn't know you thought I did it."

The sting of betrayal had lessened with Bill's sympathy and swift apology, a keen understanding of loss too acute to be manufactured from anything but experience. That notion had Dipper remembering what Joseph said at dinner, the mention of an enigmatic 'Paige', but he didn't push it, not yet. He would bide his time.

Envisioning and planning for that moment accounted for the rest of the drive to Bill's apartment, but at the cost of offering vague and distracted replies. It wasn't uncomfortable, but a certain air of tenseness and solitude had absorbed them in the aftermath of a fragile discussion that Dipper was more than content to leave behind them.

It wasn't difficult, he'd had approximately three years of practice.

The white noise of the shower's water drowned out Dipper's thoughts as he graded reviews, the students' last assignment in preparation for the final. In the tiny sample size, establishing who was likely to pass or fail the class was a matter of which students bothered to do the work, and he was ecstatic to see Pacifica had truly improved in her performance. One more study session was
wedged between now and the final itself, a weekly meeting he'd come to look forward to and was excitedly apprehensive about as the finish line loomed.

Sinking into the comfortable sheets of Bill's bed, he hitched his legs up to account for the new position and angled the homework into the light of the nightstand lamp. It was a little wonky, trying to do this in a bed rather than at a desk, but sitting in a creaky wooden chair at dinner had prematurely triggered the pain.

The sound of the water died with a squeak and the groan of plumbing, implying Bill would be joining him promptly.

Dipper unconsciously smiled to himself.

Minutes passed, and Bill entered the room dressed in only boxers and gauze, hair still wiry and wet, constellation tattoos gleaming in the lamp's illumination. The scent of his soap had Dipper taking a deep breath inward.

"Pine Tree," he greeted as he collapsed in bed, arms flopping around him to pull him closer, a jarring motion that had a swipe of ink spanning the page.

"Wow," he said, complaint mild, "look what you did. How should I cover that up, write 'sorry I was super drunk'?'" But that elated him, not the thought of Bill drinking but the realization that he hadn't, not in so long. When they'd met, he recalled near-alcoholic habits that'd rival Stan's, and those habits had dwindled — the bottle of ale on Bill's counter was as full as it'd been two weeks ago.

Bill huffed, wiggling to eliminate the space separating them. "Sorry, I was super drunk and cuddling the instructor."

"Must be pretty drunk if you're writing that on their papers considering you are the instructor," he said, setting the assignments aside to roll on top of Bill, pinning him down.

He blew air at his face, and Dipper squeezed his eyes shut, scrunched his nose. "That was from your perspective."

Peeking at Bill, he exhaled a laugh. "That was supposed to be your impression of me? It wasn't nearly gay enough." A staple throughout their friendship, it was a running joke with them, Bill's reminders of his flaming homosexuality which was in reality standard bisexuality.

"Oh yes, how could I forget how flamboyantly gay you are? I should've tossed in 'oh Bill's!' and 'fuck me, daddy's.'"

"Yeah, that's basically me," Dipper said sarcastically and rolled his eyes. For the hell of trying it, he straightened his back and gave an obvious grind into Bill. "Oh, Bill. Fuck me, daddy."

Bill's eyebrows hitched, mischievousness glinting. "Is that an invitation?"

A jolt of desire rushed him, but he forced his mind to clear. "I believe we're taking it slow," he commented, a joke sliding forth. "Is that how Wendy jumped you?"

"Something like that." Bill shuffled, thrusting up against Dipper. "First it's 'taking it slow', then it's 'taking me in your ass.'"

A chortle tumbling from him, Dipper gazed fondly at Bill and could quietly appreciate the crude humor, the dangerous smile upon his devilishly handsome features, and his eyes— god, his heart
leaped. If not for Bill's reply breaking his concentration, he would've been convincing himself they could be physical.

But no, they had more important things to cover, and Dipper addressed this by shifting off to a side, tone becoming serious. "Have you taken it slow with all your partners?"

"Yeah," Bill yawned. "Tried to." He reached over, booping Dipper’s nose, and he basked in the tenderness.

"I hope this isn't a weird question," he said, anxiety spiking. The approach was a sneaky measurement of complexity. "But how many people have you dated before me? I know about Wendy, obviously, but..."

“A few. Two didn’t mean anything, really... and I don’t want to talk about the other.”

Dipper sensed the roadblock long before it arrived, so he veered onto another course with the same destination but boasting upfront means of getting there. "Um, at dinner... Joseph— if you recall, he mentioned someone named 'Paige'?"

“Pine Tree, I said I didn’t want to talk about her.”

"Oh. So... that's— okay, got it. I didn't know if she was a former girlfriend or a friend, or..." But his previous edging into this suggested girlfriend-slash-lover had been his estimation, and he might've felt accomplishment in his accuracy if it wasn't darkened by her death. "Sorry, I'm sure that was hard for you. I'm guessing you, uh, won't take me up on it, but I'm pretty good at listening if you ever did want to talk."

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he repeated. “Not now.”

"Yeah, man," he replied, dropping this with profound ease given he was no stranger to tragedy, especially those intertwined with death and the alteration to life that followed. The lack of information was disappointing to a curious mind, but he respected it.

Stretching to assemble the assignments, he plopped them onto Bill's chest. "I should get back to grading these, and figure out what to do with that giant mark. Thanks, Bill." Uncapping the pen, he returned the boop from earlier by placing a red dot upon Bill's nose.

“Wow, I should take that pen and write on your face for being so devious.” Bill struck by snatching the pen, impressively spinning it in his hand and bopping him back on the nose despite Dipper's protest of 'hey!' and gentle swatting that feigned irritation. Knocking the pen from Bill's grasp, Dipper scooped it up and tucked it under his thigh for safe keeping.

"That," Bill gestured to the swipe of ink over the assignment, the blemish he'd caused, "is almost as ugly as my soulmark."

Although he felt bad, he tried to lighten the mood with a horrified gasp, chiding in his best Joseph-impersonation, "How dare you speak ill of this gift the Creators have bestowed upon our mortal souls, so we can find our beloved one and only and live a blessed life devoid of sin." After a beat, he incorporated in memory of their awful pet names, "...My precious lambchop."

“I think I just got PTSD from that.”

"Sorry," said Dipper through a chuckle. Resettling on top of Bill to begin grading, it was a smoother process than he imagined it'd be, Bill's stomach a surprisingly decent surface to write scores on between bouts of chewing on the pen.
Idle, casual banter accompanied the comfort, a tranquil evening in with Bill the most sublime end to this night that he could think of while they were cozily tangled together. Even as Dipper busied himself with grading and Bill read about astrophysics, he felt close to him beyond their physical proximity and grasped the beginnings of comprehending Bill's distaste for soulmarks.

The terrible heaviness of Bill's soulmate possibly being deceased weighed on him, but pressuring Bill was a boundary Dipper couldn't bring himself to test, not when patience would prove to be a better prolonged strategy. It could wait, and even his insatiable curiosity must have somehow recognized that because the internal demand for information had been uncharacteristically hushed, an adjustment perhaps attributed to the growing notion that they didn't need matching marks to enjoy this sort of serenity, their love for one another requiring no verbal confirmation or inscription upon skin to validate its existence.
Writer's block had waged a war against Dipper at the worst time possible and was winning this battle, leaving him struggling to generate suitable content for his screenplay, or really any words at all as he stared at the document on his laptop. It was nearing completion, a relief since the due date ticked closer. Less than twenty-four hours.

It'd been pushed aside to study for his other finals in physics courses, arguably pertinent to his future and therefore more deserving of his focus in this stretch of cramming, never mind how he hated every minute.

Drawing him from the screen, Mabel chirped, "Did it work?"

Blinking, Dipper asked, "Did what work?"

As she resumed packing, she clarified, "You said you were going to read Robbie's poetry for inspiration. I was wondering if it worked." Following the sentence was the dull thud of another box being stacked atop 'move-out mountain', a term for their pile of items packed in preparation for winter break. Vacating the dorms one week early to beat the rush by moving to Stan and Ford's place was the least tedious option with their parents traveling on business and Mabel's work schedule.

"Oh god. That." Dipper's head bent over the desk, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. "It might've been inspiring if I was writing a screenplay about… I don't know, his life being a rocky road or his soulmate leaving him and smashing his heart to bits. Or... I guess if I was writing a generic country song."

"Wow, I didn't know it'd be super sad! Do you think there's any truth to... that, those things he writes about? My journal isn't that depressing, and I've had like… five breakups, six if you count the hot air balloon message."

"Uh, maybe not in the poems about the devil and stuff, but I can imagine the Wendy-related poems being an outlet for him. I think he's still kind of caught up on her and that relationship," he said, memories of the date resurfacing and causing him to cringe. "It hit him hard that his soulmate doesn't seem to think they're compatible."

Mabel zipped her bag, then jumped into arranging the mess of oddities on her desk: a rainbow of highlighters, a contraband candle, stickers, abandoned art projects, a squishy glitter monster thing. Among the busyness of her packing and cleaning, it was difficult to keep his attention on writing.

"I hope things work out for him. That must suck to feel down about it all the time, but he said he's been doing better lately! He's been going to these poetry reading nights that the diner hosts."

Humming an absent reply, Dipper typed out a sentence or two for the screenplay and fell back against the chair with a defeated sigh, swiping a hand through his hair. Each word felt wrong, the dialogue forced and narrative dry, and his concentration was on anything but this task in the midst of his concerns about physics finals, hauling the necessities to Stan and Ford's place, his last meeting with Pacifica and her final. For once, Bill wasn't on that list.

Stress-induced nausea wasn't making it any easier, the universe seizing this chance to gang up on him. Now, all he needed was for his hard-drive to crash and lose every ounce of progress he'd made, the hours of effort vanishing in an instant — it was a possibility that had Dipper cautious enough to hit the save button an extra time and ask, "Do we have any spare flash drives? If we do, I
think they're in the bottom drawer." Dipper vaguely motioned toward the storage unit crammed in the corner of the already-puny room. It was astonishing that bunk beds, wardrobes, and two desks even fit in here with them. And they only tripped on one another sometimes.

Mabel rummaged through their belongings until she emerged with a flash drive, placing it on his desk with a click. “Here, I found one.”

"Thanks," Dipper said as he fit it into his laptop, turning it a total of three times to find the right direction. When the drive loaded, he was puzzled by the warning stating that it was at maximum capacity. "Did you use this one for something?" He opened the folder, leaned forward with curiosity. "It's almost full."

“Hm? No, I'm a technologically-savvy woman of the future, using 'the cloud'," she emphasized as if it was a mystical being, "instead of some ancient flash drive. What’s on it?"

As Mabel hovered over his shoulder to see, Dipper finally arrived at the substance of the drive, a video. Recognition sparked in him, breath catching, a tremble rising from within. Oh.

That.

"It's… uh, I know what this is," Dipper said but didn't open it, suddenly-clammy hands clutching, retracting from the keyboard to emphasize that he wasn't going to brave loading the file itself. When Mabel wasn't deterred, his stomach churned upon arriving at the conclusion that he'd have to explain further. "It's a video from the holidays, that… holiday." That holiday, it was a euphemistic term familiar to him and Mabel as it was a nicer description of the night that'd launched the vastly-damaging change in their lives, the abrupt end to their grandparents'.

“Oh.” Mabel staggered back as if putting distance between her and the video. “I didn’t know you had that..”

"I forgot about it," he confessed, picking up as she trailed off. "Dad was going to throw that year's away because Mom didn't want it around, but I asked if I could keep it since it's, y'know… kind of the last time.” Dipper didn't have the emotional strength to spell it out and didn't bother when Mabel would know precisely what he was hinting at, why it was such a painful memory. "I never watched it, though. I guess I kept it because, maybe, one day?" Jaw tightening, he lowered his gaze, taking a deep breath to steady himself and calm his nerves.

“Are you ever going to?”

"I thought I would, but… I don't know anymore. Maybe I'll get rid of it, or something. Mom wouldn't like me having it anyway."

Mabel turned away from him in stiff movements, withdrawing to her suitcase. “That might be for the best, Dip. I don’t think anyone wants to relive that.” It was one of those scarce times that he couldn't hear Mabel's cheer in her voice, and even as he stared at the corner of his laptop, he could picture her lips pursed as she shakily held her composure.

But Dipper was on the fence about her supposition, being the last time they were happy together as an unfractured family, the shred of a memory before everything became terrible. Maybe… he would watch it, just once, then decide what to do. Pocketing it for later, Dipper asked, "Do we have any other flash drives?" Although tempted to lamely joke that he hoped this one wouldn't contain traumatic mementos in an attempt to lessen the tension, he had the sense to bite his tongue.

Hesitant, Mabel sifted through their storage until she plucked another one from the school supplies,
handing it over with a, “Here.” Plugging it into the other USB slot, he was glad this one appeared to be unused and began to back up his screenplay. Once it’d transferred, he could once again relax. Well, more accurately attend to the irritating writer's block that was ruining his efforts to complete this.

It was twenty minutes into that hindrance when Mabel plopped down beside him in the second desk chair and let out a noise of exhaustion, appropriate since she had most of her items ready for the transfer to Stan and Ford's apartment. It was impressive how quickly she'd been able to pack and with exceeding grace; unlike Dipper's, her boxes were neatly folded and the items inside stashed with equal consideration.

"Do you have some time off during the break? We should do something fun," he proposed, partially out of interest and slightly because any distraction from writing was a welcome one.

“‘I have a few days off!” Mabel said enthusiastically, having perked up from their downcast exchange. “They hired a new guy for management, and he’s covering me while I’m gone. I’m not sure how long he’s going to last,” her voice lowered as if someone might overhear in the privacy of their dorm. “He’s awkward with customers, and he miiight be eating the food.”

Dipper's eyebrow raised. "Who thought it'd be a good idea to hire Stan?"

Mabel snorted. “No, no. It’s one of Robbie’s friends. Thompson, I think.”

Dipper's mind flashed to the friend group that Robbie and Wendy hung with. "Oh, that guy," he said and nodded, a pensive hum escaping as he envisioned Thompson rooting around in the kitchen and eating the ingredients before they had a chance to be arranged into a greasy plate of food. Thompson wasn't the best choice of a hire, but ‘decent employee' and 'Robbie's friends' didn't have a ton of overlap.

"Does Robbie still work there? I haven't seen him since… wow, it hasn't been since we, uh—" Dipper didn't think 'got questioned by an officer' was the ideal way to tell Mabel, so he started over. "Hey, do you remember when Wendy invited me and Robbie to the comedy club a couple weeks ago?"

Mabel nodded. “Yeah. Why? Did something happen?”

"Yeah, they wanted to do urban exploration, and we wound up going to Sunken City," he replied, a light groan of 'what a night' trailing as an afterthought. "A cop stopped by and tried to bring Robbie in for having unpaid fines, but Bill intervened."

“Whoa, you went to Sunken City?” Mabel brightened, the flood of inquiries incoming. “What’d you see? I bet it was pretty cool, with all the underwater buildings. Ooh, and the ghosts! Did you guys see ghosts? Was it spooky?"

"A lot of rubble, I guess? And graffiti. There wasn't much else." Nothing like what Mabel seemed to be craving: no ghosts, no spookiness, no submerged remnants of buildings. "Kind of cool to explore. I miss doing that with you." He and Mabel had never selected dangerous locations but used to traverse restricted areas, a milder version of the hobby.

“If you're feeling okay,” she spared a critical glance as if daring him to lie about the condition of his chronic pain, "we should totally go exploring, Dipper. We could be like, spirit trackers.” As much as it'd been dormant the past couple years, his intrigue with the supernatural was heightened at the mere mention of resuming their urbex outings.
"Yeah, like… phantom finders," he agreed, a finger tapping his chin thoughtfully. "I know we don't have a lot of time to do it anymore, but we could. Oh, Robbie wanted to go to that place in Downey."

Excitedly squealing, Mabel clasped her hands, her eagerness contagious. “We should go. Robbie would love it, I think it sounds awesome, and maybe we can get Wendy to come too.”

Although they'd have to do some expectation management since he wasn't sure it'd be awesome, Dipper conceded. "We can ask them. Bill didn't like Sunken City, but he might not be mad if I talk to him about it before going, or… if he's invited to come with." If it was risky, having the five of them there as a group was a lot less endangering than him, Wendy, and Robbie. Dipper felt confident with Mabel and knew her better than anyone, they'd spent a lifetime together and done similar things as younger teenagers — not to the scale of breaking into a restricted and abandoned building, but still.

Spinning in the chair to empty her excess energy, Mabel grinned. “You should talk to him. He can’t say no to you.”

Dipper wasn't convinced.

"I'll mention it," he promised, but drooped as his eyes landed on his laptop, the screenplay open and cursor flickering at him mockingly. "I should probably finish this, then we can haul our stuff to Stan and Ford's. Do they know we're bringing the cockatiels?"

“Yep, sure do! I sent them a text as a heads-up. Stan responded saying he'll 'teach them proper English', and Ford wants us to hide his pens to make sure Kiwi doesn't take them.”

Yeah. In hindsight, teaching his cockatiel to retrieve pens hadn't been a flawless idea.

"Great, so they're going to know every offensive word under the sun," Dipper said, sarcastic but mirthful. "They've been hanging out with Mom and Dad, so adding Stan's influence, they'll be smooth-talking politicians with a, um, 'strong' vocabulary?"

Mabel giggled. “They’re going to sound worse than sailors and complain about Bill’s dad.” He hoped not, but it wouldn't surprise him to hear their birds reiterating displeasure about political opponents. That'd make for an intriguing chat if Bill overheard.

"Bill went with me last weekend," he said, the evening visit springing to him, "so they've met him now. They seem fine and don't equate him with his dad, so I think he passed Mom's examination. I guess that's one good thing about Bill— he's weirdly a 'meet-the-parents' type when you want him to be. Super charismatic." Remarkably so, he could have a whole room enchanted with his presence and capture everybody's attention like a magician. It was an admirable quality from the perspective of someone harboring the social skills of a salt shaker.

“Wow, you got Mom's seal of approval on Bill? That might be unheard of, a new record and everything. I thought she'd be more uptight about it since she has a lot of choice words about his dad." There was an intermission in her glee, and she went on softer than before, "We need to visit them. You and me, I mean.”

"We have all of winter break. I know they're usually busy up to the holidays, but after that, we'll get time with them."

“T’m glad, I miss them.” The collective homesickness was brief, because Mabel broke into a smile and playfully ruffled his hair. "Write your ultra-romantic mystery thing, and then let's get going."
Dipper woke to the pounding of his headache, feeling like his mouth was stuffed with cotton and drier than the most scorching desert. Being upright sharpened his agony, and he winced, squinting into the low light of Stan and Ford's apartment and wondering how long he'd been dead to the world.

The cockatiels weren't chirping for dinner, so it couldn't be evening.

Collapsing onto the sofa—well, his makeshift bed—was the last thing he remembered after attending morning classes and his monthly therapy session. Sleepless nights from studying and distress taking their toll, he'd been too exhausted to do anything but crash, yet catching up on rest was a miserable experience since it rendered him tireder than before and significantly more dehydrated.

While disorientation faded the pounding continued, a constant *thud-thud-thud* but somehow louder than he remembered, and he swiveled around as he realized it wasn't confined to his head but was actually someone knocking on the door. A groan spilled past his lips. Rising to feet that might as well be bricks, Dipper dragged himself to the door and peered through the peephole, then blinked when a yellow-black mass fell into his vision.

That couldn't be right.

But checking confirmed it, so he opened the door to reveal Bill. "Hey?" he greeted, rusty in the wake of slumber. Dipper cleared his throat, wiped the bleariness from his eyes. "I mean, hey. Uh, do you want to come in?"

“Pine Tree!” With an energetic flair that Dipper felt insanely removed from, Bill stepped in, kicking his shoes off with majestic coordination. “I totally didn’t expect to see you here. Did I wake you?”

"Yeah," he mumbled, swallowing a yawn, "and nice try, we both know I texted you yesterday to mention Mabel and I moved in for finals week and break."

“Nah, I definitely never got that. You seem sleepy, cutie. You should resume counting sheep!” After a contemplative beat, he said, "I can join you."

Dipper's eyebrows lifted. "You're... going to join me? I mean, that's cool if you want to, but I didn't know you'd come all the way here to take a nap with me." He didn't have to ask what Bill was doing because he'd get an absurd, fabricated excuse, and while entertaining, the reality was obvious that Bill wanted to spend time with him. Being boyfriends, that wasn't unreasonable. Rather, it was superb.

“I will travel any distance if it means I can be beside you.”

The sentiment melted Dipper entirely, had him beaming like a lovestruck fool as his heart jackhammered. Although he didn't consider himself a romantic, the sincerity and sweetness of Bill's promise surpassed logic and broke his defenses against the giddy burst of affection that exploded in his chest.

"That's, uh... wow." It fell from him, stunned. That was the only halfway intelligible phrase he could muster as he pawed the back of his neck, so flustered and equally delighted, but at an utter loss. Finally, he settled on a tiny mumble of, "You are way too charming, man."

“Not nearly charming enough, cutie. Are you ready to snuggle?” Bill was on the move, kissing his cheek on his path to the couch, but Dipper didn't follow. He was bewildered, frozen in place,
then spun on his heels to gawk at Bill with owlish eyes.

"Did... did you just kiss my cheek?" he asked, voice raised an octave as he blushed a rosy red. "I don't think you've done that before." Whenever cheek kisses were exchanged, it was always from him to Bill. And rapidly, the reality of it was catching up to him, leading Dipper to wonder if he could even smile wider. "Oh my god, dude."

Trying to keep a damn skip from his step, Dipper trailed after and landed beside Bill on the sofa. Bill must have been waiting for this because the response was instinctual. Dipper felt his arms circling his body, immersing him in a cozy embrace against his chest, an adjustment he was pliant to in curving his body against Bill's as they fit so snugly. Bill surrounded him; his stature, his broader frame, limbs ganglier... it was perfect, the secure vibe and inhaling the signature aroma of spicy honey.

"You feel big," he teased, recalling the first time they'd cuddled and his embarrassing reaction at the time.

"I'm big, huh? Sounds pretty gay." Bill squeezed him, pressing a kiss against the top of his head, and Dipper swore he was going to gush with enamored joy. So much for not being a romantic.

Overwhelmed by the tenderness and more amused than humiliated, he laughed. "I can't believe you remember that." Not only did he remember what he'd said, but he also remembered his response, a feat that Dipper would recognize as an accomplishment if it wasn't so mortifying. Tipping his head upward, he fondly booped his nose to Bill's, then retreated to burrow into the perfectly-spaced crook between his neck and shoulder. "Just... if we're napping and cuddling, kind of be careful because— I went to therapy earlier, and now everything hurts."

Thinking of the therapy appointment put a sour taste in his mouth, as his therapist had introduced the possibility of requiring surgery and recommended he consider it. Several painful and failed medical procedures were the beginning of why he disliked the idea.

Bill blew his hair as he sighed, a hand starting to caress his thigh and gently massaging the muscles, kneading small circles into it. Dipper could merely stare in awe, flattered and perplexed by how he remembered these things.

"Are you going to be okay, Pine Tree?"

"Yes," said Dipper, a reflex, but he deflated within seconds while inwardly debating if he should tell Bill. Mabel knew via the ride home from therapy, receiving an irked rant meanwhile she'd tried to offer support and promises that she'd be here for him if he went through with it. "...No. I don't know. It's— I'm... sort of messed up."

"Physically or...?" Bill's patience was endearing, yet Dipper's anxiety prevailed. "If it's something you want to talk about, I'm here."

Flatly, he explained, "My therapist said it'd be a good choice to try another surgery, because obviously the last four have worked wonders."

"Does your therapist need brain surgery?" Dipper barked a rough laugh. "The fifth time is not a charm."

"Yeah, well... it'll be worse for half a year, then it's back to normal." That sent a jolt of bitterness through him as he realized a constant, dull pain originating in his hips and making each leg ache was his normal. "So I don't know. I guess the next couple appointments will determine if I need it."
“Are you going to go through with it?” Bill asked. “He can’t make you.”

"I know he can't make me," he said, a sigh heaving through him, "but I'll have to think about it." So far, all he'd done with the information was brood, then be dropped off only to fall into a deep sleep.

Bill exhaled slowly, his fingers dancing over Dipper’s sides, a motion that soothed the edges of his mood. “Alright, sugar. Like I said, if you want to talk– I’m here.”

He hummed, airy and dismissive, but mostly discontent with his circumstances. It required extensive consideration, an activity he was in no state to engage in while he should be preparing for finals and— oh, right, Bill was here.

Shifting the subject, Dipper inquired, "How's your therapy going, by the way?"

“It’s going fine,” Bill said. “Rejuvenating.”

"Yeah? That's good." At least Bill's therapist wasn't encouraging a high-failure-rate surgery. It sucked the life from him and restarted the headache that should've been history by now, but then again, wading through grogginess wasn't the same as remedying his dehydration.

Too comfortable to bother, Dipper figured he'd be alive in an hour to address his health more appropriately. "It's the first day of finals, and I feel like I'm dying," he lamented through a quiet moan, burying himself closer to Bill. Late nights of strenuous study sessions, skipped meals, and coffee in lieu of sleep was deteriorating him, but he was determined to power through.

“Oh, Pine Tree.” Bill's massage had unearthed a particularly sensitive spot, and he shuddered. “You'll get used to the pain, trust me. This is only the beginning of Finals Hell.”

Stacking fatigue onto himself wasn't a reality that he was prepared to face, but death-by-stress meant he wouldn't have to worry about surgery, a strangely appealing thought given the last sequence of procedures. "I'm not sure I'm the best candidate for the motivational phrase, 'you'll get used to the pain.'" Bill paused, briefly tensing. Recognizing the reply had been a bit callous, an apology was formulating but Bill beat him to it.

“Sorry, cutie. Didn’t mean it like that.”

"It's fine," he said, a hint of a coarse chuckle embedded in the reassurance. "Seriously." From Bill, it didn't bother him, knowing nothing malicious was intended but entertained by pointing it out.

“If you’re sure, doll.” Bill relaxed, and Dipper fluttered his eyes closed as Bill's chin came to rest atop his head. Breathing in Bill's scent through a lazy inhale, Dipper felt them meld into each other, entangling, filling the space impeccably, the position optimal for seducing him to sleep after an exhausting day.

“Hey, Pine Tree.” Bill was shaking his shoulder, rousing him from unconsciousness to take in a world of blurriness with a new smell of food permeating the apartment.

"Mm?” Sitting up in a drained haze, he mumbled, "What time is it?” Although the sun hadn't dipped beneath the horizon, it'd felt like they napped forever and a day with how his body ached, his head trying to implode. If finals didn't kill him, this might.

Bill offered him a glass of water, which he gratefully accepted. “I’m guessing you’re thirsty, so drink up. It's almost five now, honey.”
They hadn't slept as long as he'd originally believed. "Oh," he said, voice a croak. "Jesus, I sound awful." In hopes of amending that, he downed the water and set it on the coffee table, but it seemed his headache was permanent when the cockatiels took this opportunity to chirp at them.

Peering to their cage, he mentioned, "They might be hungry. Mabel and I have been giving treats around this time to get them accustomed to living here while we're on break."

Bill mirrored his line of sight, and he scowled. "They're probably unhappy that I've been staring them down for the past thirty minutes."

"Is that— you seriously were staring at them while I napped?" Dipper asked, giving him a jovial shove, weakened by recently waking. "Yeah, no wonder they're upset. Stop creeping on my birds, man."

“I don’t like your birds, cutie. They’re weird.”

Dipper happened to be a fan of weird, a comment on the tip of his tongue before he gave Bill’s cheek a quick peck. "Well, you're weird but I'm not throwing you in a cage. Consider it a privilege."

Bill's features scrunched disapprovingly. “I still don’t like them.”

Ignoring that, he approached and his presence caused Kiwi and Peaches to lower their chirps to pleased tweets in greeting. "I don't blame them for being hungry since I'm getting kind of hungry too." Despite the water, there was no reprieve from his monstrous headache. "What about you? Are you staying here for dinner or…?"

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I actually started making— fuck. Hold on.” It suddenly clicked what the food scent had been when he’d first woke, and now was more like charcoal than anything edible. By the time he looked to Bill, he'd vanished, and Dipper snagged a glimpse of him making a beeline into the kitchen.

Trekking after, Dipper flinched at the jostle in his head and legs but wasn't deterred as the burnt smell intensified, eliciting a cough. "What is—" he cut off, then corrected more appropriately, "was it?"

“It was supposed to be a vegetarian stir fry,” Bill said as he removed the smoking, charred remnants from the stovetop. Over his shoulder, Dipper could hardly identify the ingredients but not because they were fried. It was like Bill had put whatever was on the counter into the dish. “I tried to make it vegan or whatever for you and Shooting Star, but.. you know, that’s complicated.”

The kindhearted gesture of cooking while he snoozed so he would have dinner to wake up to after a taxing day warmed him. Expression softening, it was only when Bill was looking at him weirdly that he realized he hadn't elaborated. "It's nice," he said, almost shyly, "like… that you tried to do that. I know it didn't, uh, quite work out, but I don't think anyone has really made food for me before.” Minus family, that didn't count.

“Sorry, Pine Tree.” Bill glared daggers at the ruined meal, as if it'd been the food's fault. “I’ll need to try round two, huh? I don’t even know if I have the stuff for this.”

"No, it's fine, dude. You don't have to worry about it. Like I said, it's sweet that you tried. So, you want stir fry?" A cursory glance through the refrigerator vegetables suggested Bill hadn't used many at all, leaving the question of what he did use a mystery, but plenty of ingredients remained to be assembled into a delectable dish.
“Well, I thought you’d like stir fry. I’m fine with anything.” Behind him, he could hear Bill scraping the burnt residue of what was formerly food into the trash.

"Stir fry would be tasty," he agreed, spreading the vegetables atop the counter and beginning to prepare them, slicing with practiced elegance. "Mabel and I picked up a bunch of stuff, so we should have everything we need. I'll have this done in, I don't know, twenty minutes?" Cooking was thousands of times more appealing than attending to the unfinished physics assignments due shortly, but that'd always been true.

Noticing Bill was missing from his peripheral vision, he swiveled to see where he'd gone and located Bill admiring him from underneath the doorway. “You’re amazing at cooking, sugar. You make a great housewife.”

Conservation of his minimal vigor for finals week persuaded him to let that be. Returning to chopping, he commented, "Sounds more fun than being a physicist, but I'm not going to be raising human children— oh hey, why don't you go feed Kiwi and Peaches? Their food's already mixed, just put it in the dish."

“Who is.. Kiwi and Peaches?” Bill questioned. “What, did we get ferrets too?”

"Ferrets?" Dipper questioned, then shook his head. "No, they're the birds. Kiwi and Peaches, like… fruit. Fruit cockatiels. I'm pretty sure I've told you that before."

Bill’s mood took a dive, a change announced by sulking and slumped posture. “Oh, those. Didn’t they already eat?"

"No, they need their food," he said, "and we've been giving them a chunk of honey treats too, getting them acclimated. They're friendly so I doubt they'll care if you feed them."

“I tried to make dinner, why do I have to feed the birds? I didn’t want them to begin with.”

Bill's pout caused him to grin, and Dipper said, "Because you burned dinner and now I'm making it. Also, that's no way to talk about our children, so get to it, bird daddy."

“I’m not feeding them,” Bill insisted. “I’m no one’s daddy, but definitely not theirs. I don't have a beak, or feathers, I don't chirp all day…” Although he went on, Dipper couldn't make out what was said over the noise of food preparation because Bill had exited the kitchen, the distance muffling.

The sheer magnitude of grumpiness in Bill's voice cracked Dipper into a chuckle and a quiet 'Jesus Christ' as he rolled his eyes at the opposition to giving the birds their dinner. He could still hear them chirping, suggesting they hadn't forgotten about pellet-time and wouldn't be permitting anyone else to forget either.

Taking a small break to lean over and peek through the doorway, Bill stood by the cockatiels, grumbling. Dipper could decipher snippets.

"Stupid birds. … Why do birds even need food? … I'm not feeding you."

Real effective. Especially when his arm was halfway in the cage as he literally put food into their bowl.

Dinner for both them and the birds came and went.

Winding down to the rhythmic splish of water running and idle task of dish-washing were elements
of his appreciation for cooking. The cooking part was a science and required high concentration, this was a window to reflect and let his mind wander freely like it tended to do at less convenient times.

“Oh, Pine Tree.” Bill’s voice was growing closer, his footsteps thumping on the floor. Hands submerged in the soapy water up to his elbows, Dipper twisted to see him leaned against the wall, smugness rivaling the Cheshire Cat’s. “Would you afford me your company as we get comfy on the sofa?”

"Kind of busy working on this," he said, tilting his head to the array of dishes, vegetable bits dotting countertops, and leftovers waiting to be stored. "Stan and Ford would be annoyed coming home to a mess, which should be soon."

Bill sauntered over, snaking his arms around his waist and Dipper felt the radiating heat of his body on his back, electricity lighting up his every nerve-ending at their proximity. Bill was flush against him. “You look good when you clean. Hot.”

It was a couple seconds before he could rediscover his voice and remember that he was actually supposed to be washing the dishes, not resting his hands in the water while he was too preoccupied by Bill being right there. "Yeah?" he murmured, breath hitching. "Uh.. thanks." Honestly, he'd already spaced on what was said to him because he couldn't think past the grasp on his hips or how he was trapped between the counter and Bill.

“Pine Tree,” he said, low and sultry. “Why don’t you take a break and join me on the couch?”

Blush spreading across his face, Dipper said dazedly, "Because… I think I kind of like how things are going here?" The translation from thoughts to words was jumbled, his attempt at telling Bill that he had dishes to wash and a kitchen to clean morphed into a confession of how this was flustering him beyond compare.

Bill chuckled, placing a kiss against his neck that had his jaw tilted upward in a silent plea for another. "We could continue in the other room. On the couch."

"Bill," he whined, but his resolve to stay was slipping. The wind stolen from him, Dipper's guffaw and the following joke were breathless, "I guess if things get messy, they might not even notice since there are tons of random stains everywhere."

“I thought you wanted to take this slow.”

"I thought you wanted to take this slow," he parroted the accusation, teasing. "I— I'm not sure this is slow." Lingering behind him in this intimate position with his hands on his waist, their bodies aligned, his chest covering his back as he kept him pinned. Dipper shivered despite the hot water enveloping his forearms.

“Oh, please. This is as chaste as the religious student group of West Coast Tech.”

Snorting, he shouldered away to roll down his sleeves and snatch a towel, playfully swatting it at Bill. "Oh my god. Dude, you are the worst." Devilishly charming too, but Dipper dismissed that in the spirit of willful omission.

Bill chuckled as he backed off, dodging. “I am the best, how dare you say otherwise, sugar!” He blew a kiss at him, and Dipper paused, taking in the sight of Bill's casually confident stance and dazzling smile. It was different than what he flashed at customers or his students or when he was in trouble, this was genuine and had his heart alight with an affectionate flame.
He'd thought the giddiness would've worn off, but alas, he was grinning like an absolute dope who couldn't manage his massive crush.

Somewhat regrettably, he had to end his admiration of Bill early to suggest, "Come on, let's cuddle so you can get this out of your system, and you can help me clean when we're done." It was a smooth deflection, clearly Bill was the problem here and Dipper was graciously extending himself to pacify him, even if his dash to the living room implied otherwise.

Before joining him, Bill halted in front of the sofa, arms crossed. "What if we cuddled and had some cheek kisses?" The smirk on his face didn't allow for good faith negotiations, it was a telltale sign that Bill intended on taking whatever he wanted because he knew he'd get away with it.

Dipper pulled him down by the belt loops of his slacks, a sly motion that induced a rare gasp from Bill and erased the smirk as he flailed for a brief moment prior to regaining his composure. As Bill settled in, Dipper chided, "You're getting greedy, man. Better be careful or we might fall into the temptations of real kisses."

"What?" Bill chuckled, a rumble in his throat as he nuzzled him. "No, only sinners do that."

Personally, he wouldn't mind sinning here and there but kept the fleeting request to himself out of respect for their agreement to continue taking things slow, reassured by knowing there was no rush if Bill was correct in his estimations about their relationship being long-term. They had the whole future before them, and for once, the thought of that didn't reduce him to mental lists and endless fretting.
"Done?" Dipper asked, holding out until Pacifica's accomplished nod to take the review from her and compare it to his.

Slumping forward, he rested an elbow on the table of the coffee shop located below the physics department, a grand total of four coffee containers among the assortment of worksheets and textbooks. "Yeah, these are looking good." He scanned the sheet and flipped it, then made a minor correction. When Pacifica leaned to inspect what he'd done, he explained, "You'll want to check your work for that one. It's kind of difficult."

"What?" Pacifica clicked her polished nails on the table. "That’s impossible. I checked over that."

"The right equation would help," he said, smiling wryly. "The word problems are tricky, but I know Bill's going to write the equations on the board, so just memorize the usage."

"Wait– Bill?" Dipper stiffened. "Do you mean Mr. Cipher? How do you know what he's going to do?"

"Yeah, uh," he corrected, coughing. "Mr. Cipher. Sorry, I… our classmates sometimes call him 'Bill' and…" The trajectory of the excuse was woeful, but he hoped it'd be believable and less inappropriate than oh, he's Bill to me because he's my boyfriend. Eager to move on, he inquired, "How are you feeling about the final?"

"When did you hear that? You're never in class." Dipper felt his body warm under the scrutiny, but he could breathe again when she didn't push it. "The final makes me nervous, but at least you can't skip this session."

On the contrary, Dipper hadn't planned on attending because it would be a two hour period, twice a normal class session, devoted to an exam that he didn't have to take. Before he could reply, she prompted him critically, "You are coming, right?"

Dipper scratched his neck. "Maybe, I…"

"Having you around is.. oddly comforting. It’s nice." The candid confession from Pacifica was unexpected but drew a softer expression to his face, genuinely surprised by the sentiment and flattered all the same. "Don't let that go to your head."

Swallowing the sigh, he guessed he could warn Bill that he'd be present, unusual but likely not an issue. "I'll be there," he assured and handed back her review sheet only to notice Pacifica appeared significantly more relaxed.

"Good. I can’t wait to actually see you there for once."
"Hey, I go to class," he protested, recounting the times and coming up with approximately one third of the sessions. So… imperfect, but there was effort. "...Occasionally. Look, I'll be there. As much as I've enjoyed these study sessions with you though, I hope you won't be in my future physics classes—I know this isn't your subject."

Pacifica pursed her lips. "No, it’s not. I'm looking forward to being finished for good, but physics classes? Aren't you going to be a plant artist?"

At first, he was puzzled but recalled Pacifica's estimations that his ideal field of study would be in the fine arts or in...plants, as she'd gracefully called it. "I'm going to be a physicist...?" Dipper reminded, trying to chuckle but failing when it merely sounded sad, defeated. Tired. "That's why I'm studying physics, and not drawing plants in my spare time."

"No," she told him in return, firm. Her fingers had drifted to the coffee cup, nails tapping the plastic in a motion that was more intimidating than it should've been, since she was smaller than him. "Did you completely miss my point last time? We weren’t going to do what our parents were forcing us into."

"I remember," he said, slouching as if he'd become a puddle of his former self, "but then I also remembered I have to make money, and... y'know, that conflicts with the 'doing what I want' part. Writing mystery novels doesn't guarantee big paychecks, or any pay at all." The utterance escaped before he processed it, a stark realization that he wanted to do that crashing upon him. It wasn't feasible or remotely practical, but it'd been his go-to leisure activity for months. The folder filled with short stories testified to that, yet doing it professionally was nowhere near obtainable, not even thinkable.

She perked with interest, drawing closer. "Oh, you write mystery novels? You could totally be a mysteryist."

Burying his face in his hand, he mumbled, "Sort of, I guess. As a— I don't know, super casual thing. It'd be nice to do for money, but that isn't really... realistic? I have no idea how to write a book." He could barely write equations.

Pacifica shook her head. "Nonsense. Don't you write all the time? Seems like it'd be a hobby of yours."

"It's... not that easy," he replied and sat up, thumbing the tip of his pen a few times before chewing it apprehensively. "Turning it into a career would take years, and I have to support us financially once I'm done, and..." Lost in thought, Dipper stopped rambling to shake his head, then sighed. "Sorry, it's not— this has nothing to do with reviewing for the physics final. Uh, did you decide what you were going to do instead of mathematics?"

She leaned back in her seat with her coffee cup in hand, looking thoughtful. "I might switch to becoming a nurse. Something useful. I thought that'd disenchant my parents sufficiently, the knowledge I'd like to help people rather than elicit their money."

Impressed by her ambition, Dipper said, "Wow, awesome. That's funny, not... the nurse thing, but my parents are hoping my sister becomes a nurse. She wants to do theater, be an actress."

"Oh? How... unique. I didn't know you had a sister."

"My twin sister. If you ever go to the diner nearby, you've met her. She's a waitress."

"Sleazy and cheap isn't my style."
"Oh. Right." Probably should've seen that coming. "I don't think she's going to get a job at a five-star restaurant or be in the market as a private chef anytime soon." Various instances of Mabel's details of her future fame and fortune came to mind, and he said, "Maybe when she becomes a famous actress."

Pacifica raised a precisely-plucked eyebrow. "She might want to get tips from Mr. Cipher. He’s quite the dramatic in class."

Dipper laughed at the timing. "Pretty sure they're in Drama Club right now. That's why I thought this would be a nice opportunity for our last review session. Afterward, Mabel and I are..." Well, they were going to try to convince Bill to give shelter to both him and the cockatiels for the winter break, but that was slightly more personal than what he should be sharing about his relationship to Bill. "Are going to, uh, chill."

"Mabel, hm? That’s a pleasant name." Pacifica took a sip of her coffee. "Well, have fun with that. I got a job so I can be one with the plebeians over break."

Dipper brightened at the news and banished the surge of envy down in a forceful wave, unwilling to allow his inability to work interfere with being happy for Pacifica's newfound independence. "Oh, that's super cool. Where's it at?"

"It’s at Box World. I thought it was lowly enough for me to understand how the poor feel, and so far, I'm not liking being a part of the proletariat."

His expression flattened. "That's why you're doing this?"

"What? It’s also to be less financially dependent on my parents."

Okay, that was fair, and he hesitantly grinned. "I'm glad you're getting yourself out of their control. One step closer to being a nurse."

"Maybe," Pacifica mused. "If this retail thing works for me, I should take over the chain. I'll become the Box World Super Diamond Elite Boss. The world needs more women in charge."

"That's a mouthful," commented Dipper. "CEO might be more concise." Unlike his mystery novelist aspirations, her dream was attainable; the Northwests and Ciphers were favored by capitalism, any money-making endeavor certain to yield results especially by means of shady business ethics. "You'll have plenty of time to figure it out, and hey, you don't have to worry about physics after this week." Freedom from physics sounded incredible, and he wished he had the same prospects, or even the ability to branch beyond this without risking his future.

Checking the clock, he blinked when thirty extra minutes had passed in a flash of a second. "Wow, I... didn't know it got so late," he said, rubbing his arm, "but I should probably get over to the student union. Mabel will be waiting for me after the Drama Club meeting is over."

"I'm off to get ready for work. Wish me luck in infiltrating the working class."

Dipper waited until they'd piled into Bill's golden vehicle to brush their hands together, clasping them atop the console. Thoughts of the soulmarks underneath layers of clothing were absent from his mind, more pressing matters to attend to. "Bill," he started, "how about... going to your apartment today? I talked with Mabel earlier, she wouldn't mind hanging with us a while before she has to go to work."

Bill nodded. "She can enjoy watching us get cozy on my couch."
“As long as it's being cozy. I'll leave if it goes further.”

Debating for a couple seconds, he bit the bullet to pitch, "I don't think it'll go further, but— okay, so getting cozy on the sofa would be nice, but what if, uh, I lived with you? Crazy thought, right?" An anxious laugh rolled from him as he awaited Bill's reaction, unable to gauge his expression.

“What?” Bill paused. “Where did that come from?”

In the rearview mirror, Dipper saw Mabel's nod to go on, an encouragement even though he knew this was an unsteady argument. "Like… we're getting cozy on the couch, y'know? But instead of me leaving afterward, I… live with you."

“I thought you lived with Mabel, and that you two were staying with ol’ Fordsy and Stan over break.”

"Uh, kind of," he said, his free hand fiddling with a button on his shirt, "but there is a little hangup with that, so the cockatiels and I need a place to stay. A place that isn't within hearing distance of the complex manager."

When Bill's expression dropped, Dipper grimaced. “Oh. This is about those.”

"It's not just about our cockatiels. I think it'd be fun, you and I under a single roof, and the birds aren't that noisy or messy. Stan's disappointed that they're being evicted." Quietly, that was. Stan wasn't the type to go around voicing his affection for the 'mini dinosaurs', but he had his own offhand, Stan-speak way of admitting that he'd miss watching his soap operas with them.

The response was even less enthusiastic than he'd thought it'd be: “Just. fucking tell me when you're bringing those dumb things so I have a heads up.”

“We should get your stuff and help you move in,” Mabel suggested. “It'd save everyone time because we're all free right now.” Hiking up her sleeve, she flexed. "These arms of steel are ready for some major lifting.”

Brief consideration was concluded by Dipper's nod, and he peered to Bill for confirmation. “Fine.” Bill sighed, spinning the steering wheel too hard as he took a sudden left that jostled Dipper into the car door.

Hauling the last box in, it'd only taken three separate trips with one exclusively for the cockatiels that were curious of their environment, changed for the second time this week. Dipper would get them acclimated but for now was plopping onto Bill's sofa. It was a much-deserved rest after transporting his belongings to Bill's apartment.

"Is that everything?" Mabel asked, then gave him two thumbs up when she seemingly mentally measured that it was. "I hope you have a good stay at Hotel Bill, but I gotta get going soon."

"Oh— wait, one more thing. It'll be quick," he assured at Mabel's skepticism. However, a peek at Bill rattled his confidence, noting that he was sulking, slouched with frustrations written across his face and frequently would glower at the birds. It wasn't a good idea to divulge the possibility of urban exploration, aware it wouldn't go over well (or at all, honestly) when Bill was in a sour mood. "Yeah, never mind," he finished, a twitch of his eyes toward Bill and a subtle shake of his head the indicators of what he'd had in mind, then aborted due to circumstances. "I hope you have a good shift at work."

Mabel was at the door, halfway through. “I will. Text me if you need anything, okay?”
"Okay."

And then, it was him and Bill. What would otherwise be silence was replaced by the welcome twittering and whistling of his birds, but Dipper couldn't satisfy their itch to explore their new surroundings. Not yet.

Hands clasping behind his back, Dipper rotated on his heels to face Bill and observe his fit in its full glory, the displeasure evident. He sheepishly twisted his foot into the carpet. The heavy weight of guilt welled within, leaving him to wonder if it would've been easier to avoid this by taking the inconvenient route. "Are you going to be cranky the entire night or can I cheer you up?"

“How could you cheer me up?” Bill questioned. “My home is being invaded by… birds, of all things. Birds. Haven't you ever seen that Hitchcock film? They killed people, Pine Tree. It was a slaughter!”

"Are you going to be okay? Seriously. If not, tell me because my stuff isn't unpacked yet, and we can call Stan and Ford to help move it to my parents' place.” Even the cockatiels hushed, as if waiting with bated breath to learn of their fate.


"Funny." He straightened, rising to his feet and ignoring the discomfort. A smile spread across his lips, and he drew Bill into a hug to thank him, dropping his voice to teasingly say, "I don't remember the Ciphers having any problems with illegal activities."

“I’ll sue you,” Bill told him before he reciprocated the hug. Dipper relaxed, resting his weight against him to coax the pain to fade from his lower half. “You'll regret your illegal shenanigans when you have to pay your debt by grading another semester.”

Warmly, he murmured, "I don't think I'd regret that. Turns out I'm pretty good at being the teacher's pet."

Bill nuzzled the top of his head. “You are. I don't want to let you go. You're too good.” Although he gave an appreciative 'thanks', he wasn't sure how he could be bad at grading unless he simply didn't do it, momentarily blind to his physics knowledge and the advantage it offered.

"Honestly, I already thought I'd be grading for you next semester." Much like the repetitive motions of cleaning, it'd been adopted as a hobby that encouraged his mind to wander, a set aside time to reflect.

Bill sighed, chin resting on Dipper's head securely, and Dipper hoped he'd speak since he reveled in the vibrations. Shortly, it was granted. “You should. I've enjoyed it, and you've been a miracle for Mini Northwest.” Dipper's fingers slid over the smooth undershirt, pinching clumps of material only to release them as he hummed in contemplation.

Finally, he opted to playfully snap one of the suspenders and tilt his head upward in stealing a kiss on Bill's jaw.

“Wha–?” Bill's head jerked, looking down at him, stunned, and Dipper met it with wide-eyed consideration.

"Did I hurt you?” he asked, assuming Bill was caught off guard by the suspender-snap assault. "I didn't think I did it that hard."

“No, you just.. the jaw? That's new, honey.”
At the explanation, Dipper fell into a relieved laugh, glad he hadn't inflicted pain on Bill but seemingly had done the opposite. "Don't you like it?" he inquired once he'd calmed, though a beam lingered. "It's hard to resist, y'know? Your jaw is so strong, and defined…" It was coy, an appeal to Bill's fondness for flattery.

"Of course I liked it!" Bill puffed his chest, and Dipper intentionally admired the display for a second or two more than what was necessary. "It's moving fast, cutie, but I want more."

"Yeah? How much more? A blowjob?"

Bill leaned down, planting kisses to his jawline and neck, rendering him breathless as Dipper's hands sought purchase in the fabric of Bill's undershirt. Gripping tightly, that was his sole stability as a full-body quiver swept through at the burst of sensations and instant heat climbing to his face. It was such a small ministration of affection but had a drastic effect on him when it was unexpected, a leap from what they'd done previously.

"Don't you like it?" Bill teased. If Dipper's knees didn't feel so weak, threatening to transform into jelly and collapse if he released his grip, he would've swatted him upside the head for that. "I couldn't resist your soft jaw and cute face."

"It was nice," he admitted but sounded dazed, wrestling to order his thoughts after that had scrambled them into mush. "And about what you said earlier, I… I don't think it's too fast, but we can go slower if you want to. I don't want to, uh, pressure you or anything, especially since I basically live here. But that doesn't mean we have to…"

Bill's hand gently brushed his hair, ushering the stray stands into place. "Relax, sugar. It's not too fast. You're not pressuring me."

Clearing his throat, Dipper nodded. "Good, uh.. I'm glad. That things aren't moving too fast."

Living together and the topic of pacing their physical affection introduced a problem that'd been in the crevices, never needing to be addressed until it was upon them. "So, I have to move in," he indicated the stack of boxes, "do… is it— should I put my stuff in your room, or…?"

"Put it in the guest room. That'll be your room."

"The guest room?"

"Why is this a surprise to you?" Bill asked, footsteps resounding behind him as Dipper scooped up a couple boxes and began unpacking since the destination had been established. "We're taking things slow, and I want to ensure that if we do anything.. it's because you’ve gone to me, and you want it."

Propping open the door, Dipper peered inside and evaluated. It was very similar to Bill's room minus the astronomy-related posters and starry bedspread. The space was neat, presumably unused given the clinical cleanliness and lack of personal items. In fact, the only notable item that was an electronic keyboard.

Bill followed him to the door, dawdling in the entryway while Dipper took a couple tentative steps inside and lowered the boxes. "What, is it not to your liking?"

The room was fine, so Dipper shrugged and said, "I didn't know you played piano too."

"That’s an electronic keyboard, it’s not a piano."

"Yeah, okay," he conceded, rolling his eyes. "I didn't know you played the keyboard. Happy,
Beethoven?” The sarcasm was delivered as Dipper skirted past Bill to grab another bunch of boxes.

“I don’t think you know anything about keyboards or pianos.” Bill let out an annoyed huff, arms folding. “Don’t move my keyboard.” The thought of redecoration was absurd because the keyboard was the only furniture item that he could move: the bed, dresser, and nightstand were too heavy.

As he retrieved more boxes to relocate, Dipper pondered aloud, “Why would I even do that? I don’t want to mess with your keyboard, man. I don’t play piano anymore.”

“Does that look like an acoustic instrument? No? Then it’s not a piano, it’s an electronic keyboard, Pine Tree, and don't move it.”

Bill’s distress over his wording was sigh-worthy as he lugged the last of his items into his new room, then sat on the edge of the bed. "Jesus Christ, I won't move it, okay?" All he wanted to do was live here during break, not rile Bill by rearranging his things. Flopping onto the sheets, he exasperatedly covered his face with his hands before combing them through his hair as Bill delved into a new complaint:

“I wish I had my piano. I dropped a fortune on that damn thing and I hardly get to play it.”

Although he kept his eyes on the ceiling, he asked, "Why can't you play it?” If experience was a blueprint, perhaps Bill had suffered a life-altering accident that left him unable to painlessly play for the duration of a session with the piano, a change that diminished the enjoyment. From there, a domino effect of frustration, resentment, rusty practices, and eventually quitting.

“It's too big to get through this dumb door.”

"You live fifteen minutes away."

“My life is so hard, sugar. I can't be inconvenienced like that.” Even when they'd first met and Bill was a totally entitled jackass beyond believability, Dipper didn't think he'd ever been so compelled to give him the middle finger.

Maybe he would move the keyboard later if he still felt particularly spiteful.

"Well, if we're visiting my parents, there's a baby grand in the living room. I'm sure they'd be delighted to hear you play it," he said, trying to distance himself from traces of bitterness. It'd come as a disappointment to them when Dipper's interest waned. They'd accepted it but were sorrowed; he personally believed it wasn't the loss of a hobby, but their realization that it was the beginning of lifestyle tweaks due to discomfort beyond his control.

Ditching the thought and the guest room, Dipper breezed into the living space to relish in the conversational chirping of the birds that unconsciously brought him delight. Clutching his arm, Dipper's contentedness bled into an earnest confession, "Hey, it's… uh, it might be kind of nice, living with you."

“You've stayed with me before.” Bill shadowed him into the living room, scooting by to spread out onto the sofa.

" Haven't lived with you," Dipper said and maneuvered beside him, shifting forward to grab his laptop from the coffee table. "Just stayed over a few times.” A headache was brewing as he opened the laptop and was greeted by sheets of scanned physics reviews in preparation for his finals. A long week loomed.
Bill inched over, arm weaving around his back. He slanted into the contact on autopilot. Although minor, that hopefully would render physics less of an infuriating, exhausting endeavor. “It's like the same thing, except longer. An extended visit that doesn't end.”

Amused, he reminded, "It does end. After break, I'll be moving to my dorm for the spring semester because I didn't think you'd want to deal with me or my cockatiels for more than three weeks."

“You’re fine,” Bill said as he nuzzled, then squeezed him tenderly which urged Dipper to voice his approval, heart ablaze with affection. “I could definitely live without those birds.”

Dipper swatted him away for that, though it was playful. "We're a package deal."

“Well, fuck. Am I at least saving big?”

Physics reviews forgotten, the question snagged a chortle from him, and he said, "Not anymore since you're refusing to cash in on that blowjob."

Bill squirmed, rumbling a ragged noise as his gaze dragged over Dipper, pupils dilated. A sign that Dipper didn't interpret as discomfort but... want, and he'd be lying if he said that didn't send a fiery rush through him. Then, Bill's line of sight darted abruptly, and he cleared his throat. “This isn’t a brothel, cutie. We're taking things slow.”

"The whole brothel theory crumbles pretty fast, because I don't think you were going to pay me,“ he pointed out, but it was mild. "We can go as slow as you want, I was kidding." Shrugging, he pulled his laptop closer after an internal reminder that he should be studying despite his mind being miles from equations and theories.

“Were you?” Bill almost appeared disappointed. “Damn, it's possible I would have given into our desires if you weren’t.”

Quietly snorting, he echoed an entertained "taking things slow" under his breath. For how they talked about sexual situations and had flirted obscenely during the leadup to their romantic relationship, it was astonishing they hadn't explored far in the realm of physical affection, and he wasn't sure what to attribute that to beyond growing accustomed to one another before going there.

Bill’s attention had abandoned him, trained to the laptop. “Why do you have a flash drive? No one uses those anymore.”

"Hm? Oh," he blinked, "I must've forgotten to remove that. I used a different one to back up my screenplay, and this one… yeah, I forgot to take it out." Dipper's fingertips grazed the smooth surface of the drive as a solemn mood drenched him at the touch of the casing, chewing his lip. It really should be thrown away.

“What’s on it?” Bill teasingly began, breaking Dipper from his thoughts. “Porn? You naughty Pine Tree. Download it to the cloud like a normal person.”

"You and Mabel and the whole cloud thing. God. Just let me have my old technology, okay?" Dipper pinched the drive, but he couldn't bring himself to remove it, instead joking, "Also, I don't watch porn."

Bill snickered, stroking Dipper’s arm. “I don’t watch porn either.” Yeah, he didn't believe that for a second.

"Good Christian boys," he said definitively, nudging Bill's hand off as if to accentuate that. "Anyway, it's… uh, not porn. See, my parents insist on filming special occasions— well, they used
to do it, and the video of the last winter holiday we all spent as a family is on there. So it was like,” he gulped, scraping up enough courage, "a few years ago, and I'm guessing… it's probably a video of us unwrapping the gifts." It was as much as he could get out, pained and forced, stilted like it wasn't words but syllables strung into a phrase.

“Cute. Any reason why you have it? Sounds like something your parents would want to save.”

Dipper swallowed. "Yeah, they saved the other years' videos but not this one. Because," he paused, an interior tremble brutally forcing its way outward, "it's from the night..." A beat to sustain his composure, fighting to withstand the emotional turmoil, but he finally finished in a heartbroken mumble, "From the night that we got into an accident."

Bill froze as he stared at the flash drive. “So this– why did you keep it? You said it’s a video of you unwrapping gifts, you haven’t watched it.”

"No," he admitted, eyes on the keyboard since it was impossible to face Bill, "I thought I would, but... I haven't, so I figured I should get rid of it."

“Yeah, you should.” Bill dodged his gaze, rubbing his hands together. "I can't imagine why you’d want to watch it."

"Because it's a nice memory," he said, "and it's the night my life split into 'before' and 'after', basically. I kind of like to hold onto 'before', when I had bigger ambitions to pursue that weren't constrained by—" another pause, a frustrated exhale expelling from him as he tipped his head backward. "It's just better, okay? And my grandparents were alive."

“There are other videos, sugar. This one.. seems like a bad idea.”

Dipper frowned, but he could understand. That's what his mother had thought, the reason it'd been close to being destroyed. "Maybe you're right."

There was silence, then Bill nuzzled him. “It’s up to you in the end, sweetheart.”

Dipper weighed his options. "Seems weird to have kept it this long to throw it out. Look, you don't have to see it or anything. Mabel didn't want to either. Dipper’s curiosity was natural, stoked by the intention of trashing the drive once he'd viewed its contents and deemed it unworthy of storage.

“What, are you actually going to watch it?”

"Hey, I'm a big boy. I can handle it." He cracked a lopsided grin. "It's us opening gifts, man."

Bill bit his lip, peering away from Dipper with a thoughtful expression before turning to him again. “I’ll stay with you,” he said. “But if you need to stop it, don’t hesitate to, okay? Or I will.”

Tearing a shuddering inhale through his lungs, he paused, eyes flicking to the screen and he asked, "Are you sure?" It was difficult to discern who exactly that question was meant for. Watching it tonight hadn't been his plan, but...

Bill's presence was a comforting one, the hand circling his waist doing wonders, and it reassured that he could do this. "Can you, uh—?" Dipper motioned to the sofa with his hand, grateful when Bill got the hint and stretched to lie down, a position that permitted him to curl in as the little spoon haphazardly half on top of Bill. Safe and secure. "Ready?"

Bill’s arm draped across his middle, ushering him close. “Whenever you are.”
"Okay." Dipper willed his shoulders downward, ensured his exterior was unfluctuating, and tapped on the video icon. It took longer than he expected to load, a bigger file than what his machine usually processed, but it was on the screen within a minute and autoplayed.

It started where he thought it would: he and Mabel distributing presents to their parents, grandparents, then collecting their own gifts.

Although his pulse was racing, it... wasn't as heart-wrenching as he'd prepared for. It was actually peaceful, maybe joyous, seeing them all together on the holiday to share laughs and smiles. The twinge of grief was there to quiver his own smile faintly, but negative feelings were drowned out by fondness for his family and these memories, what they had before it was splintered in a single night.

"That's my grandfather," Dipper explained as the camera panned to him opening a gift, a jacket that was jokingly held in front of him by his wife, "and my grandmother." They were as warm as Dipper remembered, jolly attitudes with a carefree take on life that came with age. "On my mom's side, I mean. They spent most holidays with us."

Bill's fingers traced his sides. "They look nicer than my grandparents were."

"They are— were, I guess, really nice people. They dedicated their lives to charity campaigns and funding education," he said but his focus was on the video, watching the footage as it zoomed to the group. Someone must have said something funny, because everyone was chuckling and in good spirits. "What were your grandparents like?"

"Racist jerks." Dipper wasn't sure the former could be without the latter. "They liked me, though I don't look as white as they did."

"Huh," he deliberated on that, realizing he hadn't acknowledged Bill's skin tone before this. "I just thought you were tan from the sun."

Bill laughed, loud and musical. "That’s what they’d claim, but no. It’s my skin color." He pressed a kiss to his head before he continued. "I have a diverse ancestry. Egypt, Brazil, Spain, Peru, England, Italy, Germany, Ireland... I’m also one percent Welsh. Our flag is badass."

"That… is oddly specific," he said, "and I didn't know you were so, uh, worldly? I have no idea what my ancestry is." Nor did he care to discuss that while he was watching his last memories of his grandparents, the gifts opened alongside piles of wrapping paper while they transitioned into idle chat. Although the exchange itself wasn't important, hearing their voices after going years without was a strange, surreal experience.

As his grandmother proposed a late night run for celebratory cake, Dipper stiffened, the haunting familiarity rushing dread into the core of his being. "The video might end soon," he warned, but it seemed detached as he was glued to the screen, watching the cheerful agreement from Mabel and the collective coaxing for his accompaniment.

Briefly, everyone departed from the shot, his parents reentering several minutes after the front door had slammed shut with quick goodbyes traded. They were restoring cleanliness to the sitting room, clearing the excessive wrapping paper, bows, and bags to reveal the carpet, a process followed by what he assumed was tidying the kitchen from the clanking of dishes.

Puzzled, Dipper said, "Uh, I thought it would've ended...? I guess they kept the camera on. Probably didn't bother stopping it?" Though he wasn't sure, as neither mentioned the camera. "Because we were supposed to be back soon. The store isn't that far, a couple miles from the
Bill let out a ‘hmm.’ “Weird to film when you aren’t all together.”

"I guess so. I don't think it would've mattered since they'd preview the video and cut it down, but they chose to get rid of this one.” The editing process had never happened, hence the prolonged absence of anything occurring on the tape except for inaudible pieces of conversation.

“I see.”

"Here, I'll find out if anything else happens.” Dipper hypothesized that it wouldn't be long until someone noticed the camera still rolling and cut the tape, but in the meantime there'd be nothing worth watching. Using the cursor, he highlighted the equalizer to sift for activity through the rest of recording and found very little until the end of the footage. As he jumped to that part of the video, he speculated aloud, "I'm guessing this is where they realized the camera was on."

Sure enough, his parents were both in the shot and sitting in the living room, tucked against one another on the sofa. 'Should be back soon,' his father said with a genial tone and a peek at his wristwatch. 'Are you going to have dessert too? A bit won't change your stunning figure, I promise.'

'I've had enough for tonight,' his mother responded warmly. 'Besides, you know I’ve never been a fan of sweets.'

Bill cocked his head to a side. “I don’t think they’ve noticed.” While Dipper agreed, he almost didn't hear him since he was absorbed in the video, semi-perplexed and entranced by what was unfolding.

Despite her rejection, the atmosphere remained upbeat. 'Understandable, you're already the sweetest,' he said, drawing her closer. Before she could respond, an almost-inaudible siren seemed to be passing by, getting louder, louder, and louder, then quieting. His father’s humor was good-natured, 'Always knew they'd come for Mabel one of these days."

Inquisitive, his mother broke into a rare but small smile. ‘She never was the safest,’ she agreed. ‘But she has Dipper with her, at least.’

Clicking forward on the video, the random spikes of sound on the equalizer inflicted a new trepidation into the pit of his stomach as he recognized them as sirens, and his parents' fast-motion confusion made it so much harder to continue, but he couldn't quit. Despair clenched him, knowing the ending but having to see it unfold anyway.

Dipper played the clip as an irregular audio peak cropped up, soon discovered to be a telephone call to their landline. 'I bet that's Shermie,' his father said, a glint of joy in his announcement as he stood to retrieve the phone. From off-screen, he called, T'll be right back!’ It was muffled, but the visuals were disturbing enough to account for the lack of audio as his father returned, ashen. Distraught. It was in an unusually grave voice that he said they had to go. Now.

Bill had gone rigid as a statue beneath Dipper, appearing uncomfortable. “Can we stop watching?” he asked. “I don’t need to see more.”

"Yeah, just.. hang on a minute. I didn't even know this was here.” And according to the clip length, there was much more to go, not that he was certain he could make it through the whole thing if it was as heart-wrenching as hearing his parents speak in panicked tones, strain edging their voices. Witnessing the unraveling of distress and petrified expressions was equally terrible. "Do you think — maybe… that was the call?"
"I don't know what else it'd be. Can we– stop this? We don't need to watch more. I don't want to watch more."

The door slammed in the tape, then silence. Dipper increased the speed and saw the haunting scene of the living room become gradually darker in the setting sun, the house silent in the absence of his family.

"I think this is it?" he said, the hour marks ticking by at the speed of seconds, though he knew it couldn't have felt like that at the time. "Seems like it ran out of battery." When the tape finally stopped, the house was under a blanket of pitch darkness, timestamps well into the night.

Bill puffed a relieved gasp, uneasily squirming. "Thank the Stars."

Still dazed, Dipper closed the lid of his laptop and peeled himself from Bill, blinking gazing at him with glassy eyes. "I didn't…" he trailed off, looking downward at the carpet. He had no idea what to say after voyeuristically infringing upon that private moment of horror, and he coughed to level the tension in the air. "Never, uh, knew about that last part."

Bill’s fingers tapped the cushion, not impatient but.. disturbed, understandably. "Yeah, well.. I can’t imagine them being eager to talk about that, Pine Tree."

Dipper felt worlds apart. "Yeah, that's… not really what I meant." He wasn't convinced they even recognized the camera had been on for the duration of the evening, but disregarded the video because it reminded them of painful memories. Brushing a hand through his hair, he collapsed onto the sofa and hid his face, a muttered 'holy shit' through his hands. "Sorry."

“About what?” Bill slowly began to pull out from under him. “Are you getting rid of that thing?”

As awful as it was, Dipper reluctantly shook his head and said, "No… I don't know. Someday, but…” Even if he never watched the ending again, unwrapping the gifts with his grandparents was a fond memory that he intended to keep alive, and it allowed him to vicariously relive the times before everything was taken from him. The healthiness of the coping mechanism aside, he craved the escape.

Bill sank into the couch cushion. “Well, if you watch it again, I'm not joining you. Sorry, cutie.”

"That's…” Dipper's voice wavered and cracked, "that's okay. I don't expect you to, it's not— well, I know that part isn't pleasant, and…” His ramble was stopped by a shudder gripping uncooperative muscles, and he realized he'd forgotten to stretch and reposition during the video.

Desperate to shelve what they'd seen, Dipper shoved off from the sofa and offered a hand to Bill, which he accepted. "Let's… have dinner, huh? It got sort of late. How about... chipotle chili or something? With squash and avocado?" Mind a mess, it was hard to concentrate on one thing as meal ideas battled for dominance over ghosts of his past threatening to spill over.

Thankfully, the mention of food brightened Bill. “I’d love some of that, it sounds fantastic.”

 Barely making any indication that he'd heard him at all, Dipper's walk to the kitchen was a fleeing jog.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Almost caught up on comments, thank you for your patience! <3

Finals week challenged everything Dipper had ever known about his own limits. Somehow, he survived through massive amounts of coffee and frantic studying and sleepless nights, navigating the days on an autopilot mode that'd been programmed to regurgitate physics knowledge. It'd sucked the life from his very soul, sapped the energy from the core of his being, then deserted what was an empty husk of a human after his tests were over. The consequent lack of responsibility was strangely displacing, so he'd been swapping between jotting down ideas for his short mystery stories, chewing an array of pens, and chatting with Bill in the grad office while his class final ticked closer.

The sun drifting to the opposite wall of physics posters signified the afternoon was underway. "It's weird that your class is scheduled so late," Dipper commented, idly tapping the paneling of the desk with the point of his shoe and listening to the hollow thump. He was restless, uncomfortable after sitting for over an hour because the last break-walk around the physics department hadn't eased his aching muscles.

A check of his laptop's digital clock confirmed it was approximately twenty minutes to the final and six minutes since he'd last glanced at the display in the corner of his screen.

Adding onto his previous thought, he said, "I know things get rearranged during finals week, but it's weird meeting at three. At least it gave you plenty of time to prepare the final, right?" Over the weekend, he and Bill had drafted the types of questions set to appear but had nothing except an outline to show for their efforts, as it was Bill's task to actually write the exam.

"Oh shit, I was supposed to prepare the final?" It may have been Bill's reclined, casual stance or the undeniable smirk hiding under his guilty 'whoops' expression that drove Dipper to roll his eyes, perceiving that as one of his lame jokes but cracking a smile.

"Yeah, as the instructor you kind of have to prepare the final," he replied, but it was good-natured, "and I can tell you were totally engaged during our brainstorming sessions when we talked about what should be on the exam."

He won a grin, Bill’s chest jutting. "I’m allowed to have my attention funneled elsewhere, honey. You’re the only thing in my sights right now, not creating some answer key."

"So you're dumping the answer key on me to deal with while you admire my ass or whatever. Great, thanks." Balancing on the back legs of his chair to flick Bill's cheek, he let the chair fall forward again and asked, "Is there a key or can I make one? I seriously have nothing to do, and it's… bizarre, honestly." No homework, grades weren't in yet, nothing to fret over.

“I'm not that far ahead or organized, so knock yourself out, doll. Be careful with it, alright? One mistake makes me look like a dumbass.”

Dipper deserted his spot to tread over to Bill's desk, bending to collect a copy of what appeared to
be a stack of final exams for distribution during the class period. His electronic exam suggestion had fallen on deaf ears. "You know, there is this handy thing called 'checking your work' that you encourage your students to do? Give it a try sometime." As he began walking away, he cast a devious glimpse over his shoulder. "Also, one mistake wouldn't make you look like a dumbass, I'm pretty sure you do that all on your own."

Bill shook his head as he huffed, and with a clunk, long legs were deposited atop the desk but spilled over nonetheless from their sheer length. "I don’t need to check my work, I’m a professional. Just look over the answers before you get too crazy with those pens of yours, marking my students as incorrect."

Dipper plopped at his own desk and mumbled an agreement, drawing a mangled pen over the questions that covered the fundamental concepts of the course. If students had been paying attention, they would know these like the backs of their hands and whip through them.

"It's nice that these aren't too hard," he said, "since your students aren't going to be physics majors or anything. I guess there's no reason to do more than the basics." It provoked a rejuvenating hope that students he'd been rooting for—anybody who'd made an effort—would be passing, and he sincerely anticipated Pacifica being among that crowd.

“I’m not Fordsy," Bill said, though Dipper barely heard while focused on working through equations and jotting notes for the future version of himself who’d presumably be grading work alongside cockatiels and a talkative Bill. Although time-consuming, the equations weren't difficult but the word problems took a decent amount of concentration to ensure he wasn't skipping steps.

“I’m not going to unleash quantum physics onto them and tell them to figure it out.”

Dipper chewed his lip, the next best choice since his pen was busy generating an answer key. "I hope not. I mean, your students are…” Well, Ford's students were pursuing physics as a degree, and Bill's were there for a checkbox on the university's requirement or a front row seat to the instructor's dramatic albeit entertaining antics. "Playing Kahoot would probably be more their speed."

"It'll be a hoot, and they can enjoy it for fifteen of the two hours they’ll have for this session.”

"This should take them less than an hour," he reported, flipping through the contents of the packet. "Maybe forty-five minutes?" It would be a relief to the students who'd suffered a week through tiring final exams, the gesture cutting them some slack and kickstarting their winter break. "If you're doing a Kahoot review before the exam, they'll still be out an hour early, so—"

Bill chuckled, raising a finger to stop Dipper from continuing and waggling it. “Ah-ah, but I wasn’t going to let them leave early.”

"What are you going to do? Hold them hostage?"

“I was going to talk to them about conspiracy theories.” Bill rubbed his hands together with the classic smirk that seemed a hair more evil than usual, and the sight elicited an amused snort from Dipper.

Holding them hostage confirmed, but at least he and Bill would have a good time. Bill because he was the center of attention for an extra hour, Dipper because he enjoyed conspiracy theories. "Are you serious?” he asked, this warranting a head-tilt to stare at Bill in mild incredulity. "You're going to spend an hour talking about conspiracy theories?" With a metaphorical tinfoil-hat wearing, diet soda-drinking, conspiracy theory expert in the audience, no less.
Bill nodded, enthusiasm seeping into the motion. “What else would we talk about? I thought it’d be fun and engaging.”

"If you're doing the presentation, it will be."

Bill oozed that magnetic charm like no other, had a quality that could capture the heart of anyone with his eccentric and entertaining allure. He was inspiring, beyond charismatic, and somehow personable all at the same time, culminating into a cunning act that could convince anybody he was their best friend in the span of minutes.

Raising an eyebrow, Bill inched forward in his seat, his hands resting casually upon his divided knees. “You know, we could make it go on longer if you send me a slideshow with random shit on it to enhance the presentation.”

His skepticism was swift and to the point, "I'm not sure how that'd improve it in any way." A bunch of images with no relevance to the conspiracy theory topics would be as confusing as it would be intriguing. "Unless you're planning on going off script to account for whatever I put on those slides."

“I don’t need a script. It’s me, honey, and I’m a master improviser.”

"I have no idea how you'll fill an hour with nonsense, but…” Dipper bit his lip, suppressing a chortle, "I guess I should have faith considering you do it three times a week at each class session."

Bill was fast in defending himself, “I don’t completely make it up on the fly, Pine Tree! I have an idea of what I’m doing beforehand, not spewing everything that comes to me.” As he spoke, he straightened his posture with pride, a suspiciously-deep inhale inserting an additional chest-puff to his vain pose.

"Physics is basically nonsense.” Especially to the students in Bill’s class who were showing up for a general education credit, not knowledge, and he kept that in mind as he worked on the answer key to account for broader ideas that were correct but underdeveloped.

Humming, he jotted a note down for himself to give partial credit and said, "Oh, I might've forgotten to tell you. I'm going to the final, and no, it's not your talk about conspiracy theories that sold me."

Bill brightened with interest. “Oh? Did you want to admire me as I addressed the class?”

A worthy inference, but Dipper rubbed his arm and cleared his throat, the memory of Pacifica earnestly telling him that she took comfort in his presence drifting forth. "Uh, sure. But Pacifica was asking about it, and I thought it'd be weird if I didn't show up, since I'm allegedly taking your class too."

“Th-at’s true,” he mused. “It’s a shame you’re not attending to admire me, though. Skipping all those lessons of drooling over me until you absolutely have to come.”

"Yeah, so far… admire me alone hasn't been enough to make me come," he muttered, the obscenity too perfect to pass up even if it made him wince slightly, eager to move on. "Anyway, I'm about halfway done with the key. If you're reviewing before the test, do you have the Kahoot set up or…?"

It was the question he'd been waiting for, judging by his haughtiness. “What do you think I’ve been doing for the last five minutes? It’s a work of art, cutie. They’ll love this cheap and cheesy mart special.” With a brush of his hands, Bill rose from his chair to pick up his bag and sling it
over his shoulder. “I’m going to the classroom. How long will that take you?”

"I don't know. How hard are these word problems?" The question stalled for time as he evaluated the remainder of the exam, mental calculations underway. "Do you need it for something? If not, I'll do it during class." It'd look normal, he'd blend in chipping through the same exam that everyone else was taking.

“It shouldn’t be that hard.” Then, it was plucked from him, and the sound of Bill zipping his bag ripped through the air. “Do it in class, I’ll pass it out to you so nobody gets suspicious.”

Similarly, Dipper took measures to avoid raising suspicion. It was after Bill had departed from the grad office to greet students that he walked toward the classroom, peeking inside: it was promising, nearly every seat filled, which equated to slipping in unnoticed. His usual desk in the back had a wide view of everybody in the room, but of particular interest was observing the variety of engagement levels. Dipper could spot a phone with ease, had visual access to every computer screen (often used for games, note-taking was secondary), and was equipped to use this position to ensure nobody resorted to cheating.

Bill was stationed at the front of the room, pacing the length of it as his eyes danced over the students, then ultimately lingered on him. With a short nod, he turned away, striding to his laptop. Dipper recognized that nod and assumed Bill must've been awaiting his arrival, everybody else was here.

“Before we begin,” his voice boomed through the quiet room, commanding attention. “We are starting with a Kahoot review prior to the exam. Feel free to pull out your devices to participate.. and if anyone joins with an inappropriate name, I will use Force to expel you from the lobby.” Bill’s habit of deploying physics puns elicited a combined wave of subdued laughs and exaggerated groans, the typical response.

Kahoot flashed on the overhead projector to display the join code, several names popping up. As expected, the jokers of the class attempted vulgar or ridiculous names which were rapidly sniped by Bill with a disapproving scowl, and the screen changed again as the game transitioned to the questions.

Although Dipper played halfheartedly and occasionally, he was preoccupied by assessing the quality of the questions to ensure they aligned with what was on the test, then using it to gauge how Pacifica would do. He cared about the performance of the other students as well, but he hadn't invested nearly the amount of time into study meetups and reviews. The game presented variants of what they'd done before, so it seemed as if most students would do fine if the majority of correct answers were any indication of their comprehension.

“What are you doing, guys?” Bill asked, visibly exasperated as they landed on an answer screen to reveal poorer scores than expected. “That was a simple vocabulary question, a matter of elimination. We didn’t talk about zebras in class!” A handful of answers heavily hinted that the Kahoot had been crafted in the ten minutes prior to class, as if Bill didn't feel like generating plausible solutions so he'd tossed in whatever came to mind.

Once Bill's miniature rant was over and he clicked to the next question, Dipper picked a wildly incorrect answer if only to spite him, a shit-eating grin on his face as he peeked from the screen to Bill, who shook his head in mock disappointment.

"If nobody is going to play this seriously, we can jump right to the exam,” Bill loosely threatened, but Dipper had doubts that he was truly upset.
A student sitting near the front raised her hand.

“Yes?”

"Can we leave afterward?"

“Oh, no. I have something special in mind once everyone is finished.”

There wasn’t a widespread reaction to report, yet the two students in the row before his shared a collective 'are-you-kidding-me' look of disdain, then hushed whispers of how they wanted to get out of here. The disrespect was chafing, but worthy of nothing more than an eye roll and a sigh at their childishness.

When Bill polled his pupils for any other questions and nobody raised a hand, he carried on with the game, coming to the last stretch of questions. However, it no longer gripped Dipper, whose priorities had shifted to the ongoing conversation of the two students who chatted in whispers to one another. It required straining to distinguish what precisely was being said since they maintained lower tones, but snickers and an apparent annoyance with their circumstances were audible enough to be discerned.

It was the sort of thing Dipper would lose interest in and tune out in most cases, but it became concerning when discussions of cheating strategies emerged. Jokingly, but nevertheless alarming when they were mere Kahoot questions away from the final exam being in their grasp. Knowing Bill would be watching everyone like a hawk as they filled in answers, Dipper wasn't terribly worried, at least until he spied a notebook passed back and forth between them. The more it was exchanged, the louder their snickering became. Even a warning glower from Bill didn't deter them.

The page had writing on it but lacked legibility from where he sat, though it startled him when he noticed peculiar drawings. Not just peculiar, but genuinely disturbing as he realized what he was seeing in brief glimpses: a doodle of someone armed with a firing gun in a classroom of students. The sketched gore had waves of distress radiating from him.

Dipper gawked in utter disbelief, then to Bill in horror, and back to the students, hauntingly wide grins on their smug faces. Struggling to alert Bill, he fumbled for his own notebook and considered writing an ‘SOS’ message but was discouraged by determining it wouldn't be seen at that distance. Panicked internal debate brought him to the best feasible option, a simplistic drawing of a fish in hopes Bill would identify it as their safeword.

He angled the paper's cry for help in Bill's line of sight, glad the other students were preoccupied by the Kahoot leaderboard and unaware of his crude drawing.

To his absolute relief, it was either the safeword or the oddity itself that motivated Bill to investigate by abandoning his place at the podium.

Bill strolled over to the back rows of students. A modicum of searching had his eyes on the two with the notebook, and he eliminated the distance between them, striking an intimidating stance at his full height. “What’s so funny?” The demand rendered them speechless as Bill snatched the shared notebook, skimming it. “Kashooters?” Dipper cringed at the pun. “Oh, you both have earned yourselves a chat with the campus police and the Department Chair.”

One of the students had gone pale. “Come on, it’s a joke.”

“This shit isn’t a joke. Get off your asses and let’s go.” To an astonished Dipper, he instructed, “You’ll have to hand out the exams and supervise the class for the session. I’ll see you later.” The
two students were ushered from the room and into the hall, and Dipper could hear the sharp racket of Bill’s yelling through the walls, suggesting he had the grace to leave minimally but the patience to wait until they were in private was absent.

It stranded Dipper in a classroom of stunned silence and a suffocating air that'd engulfed them, but he cleared his throat, awkwardly moving from his desk to wander to the instructor's podium. The view from here, curious faces observing him, was uncomfortable for someone who became rattled from merely speaking in class. He didn't know how Bill did this every other day. Although shaky, the anxiety stayed at bay because passing out exams was manageable, even if it was the product of unforeseen circumstances that outed him as Bill's co-conspirator in the organization of this class.

Taking the stack of exams, he clicked them on the table and shuffled them into a neat order alongside the course evaluations. As distribution commenced, he hesitantly announced, "So, uh, don't cheat, read everything thoroughly, and… you can ask questions, but I can't really help with answers or anything. Do the course evaluation when you're done, then you can go— I'm guessing Bill, um, Mr. Cipher isn't going to be back in time." The quiet dragged on while he approached the last student to receive one, Pacifica.

Her intense gaze didn't falter as it zeroed in on him, but where he'd expected to find anger and distrust, he discovered a knowing glint. "Oh, don't look so surprised," she said as if it was plain as day, "I knew there was something shady about him. Is that why you called him Bill?" Before he could squeeze in a response, Pacifica continued nonchalantly, "For a student-instructor thing, you're not that subtle." Most of her reaction had him to his ears with redness, not the statement itself but the intrigue it stirred from other students.

Stiffly, Dipper extended the final exam and the evaluation, promising, "If… you have spare time, could you stick around once you're finished? We can go to the grad office, and I'll explain." He refused to pressure her into committing to stay, and he was losing his nerve in the face of probing eyes, so Dipper retreated to the front of the room to sit behind the small table and watch, keeping tabs on the test-takers to hinder cheating.

The same student that'd raised a hand during the Kahoot was once again gesturing to be called on, and Dipper blinked at her. "Uh, …yes?" If it was about him and Bill, he swore to god—

"Are you taking the exam?"

Sweaty palms brushed over the back of his neck, and his jaw tightened. "Oh, uh, no. I'm.. not really enrolled in this class. I'm a third-year physics student, so…” he trailed off and ended it there, punctuated by a shrug. Luckily, that satisfied her question, and the inquisitive gazes in the room were turning to their final exams where they belonged.

Reality was accurate to his estimation when most students were handing in completed tests around the forty-minute mark. While Dipper chewed a plastic mess of a pen and scanned the room every couple minutes, Pacifica was engrossed in her phone as other students trickled out, meanwhile there was still no sign of Bill.

Eventually, they were in overwhelming silence since the students were gone, no pencils scribbling on paper, no shuffling pages, no footsteps or rummaging through a backpack. With a thick swallow, Dipper collected his things. "Ready to go?" he asked Pacifica, conviction diminishing. Her eyes flicked from her phone to him, sizing him up as if she was gearing up to eat him as an afternoon snack. "If you don't want to, I— I mean, I'd understand. Like, it's sort of weird to have this sprung on you, I get it."
"We’re going to the grad office,” she informed him, standing up to brush off her skirt. “And you’re going to tell me all about your secret relationship with Mr. Cipher.”

"It's not…” he protested, but his objection died with an exhale, uncertain. They were in a relationship, and they were keeping it hushed in the midst of the beginning stages, taking it slowly to be certain it was what they both wanted.

Banishing the thought by deeming it irrelevant, he and Pacifica rounded the corner into the hallway, Dipper a fraction of a step ahead to lead her to the grad office. "Look, I owed him a favor," he said, minor details skipped in favor of being straightforward, "and… we agreed that I'd grade for him, so yeah. I started attending class to get to know his students better, y'know— to recognize them as I was scoring their assignments."

“So.. you’re doing him a favor, and that’s it? Is that why you decided to tutor me?” Pacifica's eyebrows knitted, disgust etched in her features. "Were my assignments that bad?"

Holding the door open for her, Dipper chewed the inside of his cheek as he deliberated on a reply. "No, that's… it wasn't part of the favor, the tutoring. Anyway, the grad office is the first door once you go left." The instructions were for naught since he mumbled a 'here, I'll show you' when she stalled inside at the unfamiliar surroundings, and he squeezed past her in the narrow hallway to where he could hear Bill's unmistakably loud lecturing. "Or I guess you could just follow his voice." It was thunderous, definitely distinct.

“Wow,” she said, almost awed. “He’s really mad, isn’t he? I haven’t heard him get so...”

"I guess it kind of sucks for him. He was going to talk about conspiracy theories for the last half of class."

“What a nut."

"Hey, conspiracy theories are cool,” he defended, a lopsided smile on his face that wilted when they approached the office, Bill's volume ringing out louder. "It's this door." If she couldn't already tell.

"Now that we're here, are you going to grade my exam?” Pacifica asked suddenly, and Dipper nodded. "No, like… in front of me." Another nod came after a pause of contemplating the request and figuring there was no harm, yet both of them shrunk down from the piercing boom as Bill spoke again from the other side of the wall. "This better be worth seeing my results.”

Inhaling and bringing her shoulders back, Pacifica pushed the door open. Before them, the two offenders were seated, surrounded by the fuming form of Bill and the disapproving Ford.

“What is wrong with you?” Bill near-yelled, looming over them with outstretched hands that revealed the degree of frustration. “What, is this some sort of game to you? You don’t joke about shooting people. You don’t laugh about it, and you don’t smirk when we’re talking to you.”

Dipper wondered how long they'd been at this, if he was inadvertently interrupting by coming in. However, he didn't have a chance to rethink his entrance because Ford had detected them, then was clearing his throat at Bill to alert him to the newcomers in their office, but Bill wasn’t stopping. “Jokes like that are how people get killed. Tasteless and crude, and you’re hurting the victims of gun violence.”

Giving a gentle rap on the door, Dipper regarded him with a tentative "Bill.." as it seemed there was a lull in his lecture.
“Yes, Pine Tree?” Bill’s wide eyes snapped to him. “Are you going to join in?”

"I…” Dipper stole a glance at the two students who weren't smirking anymore but had their heads hung, seemingly experiencing the uncomfortable shame in their actions. "I think I'll pass. I was here to drop these off." He deposited the stack of course evaluations and final exams onto the side of Bill's desk, tucking them underneath the dog plushie. "We can go somewhere else if you're busy, though."

“Not without grading my exam,” Pacifica insisted. “Remember what I said? Look, I'd offer you money, but you'll reject it.”

“I think we’re almost done with our lecture.” Bill glared daggers at the two students. “But I can guarantee that you two are far from being dismissed. The Department Chair will be ready to meet with you in a few minutes. Did you have anything you wanted to add, Fordsy?”

"No, I believe you have sufficiently covered this topic over the past," Ford peeked at the wall clock, "hour or so. If you'd like, I can escort them to her office since it appears you have visitors, and I ought to drop into the curriculum meeting downstairs.” Ford regarded them, his look cool and composed in what Dipper assumed was an attempt to maintain professionalism before Bill's students.

“Go for it,” Bill invited with a dismissive wave as he redirected his attention to him and Pacifica, meanwhile Ford motioned for the two students to accompany him. “I’m done talking to those hooligans.”

"Do you want to sit down so we can go through it?" Dipper asked Pacifica, offering her what was usually his chair at the spare desk. Craning his neck, he asked, "Hey Bill, it’s okay if I grade Pacifica's final, right?"

As if expecting something more from the interaction, Bill deflated, obvious disappointment causing his posture to droop. “Sure, Pine Tree.”

While Pacifica was settling in the chair, Dipper placed his answer key and Pacifica's exam onto the desk, but his thoughts were trapped on Bill's dejected reply, his vocal dissatisfaction. "Maybe…” he began, deducing the issue fairly easily, "you should help. I was in a rush while making the key."

He perked up almost instantly, scooting to join them with his chair after a flashy spin. “I told you to not mess it up,” he teased warmly. “What am I going to do with you?”

Flushing, Dipper gave him a tender shove in the ribs. "Treat me to something nice considering I actually succeeded in finishing the whole thing, including variant answers. Coffee is preferred."

Pacifica let out a noise of mock revolt, covering an ear as she rested her elbow on the desk. Dipper could see through the act. “The student-instructor relationship is cute, but I didn't study my ass off to listen to you two flirting.”

Although it wasn't as unethical as she framed since he wasn't Bill's student, the slide of the final key over to Bill was supplemented by an uncomfortable, "Uh…” Intimate information of their relationship was separated from this, not to mention incredibly awkward to talk about in the presence of Bill's student.

“What?” Bill asked, confused. “I keep my personal and professional life separate, and until I have submitted final grades, you are my student.” Pacifica seemed to understand the clue that it was against her interests to be suggesting there was a romantic element, and Dipper was glad she
dropped the topic instead of dangling monetary incentive for a clearer answer.

Bill's diversion and termination of that allowed Dipper to calm himself, anxiety ebbing as he inspected Pacifica's final exam. "Are you double checking the answer key?" he asked Bill but didn't stray from the sheet, comparing her responses to his own.

"Of course," Bill said, looking over his hasty job of a key. "It looks fine. Sloppy, but that's likely because you were in a hurry."

"Or because you threw me in charge of administering the final unexpectedly," he proposed, then more sarcastically, "but I'm glad that it's to your standards when you couldn't be bothered to do it."

Bill grumbled. "It shouldn't have been unexpected, you're my grader. You should be prepared for anything I throw at you, including being a substitute test proctor because my students apparently make bad decisions."

Choosing to ignore Bill and progressing to the next page, he was impressed that all of Pacifica's work was correct so far and only had to use his pen to indicate a couple lost points on the harder equations. From there, it was a breeze to grade. "Does that look right?" he asked in reference to his scoring, a low A but indisputably excellent in contrast to where she was in the beginning of the semester.

Bill leaned to verify Pacifica's answers were properly scored, and he made a small mark near the middle. "Decimal's in the wrong spot," he explained, "but otherwise you got everything."

With a nod, Dipper wrote and circled the percentage. "So you, uh, passed. Definitely passed," he said as he coasted the paper in Pacifica's direction. "Just a couple super minor errors, but I think that's going to even out to an A in this course since you did those extra credit review sheets too."

A suspended breath fell from her, an expression of pride blooming on Pacifica's face as she registered her own achievement. "I told you I'd ace this, Dipper." Everything about her, from the sincere smile to her confidence was proof that a weight had been visibly taken from her, and it was exhilarating to witness the transformation as it clicked that she was capable.

"Yeah, you did great," he said, chuckling, "and I know you'll do better at whatever you decide to study, because you'll be invested in it. Nursing, I think?"

"Yes," she confirmed, that glittering of refreshed self-esteem in her eyes as she regarded him. "Maybe I'll change my mind later, but for now-- nursing is what I want to do."

The brief tick of silence corroborated his suspicions that the impending moment of bittersweetness was upon them, and Dipper hesitated as he admitted, "It's been nice, working with you this semester, and... best of luck on your nursing program, or whatever else you end up pursuing."

"You as well, future plant artist. We'll have to keep in touch." Helplessness bound Dipper as he could do nothing but watch her stand from the chair, then halt in the entryway. When she looked back, Pacifica's smile was fleeting and wavered with the tiniest flickers of emotion. "You have my number. Use it."

It was as if they were suspended in time as Pacifica waved her goodbye, then disappeared into the hallway until the click of her heels had faded. The melancholy mood was sinking into Dipper each second he stared blankly at the door, his trance broken only by Bill clasping his shoulder and while no verbalization was exchanged, he didn't have to say. It was reassurance that Bill was here for him.
"I'm still pissed," Bill said, a conclusion to the prolonged stint of silence as he wheeled his chair to his own desk once more. "I can’t believe those assholes made a shooting joke. They can try their 'it was just a joke' defense on the campus police and see where it gets them."

Dipper rotated to face Bill, lazily slumping into the backing cushion. "Poor time and place, but I'm... not sure a good time and place for shooting jokes really exists either. Thanks for coming over, by the way. I didn't know if you'd recognize I was trying to use the safeword."

"I don't know what else a badly drawn fish could be."

"Hey, it wasn't that bad," he protested, "and it conveyed the message. I'd say my fish was pretty victorious."

"It was, by far, the worst fish I've ever seen, and I have young children in my family."

Bill’s attack on his admittedly-lackluster art skills coaxed a thoughtful expression to Dipper's features, and he pondered, "You know, I might not go home with you if you're going to pick on my fish-drawing abilities. Mabel and I will pack up the birds and relocate to your estate in the Hills. It's so big that I doubt anyone will even notice we're there."

"You do realize I can call the police and have them remove you."

"Not if they can't find us."

"I could have police teams scour the area with their dogs," Bill countered, the quirk of his lips implying he enjoyed the resumption of their banter. "Where are you going to hide?"

Dryly, he said, "Beside your dad, I guess. The law never looks in his direction." It was playful, the telltale sign his affectionate shoulder-bump into Bill, prompting him. "Hey, do you want to get out of here? We can grab coffee and begin grading finals, assuming we don't get lazy about it."

"Sure, I think you owe me some coffee and chill after you insulted my father's honor."

"Whoa, honor? I didn't know he had any of that," he said, snarky, unable to help himself and his cheeky tongue. Despite being unapologetic in every sense of the word, he added, "Sorry, I'll stop. I'm sure your father is an upstanding man like you. Ready to get coffee?"

Bill shook his head, rising to his feet. "We might as well, but you still owe me a coffee."

"Think we can arrange alternative payment?" Dipper asked, then tipped his head at Bill's bag where he noticed the answer key was protruding. "You have finals that need grading. Maybe I can assist."

Bill feigned being unimpressed and protectively tucked his bag close to his side. "You'll have to pay up, sugar. Or do better than grading finals."

Teasingly relenting, Dipper inquired, "Okay, okay. So how many cheek kisses will that be?" It seemed that was the ticket to breaking Bill's character because he burst into a toothy grin, and Dipper was powerless to the smile that contagiously spread.

"About seven dollars and eighty nine cent's worth."

"Wow, that's all? If I gave you a cheek kiss, I think you'd owe me the difference."

"Damn," commented Bill. "Now you're hardballing me? I thought I was the businessman here."
Come on, Pine Shark, "over Dipper's laugh at the tweaked nickname in light of his bartering prowess, Bill went on with a wink, "let’s get some stupid coffee."
“Pine Tree!” Bill broke Dipper from his daydream. “What the hell are you doing? You’re missing your turn.” He motioned frantically to the Monopoly board borrowed from the diner, the result of Bill overhearing they carried a few board games and requesting this on the spot, citing it as his favorite.

"Jeez, relax," Dipper said, rolling the dice and relocating his piece accordingly. "See? I'm going. No need to get your tycoon in a bunch. Jesus, there." Handing the dice over, Bill snatched them to take his turn. "I feel like you're more into this than the reason we're here." Student evaluations and finals, to be precise. Bill had insisted they go out instead of confining themselves to his apartment. So they were camping at the diner and, since Wendy had texted him about being bored after her own finals were done, she'd been invited to join. Dipper hadn't realized Bill and Wendy were talking regularly but was glad to hear it. Their romantic relationship may have been unhealthy, but they both enjoyed a close friendship.

Between Bill's presence, Mabel popping in during her breaks, and Wendy's companionship, Dipper was equipped to breeze through the entirety of the evaluations and finals that were fanned across half of the table.

Wendy leaned over casually, resting her cheek on her palm and watching Bill's fervent playstyle. "Yeah, it was probably a mistake on the diner's part to give him Monopoly. We might be here until the end of time."

The second the dice landed, Bill moved his piece: the top hat. Of course. He'd been adamantly calling it the classiest, the piece made for him, and neither Dipper nor Wendy thought contesting it was worth the trouble. “We’re here until I win, and I’m already kicking your asses.”

"You have the board covered in hotels."

"Don't belittle my five-star Bill-tels."

"You won't even let us preemptively declare bankruptcy," Dipper said, retrieving the next evaluation from the stack, "and are you grading anymore? I don't think I've seen you pick up that pen in ten minutes." The evaluation was another typical "good" one with limited insights or improvement suggestions, most rating Bill's teaching style and course from fair to excellent, and therefore a tally in the 'kind but not useful' column.

“Well!” He thumbed his stack of Monopoly money, a shark-grin on his face. “How about a small loan.. for a price?”

Glancing up from the evaluation, Dipper stared at him skeptically. "Sounds like a scam. Did you learn that line from your dad?"

“Wow. I need a new boyfriend. Hey Red, is Nate—”

"Boyfriend?" Wendy didn't allow him to finish, curious and amused.

“Yes. Is Nate available? I need a replacement, stat.”

"I heard Robbie is," she joked, "but that's cool. Didn't know if you two were dating, or if you were joking before."
Nervously laughing in bursts, Dipper's fingers curled around his upper arm. "Yeah, no… uh, we're really dating. We haven't been that—" his free hand gestured as he struggled for words, "open about it, I guess? We're testing the whole dating thing, and apparently Bill is leaving me for Nate or Robbie."

Bill's features scrunched in disgust. "Eugh, Edgelord. Why would you bring him up, Red? He's gross."

"Hey, you broke up with me via voicemail. I can do what I want. Also, because he's right there."
Wendy tipped her head toward the other side of the diner's counter, and through the kitchen entryway he saw Robbie's lanky, black-clad form washing dishes.

“No, you can’t do what you want when it comes to Emo McEdge.” Then, Bill addressed him. “I might not leave you, but you’re going to have to sweeten me up, sugar.”

Although Bill's overdramatics were a cheap grab for compliments, Dipper obliged and said through overly-honeyed words, "What? You might have to repeat that. I was too busy fawning over your muscles and raw handsomeness, and thinking about how you're the most amazing boyfriend. You're so funny, romantic, courteous..."

"Get a room." Wendy whooped as she tossed the dice, and they clacked over the board's surface. "Think I can sweeten you up too? Instead of sacrificing an arm and a leg for that property I landed on."

Bill scoffed loudly, palm outstretched as he awaited payment. "You had four months to ‘sweeten me up’, so no.” Wendy reluctantly complied, but he heard a 'lame' under her breath as the cash traded owners. Dipper was relieved his turn didn't include falling on one of Bill's spaces given how quickly those properties drained his funds. An unlucky roll or two would be game over.

Returning to the evaluations, he slid a new sheet from the stack. "Is this one blank? Oh, wait." At first, it'd seemed someone handed in a completely empty evaluation but near the bottom, on the last question that inquired about overall thoughts on the course, a student had messily written 'he's tall.'

Instantly, Dipper chortled. The inquisitiveness of Wendy and Bill prompted him to flip the paper so they could view it, and Wendy fell into laughter while Bill sniggered arrogantly.

"Looks like you were teaching some observant ones this semester."

“They were right. I am tall. By the way, pass the deed to this space. I'm expanding the Bill-tel franchise.” Because that's what their tiny Monopoly economy needed. Even so, Dipper did his job as a banker and sold the property, barely a dent in Bill’s money.

"I'm not sure how confirmation that you're tall will help you improve your course." Dipper filed it away with the others that provided no particular insights: the blank ones, the brief ones, and the 'everything was good' ones with nothing notable.

Bill shrugged, placing another hotel on the lot. “Maybe they think of my height and the force of gravity on it? I don’t know, Pine Tree. I can’t read minds.” The content of the majority of these evaluations would imply otherwise because they were incredibly vague and lacking detail, driving Bill to generate his own conclusions based on their minimal feedback.

Another roll of the dice, and Wendy's hands came up in surrender when her piece stopped on a decked-out property set of Bill's. "That's it for me, guys. I'm broke. Thanks, Bill." The rest of her funds were shoved toward his neat stacks of colorful fake money, her deeds to the bank.
“My small loan offer stands,” he said, sly, "but you need to give me a portion of your properties."

"Nope, bankrupt," she replied, "because you'd end up beating us again if I hand them over. At least Dipper has a chance."

Seeing the board, he grimaced and shook his head. "Yeah, no. I seriously don't." Not compared to the endless wealth that Bill had collected from well-placed properties, adding structures to them, and fortunate dice-rolls. "I guess maybe if I continue to cash in on sweetening up Bill instead of paying him?"

Bill fingered his stacks of money, thoughtful but devious. “Say, Red, did you know Pine Tree has business smarts going for him? I pick up the check, and he doesn't spend an hour fighting me over it. You were always insistent on splitting the costs whenever we'd go out.”

Wendy rolled her eyes but didn't appear irritated, and Dipper thought he could sense relief in her tone as she said, "It's called being independent, man. I don't want to rely on my boyfriend for everything, y'know? I can take care of my own financials." She looked to him, scrutinizing, tilting her head like she was trying to make sense of their arrangement. "So you let him pay for everything?"

"I mean, he offers, and I don't have money for frivolous stuff, so… yeah."

"You gotta establish your dominance as financially-separate," she said, encouragingly bumping him. “If you don't, you'll be living off Bill's money for the rest of your life like a spouse from the 50s because that's basically what he wants in a partner, I swear.”

Although he wrinkled his nose at being dependent on Bill, he couldn't summon the same sheer revolt as Wendy when it came to fulfilling Bill's vision of his ideal spouse. Compared to the trajectory of his career, it sounded both more fun and more satisfying than anything the field of physics could promise to a disengaged student.

Bill puffed his chest. “You’re not wrong. An ideal spouse would be a housewife who permits me to win the bread while they keep the house tidy.” Dipper could picture himself reading and writing mystery novels in that spare time, and leisurely cooking and cleaning — all activities he enjoyed, and it didn't demand unnecessary physical discomfort.

As if unconcerned now that it didn't apply to her, Wendy simply brushed it off with a noncommittal, "Can't believe you don't want two incomes."

"As long as kids aren't a part of it," Dipper mumbled, but it was directed to the table, not anyone sitting at it. Realizing he hadn't taken his turn, he tentatively shook the dice prior to Bill inevitably cracking the whip of eagerness. "Should we start a new game since Wendy's out?"

"We haven't finished this one," Bill objected. "We can’t start a new one yet."

Honestly, he could've seen that coming and already knew why. Bill wanted to relish in being the ultimate winner and siphoning every single fake dollar that he could from the other players before he'd call it quits. "Okay, okay," he relented when Wendy didn't mind, busy switching between the diner menu and her phone. Upon landing on a property, he asked, "Great, do you own this one too?"

Beating Bill to a response, Wendy peeked up again. "You guys want anything? It's been a while, and they probably don't want us in this booth forever if we're not ordering." It was during a quiet part of the day, barely anyone around; not only was it an off-hour, but college being on break
meant most students had cleared for home.

“I could eat,” Bill said, making a point of plucking away the money Dipper owed him. “Perfect timing too. Doom and Despair is on his way.”

"Can you not be petty for once? Like, be civil," he chided, nudging him in the side.

Wendy waved Robbie over, and that was the cue he'd needed to stop wallowing in the doorway of the kitchen, debating if he should. The decision had been made for him. "Robbie! What's up, dude?"

Robbie smiled as he approached, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Hey, man. Is that Monopoly?”

“It’s None-of-your-business-poly, because you need to take our order.” Bill tapped the laminated menu impatiently. “I want a burger with a side of fruit, and if I know Pine Tree, he's having a salad. Put one in for Red too.”

“I’m on break. And they can order for themselves, you know.”

"A salad sounds pretty good." For a place with astoundingly greasy options, their salads were among the better items, their good taste likely attributed to the establishment's location bordering a college campus with health-conscious student body to cater to.

"You wanna chill for a while?" Wendy asked but didn't wait for confirmation, scooting over in the booth to smack the recent vacancy. "You said you were on break, right? You should join us. Sit."

Dipper's hand grazed Bill's under the table, attempting to calm him when Robbie sat on the opposite side. Unfortunately, the table wouldn't be enough to separate a raging Bill from his target. "We were, uh… finishing up this round. Do you want to play?"

“Whoa, whoa. Stop. I didn’t say he could play.” Bill bristled, squeezing his hand tightly. “I don’t want him touching this game.”

Exhaling and closing his eyes, they'd become doe-like as they bore into Bill upon opening again. "It's one game, and I figured you'd like to have a fresh victim to suck the financial blood out of." His reasoning received an angry pout and disapproving look.

Robbie, however, didn’t seem disheartened. “Golden Boy won’t stop me from playing,” he told them, about to select a piece when Bill snatched it from his hand. “Really, Cipher. You wouldn’t want to be kicked out for disturbing the peace, would you? Maybe drugging a minor?”

Bill’s hands clenched, and he shared a long glare with Robbie before scathingly relenting. “Fine.” Although Dipper's shoulders dropped with relief, it was short-lived and uncertain under the impression Bill would be bitter about this.

An aura of smugness about him, Robbie smirked. “Good choice, Cipher. You wouldn’t want to be kicked out for disturbing the peace, would you? Maybe drugging a minor?”
Surprised by the callback, Dipper said, "I feel like that's a weird threat to make when that ended in getting fired. So, can you guys— I don't know, act decent to each other? If not, this is going to be super tedious."

As his specialty was mentioned, Bill grinned from ear to ear, puffing his chest. "Of course I can act, I'm—"

"Yeah?" Dipper prompted, waspish. "Good, because if either of you start up, the bank reserves the right to," he paused, sight drifting to the fake Monopoly money, "uh, administer a ten dollar fee that doubles with every offense."

Bill's expression plummeted. "What?" he demanded, frown replacing any brightness that'd previously been there. "Are you fucking joking?"

Halting his distribution of the funds, he bluntly said, "No." Then, resumed handing out the money, putting the cards on the board. "Okay, ready?"

"Wait. Red, I want you to be the banker."

Wendy's evaluation of the idea was cursory, an immediate dismissal that seemed more from spite than a true stance. "Nah, I'm good."

“But I don’t want Pine Tree robbing me of my money!"

"I'm not going to rob you unless you're being a jerk," Dipper said, taking the first turn to begin the game and passing the dice afterward, "and I thought you could manage being nice."

Bill grumbled. "Being a jerk doesn't give you the right to steal from me."

With a hum, Dipper took an evaluation from the stack to restart the process of sorting through them, adding another few to the 'unhelpful' pile. A single turn was all it took before Bill's complaints resumed, and Dipper chalked it up to the pain of refraining from insulting Robbie. "Pine Tree, I don't want you to be the banker. I'll be the banker."

Dipper didn't stray from the evaluation as he determined, "No, you'll cheat and needlessly fine Robbie without ever touching your own funds."

"Do we need a new fee for whoever keeps bringing up the banker thing?" Wendy asked, and Dipper could see her give Bill a critical side-eye from the corner of his vision.

Bill crossed his arms as he stared them down, unhappiness brewing and threatening to overflow. "You both are prejudice against me. Neither of you should be the banker." Through a mutter, Dipper swore he could hear 'should've gotten with Nate when I had the chance' and wished he could facepalm at the ridiculousness.

Robbie was irked as well, tapping a lip piercing while that signature attitude of annoyed boredom rested on them. "What, do you want me to be the banker, man?"

"No," Bill said, a snap. "I will be the banker."

In the midst of trying to focus on reading through Bill's evaluations while Bill himself was in a dispute over Monopoly, Dipper's thin patience had worn, and he pushed the bank's items over to Bill. "I'll sit out for a bit. I gotta get these done before it's midnight and we're still quarreling here," said Dipper, peeved and thoroughly exasperated.
Stunned, Bill blinked at the money, then at Dipper. “You’re.. not playing?”

"No, I'm just… yeah," he said lamely, shuffling the remaining papers. They were a more worthwhile pastime than balancing the peace between Bill and Robbie, the stress of their arguing and keeping up with the game freed from his shoulders. It provided space to breathe again. "Like I said, I should finish these."

Robbie shook his head, rising to his feet. “I’ll stay out. You should be able to enjoy the game.”

Snagging his hoodie to prevent Robbie from departing, Dipper peered at him earnestly. "Uh, that wasn't really the problem— well, I mean, it's not the only problem. I can't do both of these at once." And Bill… he was insistent that everyone take their turn in a timely manner, not out of malice but genuine excitement for the game that was oddly endearing but a bad combination for the circumstances.

Bill let out a groan of displeasure, and his hands crashed to the table with a thump. “I wanted to play with Dipper, not fucking Severus Snape.”

Uninterested, Dipper suggested, "So don't play?"

"Yeah, I'm getting hungry anyway," Wendy agreed, then asked Robbie. "That reminds me, when can we bum food off of you?"

Robbie shrugged. “My break ends in about fifteen minutes, but I can slip your order in early.”

"Sweet. Forget what Bill said about salads, bring me nachos or something good." She stretched over the table to clap Bill's shoulder, then Robbie's.

"Water's fine," he said, then after scanning the evaluation, he snorted and inclined into his boyfriend. "Oh my god, this one wrote a cell phone number and said you were cute, Bill."

“Wow,” Bill remarked, though he didn't sound enthused even as Robbie left their company to put in their order. “Be careful, that student's aiming to take your job.”

Dipper stiffened, a tad on edge from Bill's tone, but he filed it among the ones to review later. "I guess, but they had quality feedback."

“Did they? He’s ‘cute’ isn’t that good. I’m fucking handsome.”

"I know you are, and there was more than that," he said, "not about you, but about the course." Probably of lesser interest to Bill than the prospect of hearing about himself and his physical attractiveness. "But yeah, you're plenty handsome."

“I’m the handsomest.” Bill beamed weakly. “But apparently not enough to make you want to play Monopoly with me.”

"Are we going to have to throw down outside to get past this? Jeez."

"Forget Monopoly and let’s cuddle in the booth if you can't play without me." It must've appealed to Bill because Dipper was already feeling an arm wedge between him and the cushion, circling his waist to rub his hipbone through his jeans.

“Yeah, I can’t pass that up, can I? You’re too inviting.”

"You guys look comfy." Wendy commented, entertained by the affectionate display as she folded the Monopoly board, "but I can't see this being helpful to your productivity. Bill's barely touched a
single exam this afternoon."

"Alright, so we should go through these," he said, propping himself against Bill and relishing in the coziness of being trapped under a protective grasp. "Are you actually going to do what you promised and grade their finals?"

"I'll grade their finals... eventually," Bill said, coaxing him closer with a press of his fingertips. "But we can do the evaluations for now."

"Hey, I'm back. Hope you didn't enjoy too much suffering without me." Robbie sauntered up to the table, plopping in beside Wendy, then he paused to survey them. "Uh.. what?"

"What?" Confused, Dipper examined Robbie's own perplexed gape until he realized. "Oh."

"You mean them? That?" Wendy asked for clarification and chuckled. "Yeah, where have you been? They've been doing that, even while we were dating. Their ultra 'platonic' snuggling is old news."

"I mean, he didn't cheat or anything, but..." Sheepishly ducking his head brought him closer to Bill, curling into his side and clasping their hands under the table. Bill nuzzling the top of his head was the icing on the cake that he didn't know he needed until that moment, a fiery blossoming of adoration expanding within.

"Funny. You were paranoid about me cheating on you, man," she said. "Then you texted me randomly and said we were getting back together because you got lonely, but you broke that off like a day later. Classic Bill rebound."

"I'm gentlemanly enough to break up with you, Red. I can’t say you’d do the same if you wanted to chase other tail. Remember your exes?"

"That one was a fling," she defended flippantly, "and there was that summer romance, then that blind date..." She listed off, counting on her fingers until Dipper interrupted.

"I think this might be Pacifica's evaluation," he said, a lukewarm conjecture though it was beyond-a-doubt hers. "She said you refused to help her, Bill. All you did was..." a laugh, "was hold office hours, give text book pages, and assign tutor groups, and she goes on to write that she had to get help from a different physics nerd— I'm guessing that one's me."

"Really something, isn't she? I'm amazed she got so far."

"You're amazed? I'm pretty sure you told me that money is how she got everywhere," he said, recalling the discussion. "I'm glad she didn't need to do that during this semester. Once she knew the vocabulary, she learned the material on her own." Pride for her achievements and hope for her future had lifted his mood from its dreary fatigue, revitalizing him. Although it was Pacifica's success, not his own, the loving and endeared gaze of Bill insinuated he should celebrate it regardless.

Interrupting the wordless transmission, Robbie coughed and awkwardly stood. "Well, I'm going to check on the food. It should be ready now and not half-eaten, because Thompson doesn't work until later."

"Get out of here, Valentino. And Pine Tree— look, I'm happy for her, okay? She exceeded my expectations." To Dipper, it was less about the grade and more so the accomplishment that Pacifica recognized her own potential and tapped into it, yielding ambition, pure dedication to do what she wished. Not what she was told to do.
It was something he was working on for himself.

After a minor internal debate, Dipper admitted, "Mine too, honestly. I had no clue how it'd go, the tutoring thing, but it's nice that you let me try it. She kind of led me to discover that I'm not sure I want to do physics."

Intrigue glinted in Bill's dichromatic eyes, a reflection of the curiosity he so often felt himself. "Have you thought of what you want to do?"

Dipper swallowed, and he nervously fiddled with the crease of an evaluation. "I guess not." There were a couple forerunners that came to mind, but none feasible despite his hours of crunching numbers and making hypothetical plans for an enjoyable career.

The second of somberness was broken by Wendy somehow picking up on his uncertainty and changing the subject by announcing, "I think that's Robbie coming with our order, so let's chow down and pack up before the dinner rush."

Sleep was a luxury when his overtired mind wouldn't transition to peaceful slumber, an insomnia all-too-common in Dipper's experience, and living with Bill didn't suddenly alleviate it. The apartment was quieter than the dorms, almost too quiet, and it left room for his thoughts to wander and the silence to seep in. The events of the day replayed in the absence of anxiety to traitorously lure him to stress over new things now that schoolwork was temporarily unavailable for fretting. Evaluations, finals, Robbie and Wendy, the diner, a rocky Monopoly game.

Observing the digital clock tick by in five-minute intervals was doing him no favors while the bags under his eyes grew heavier, so he heaved himself from the bed and began padding toward Bill's room. A warm glow peeked from under the door. Dipper's heart felt lighter.

Gently knocking, he prodded it open and found Bill sitting upright in his bed, squinting at a female fashion magazine. Bill must have noticed the movement by his door because he said, "I don't understand why you like these."

While untrue, he decided to roll with it. "The same reason I read *Playboy*," Dipper teased, lingering in the entryway with his shoulder leaned against the frame. "For the articles. But seriously, I don't read them, and I have no clue why you're reading them either."

"Well, it sure looks like something you'd read." Bill discarded the magazine to the nightstand before his gaze landed on Dipper, who was shaking his head to clarify he did not in fact read those magazines. "What are you doing, anyway?"

Dipper sensed that was his opportunity to step inside. "Can't sleep." The explanation was plain as he took a seat on the foot of the bed but didn't scoot closer under Bill's watchful eye, feeling like a bug in full view of a microscope's inspection. "Figured you might be familiar with that."

"I am." Bill patted the blanket, a request. "Come here, Pine Tree." Agreeing with a quick "sure", Dipper eliminated the space between them to sit beside Bill at the top of the bed, resting his head on his chest when Bill shuffled to accommodate it.

"So, what do you do during these late nights that you can't sleep? Other than read fashion magazines."

"Masturbate to the thought of you," he said, though he cracked a grin contagious enough to incite Dipper to do the same.
"Don't have to settle for the thought while I'm here to provide a stunning visual." Not that Dipper believed that he was anything close to physically stunning, especially in a haphazard state of lacking sleep: mussed hair, tired eyes, limbs drooping with fatigue.

Bill shook his head. “Nah, I like my imagination. I can get real kinky with that shit." Dipper's shade brightened to a marvelous red. "And I spend a lot of time on my phone surfing the internet.”

"Tried that for a while, but I don't know," he said, mindlessly poking at the comforter. "I was busy thinking about today, earlier. I guess that'd be yesterday since it's past midnight. Don't you think it was kind of…" he chewed the inside of his cheek while cautiously arranging his phrasing, "uh, unnecessarily rough? Like with Robbie, I mean." It seemed illogical for Bill to be perfectly content with Wendy, his ex-girlfriend, but have an issue with Robbie after they weren't competing for the same love interest.

Dipper knew Bill wouldn't welcome the topic, but how he'd went tense and pulled away from him was more than he'd accounted for. “What do you mean, ‘rough’? I didn’t do anything wrong, he deserved it. You should know that, it’s Robbie.”

Dipper pointed out, "I didn't say you did anything wrong. I was talking about your guys' bickering. Look, I want to be able to hang out with my friends." Sighing, he resumed the nervous chewing of his lip and debated. "Would you be more comfortable if I hung out with Robbie when you weren't there? Because I can do that, if that's what you need."

Bill faced the opposite wall, his arms crossed over his chest. “I don’t even know why you like Robbie, Pine Tree. He’s awful, and he isn’t funny.”

Dipper could infer the defensive tone and exercised caution, aware this could quickly turn sour. "He's a nice guy, fun to be around, and… it's different with me and you. You have all these friends from work, your old job at the comedy club, my family, West Coast Tech, the Drama Club, and people know you when we go out." That was weird in its own right but a strangely common occurrence, and the most flabbergasting part was that Bill often knew them too. "I don't have that. I have.. my family, and friends like Wendy and Robbie. That's enough for me, but I want to keep them close."

“Pine Tree, you know I don’t like this." Well, yeah, he could've presumed that, but what he hadn't been expecting was this amount of resistance. "Being around Valentino is enough to make me want to shoot my brains out.”

Although about to speak, Dipper paused to contemplate his words, an idea hatching when he saw Bill purse his lips in a demonstration of displeasure. "I thought you were an actor?" he said, tipping his head. It was a slightly mischievous attempt at riling Bill's competitive side that compelled him to be nothing short of the best. Dipper assumed this aligned well with that goal, a measurement of ability. "You can act like you don't want to shoot your brains out."

That hit the mark because Bill was looking at him, eyes gleaming dangerously. “I suppose I could, but.. on one condition, Pine Tree.” Skeptical evaluation spanned seconds as he determined that of course there had to be a catch, but Dipper wasn't sure where it'd be on the scale from minor inconvenience to personally endangering.

He swallowed, prepared to hear him with an open mind. "Yeah?"

“In the spirit of ‘acting’, we need to make out in front of the others. Full tongue assault.”

Dipper's expression flattened. "Yeah... no. I'm going to act like I don't want to flick you in the nose
for that." Despite what he said, he was leaning forward a moment later and flicking Bill in the nose. Bill’s head jerked back, and he blinked rapidly at him with manufactured shock. Nonchalant innocence ringing in his voice, he added, "Guess I'm not much of an actor."

"How dare you, Pine Tree!" Dipper's eyebrow raised, his smirk unwavering. "I've been wounded! Make it up to me."

Feigning concern, he cupped Bill's jaw and tilted his face, his free hand sweeping over his cheek in a gentle caress. He let the touch linger, taking his sweet time as he pretended to analyze Bill's 'wound' that so desperately required restitution. The pad of his thumb stroked Bill's sharp cheekbone, taking in the curve of his jawline all the way to his pale lips before he suddenly backed off. "Nope, looks fine to me."

A groan fell from Bill, and he bopped him on the cheek with his finger. Dipper playfully puffed them, but it deflated with a laugh as Bill said, "You look fine to me."

"Thanks," he said, flattered, then devilishly dragged his eyes over Bill. He made a show of drinking him in the way Bill loved to watch him do, and he could almost see his ego inwardly stacking up as he awaited a compliment that he felt entitled to receive. Purely to antagonize, Dipper coughed and announced, "Alright, well, I'm glad we've had this talk."

"What?" Bill sputtered. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Yeah," he replied, suppressing the Cheshire cat influence that threatened to overtake his innocent smile. "Goodnight."

"No, not goodnight."

Motioning toward the magazine atop the nightstand, he asked, "To be left to your girly magazine? Or, what was it— were you going to masturbate to the thought of me?" Bill's two nighttime activities according to him, whereas Dipper engaged in reading mystery novels and scouring Internet rabbitholes until he crashed.

"Honey, it's like you haven't considered the possibility that I pasted images of your face into the magazine and jack it to that." Bill winked at him.

Dipper snorted, highly doubtful. "That… is resourceful. Definitely resourceful. But I know you weren't doing that when I came in here."

"Oh, do you? How so?"

"Because your hands were on the magazine?"

"That you saw."

His eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, how many hands do you have?"

Bill shook his head. "My hands were on the magazine when I heard you approach."

Dipper's features twisted in mock distaste. "Gross." The least he could do was wash his hands before touching everything, but luckily, he hadn't any plans to borrow that from Bill. However, he was dubious of the claim and had a hunch Bill was toying with him, so he said, "You weren't doing anything."
"No, because we're good Christian boys, you and I." Bill blew a kiss at him despite being in range to deliver a real kiss. A testament to their holiness or whatever, Dipper surmised.

There was a rough inhale and rub of his arm before he continued, hesitant, "I don't think we're good Christian boys. That requires being with your soulmate." It had been shoved to the back of his mind as of late, deemed unimportant to their relationship and newly off-limits; understanding Bill's discomfort resulting from grief struck a cord with him, and he could sympathize with that. Whether they were soulmates or not, it was... debatable, a constant tug-o-war for Dipper. For a while, he had been convinced the remaining puzzle piece was Bill's soulmark, and entertained the fantasy of stripping the gauze to reveal his own handwriting. Regrettably, that same gauze deepened the mystery since it could be hiding a grayed mark, a sign of a deceased soulmate.

Bill bopped his nose, causing it to scrunch and breaking him from his daze. "Honey, my ideal Heaven is with you and no soulmates."

The sweetness and familiarity of the reassurance broke his tense exterior, an easy laugh chiming in alongside a contented sigh as he beamed at Bill. With the air relaxed, he felt confident gradually chipping at the distance to snuggle closer, tuck himself beside Bill in an embrace that kept him feeling surrounded. Movements careful, he wove Bill's arms around him and tipped his head back to ghost kisses over his jaw. "You know," he started, barely a murmur, "Mabel... said something interesting about soulmarks a while ago." As he spoke, his hands drifted to Bill's forearms where the wrapping of the gauze was identifiable underneath the fabric of his shirt. "She said some cultures traditionally cover grayed-out soulmarks."

"Hm?" Bill gazed at his arm, lips curved downward at the proximity of Dipper's hands to his soulmark. He'd gone rigid again, and it rattled Dipper to know Bill was nervous. "Are you thinking I'm a part of those cultures?"

"I don't know," he confessed but it was partially honest, because he recalled Bill mentioning he had ancestry from Egypt which happened to be a country Mabel had listed. "Are you? Or, do you practice that?"

Bill swatted his hand, then gripped his arm protectively. Not even reacting to the change beyond gawking at the wall beyond the bed, the color drained from Dipper's face and was driven home by what Bill said: "Why else would I have it? She's been dead for years."

Everything stopped, frozen in time as he escaped into his mind while the connections linked themselves together to form a despairing reality. It hadn't been possible to him until it was right here, confirmed by Bill himself — they weren't soulmates. He and Bill weren't soulmates. The repetition didn't register, not sinking in but affecting him all the same. Dipper's jaw was clenched tightly, knuckles white from choking the sheets, but he managed to gulp and mumble brokenly, "She was your soulmate? Paige?" The name was hushed, memories of past utterances flooding him with an unwanted and overbearing stream of reminders: they weren't soulmates.

And until now, he hadn't acknowledged how badly he'd wanted to be soulmates with Bill.

"I don't really want to talk about that stuff, Pine Tree. Are you okay? You look pale."

"No, I..." Blanking on everything and sputtering nonsense, he didn't know. The revelation had tendrils of dread weaving into him, clasping and restricting. He felt choked. It was suffocating. "I — just... give me a minute." Pressing further into Bill revealed he was quivering like a leaf, and Dipper forced a ragged inhale, fighting to steady himself but getting nowhere when it only caused him to struggle for breath. This was a battle against his anxiety, and he was losing.
It was a few long moments before he calmed himself enough to think again in fleeting spurts. He searched for something, anything, applicable to the situation that could aid in coping with Bill's loss. In a way, it felt like his loss too but knew he was to blame for creating the perfect scenario in which they'd be soulmates. Then, the terrible letdown when his fantasy had been ripped from him and shattered. "I'm sorry," he said, hoarse, "about your soulmate. I... didn't— I had no idea."

Although Mabel suggested the possibility, it'd blindsided him given everything Bill had said implied his soulmate was out there somewhere, alive but being avoided—

“She was my soulmate in spirit. No one else understood me like she did.”

Bewildered and speechless, Dipper blinked.

Wait.

The keywords triggered clarity: in spirit. In spirit, a suggestion that they hadn't been soulmates but Bill was attempting to pass it off as if they were. And for what reason? Dipper didn't know, but he was accustomed to the unforgiving and complex nature of loss that sometimes didn't have a logical justification. "You couldn't have just said that?" he asked, soothingly gathering Bill into a hug to nuzzle him. He wasn't accusatory. He got it.

But what kind of hellish sitcom did they live in where something so easy couldn't have been explained the instant Bill realized they'd had different understandings of "soulmate" in this context?

The connotation of 'in spirit' served to debunk the claim that this woman was his fate-determined soulmate inscribed under that dumb layer of gauze, but he was too exhausted to interrogate Bill on this, nor did he want to when it was a sensitive subject dear to Bill.

That alone had him restless, as much as he aimed to respect the extent that Bill cherished his former lover. Placing her memory on a pedestal burned uneasiness through Dipper upon wondering how he would ever compare if Bill had perfected this past image of her, even going so far as to think of her as his true love. Although he hoped Bill hadn't meant it to be a metaphorical slap in the face, particularly if they were soulmates, it felt like one nonetheless.

A yawn erupting from him was an implicit reminder to drop this, though not everything was in alignment. It didn't explain why Joseph had called her Bill's soulmate, but that would have to wait because Bill's demands for his attention took precedence. Bill had spread above the sheets, splaying his legs like a sluggish jungle cat and propping them on Dipper. Displeased, he shoved them off and half-heartedly huffed, squirming away to the other edge of the bed with the blankets in tow.

“You're cute when you get all huffy.”

Any venom that he might've been ready to spit at Bill had been neutralized by the admission of affection, rendering him unable to muster the effort for a verbal assault. Or a kick disguised as stretching out.

But alas, an internal debate proved that he was powerless to Bill's charm and scooted over again to rest his chin on his chest. The reward for his choice arrived swiftly when Bill slung his arm around his shoulders, stirring a deep sense of fondness and security that Dipper hadn't known he craved after a spike of emotion. "Why can't you be sweet like that all the time?" he muttered. "You know, since you claim to be my boyfriend and everything."

“I'm always sweet, but your sourness makes it hard to detect.”
"Don't turn this on me," he said, treading carefully as he revisited an earlier topic, the consequence of his inability to sleep. "I didn't rage quit Monopoly because Robbie joined."

“I’ll have you know, Robbie would’ve sucked the fun out of that game. ‘Satan, help me I’m getting my ass beat. Oh Satan, put your red hot meatrod in me since I’m getting fucked anyway.’” Although Dipper had nearly tuned out the latter half when he'd sensed where it was going, he couldn't stop from snickering, burying it in the fabric of Bill's shirt to maintain some semblance of seriousness.

"You could try harder to get along," he urged once he'd recollected himself, the traces of his smile enduring, "then we could do things together, all of us. I don't mind the occasional bickering if that's your thing, but... the fighting can't happen."

“I don’t know, Pine Tree.. I thought I said I’d try?”

That was better than an absolute no. Dipper brightened at the prospect of Bill making an effort in hopes this would enable group outings, but he was hesitant. "I don't remember that. I remember an insult-Robbie-fest and no real compromise."

“You wanted me to tolerate him,” Bill said, “and proposed that I act. I said I’d try.”

The promise had him alight with glee and gratitude, expression softening on Bill. "Thanks, man. I don't expect it'll be free of hangups or anything, but it means a lot." Inching forward, he gave his neck an appreciative nuzzle and collapsed into Bill's side, happily settling closer. "It'll be nice to do more things with you and not have to worry about that."

“I’m sure it will be, Pine Tree.” It was sighed against him, roaming over the area and dissipating into coolness until the sensation of Bill's mouth dragged along his skin, seeking the perfect spot before he was mewling in anticipation. Bill wasn't in a rush to pull back, lazily pressing a kiss to the nape of his neck as Dipper rested there, tranquil and miraculously beginning to feel sleepy. It was the culmination of being too lethargic to move and too comfortable within Bill's embrace to conjure the strength to keep his eyes open any longer.

Maybe he would stay here tonight.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Collapsed on the sofa, Dipper watched the cockatiels carefully explore their new surroundings, their first time out of the cage since they'd grown accustomed to the apartment and were bravely poking around. "Think they're doing okay?" Dipper propped himself on his elbows to peer to Mabel, who was similarly sprawled across the armchair that Bill usually claimed for himself. But Bill wasn't here, too busy selling vehicles that people didn't need, so the spot was fair game. "They're not clinging to us or anything, that's a good sign."

“I think they’re curious,” Mabel said, focused on the birds. "I’m glad this apartment isn’t noisy. I don’t want them to be scared."

"Well, that's because Bill's not here," Dipper said, smirk fading into a warm smile, "but he'll be off within the hour. He texted me to say that a dad's buying his teenager her first car." Surprisingly excited about it too, the message had been in all caps as if the Bill-shark had sensed blood in the water.

Mabel stretched over the armchair. “They better have a cookie and milk because I bet he’s going to bleed them dry.”

Dipper's nose scrunched, not at the suggestion but the accuracy. "It's such a weird moral dilemma. I'm not sure if I should be proud of him for being so skilled at his job or concerned how he's getting paid to take advantage of people, basically." The good news was, Bill funneled manipulative habits into sales rather than into his personal life, a positive adjustment therapy had facilitated.

“I think you should be proud of him. At least he does his job well.”

"Oh honey," he swooned dramatically as if talking to an imaginary Bill, "I'm so proud of you, knowing you spend your workdays diligently scamming old ladies out of their money." Apparently, the birds didn't appreciate his mock-affection because Kiwi began to chirp and twitter at him, scampering over to the sofa to stare at him through beady eyes.

Mabel giggled. “Kiwi doesn’t like your appreciation for scammers, Dipper.”

"Funny, speaking of scammers," he started, pointedly talking to Kiwi as he lended him a finger to perch upon, "Kiwi stole money from Bill a couple days ago. His desk was too close to the cage, I guess, and Kiwi took a dollar from it." Fortunately it wasn't shredded, as Bill would've had more of a fit than he already did over a bird taking his money. However, Kiwi didn't seem to care about the indirect scolding as he stepped off his finger onto his shirt, settling.

“Did he? I can’t imagine Bill was happy. For a guy that flaunts his wealth, he’s awfully stingy.”

"I think he was more insulted by a bird stealing his money. Oh, I forgot! They, uh," he laughed, "have figured out how to annoy him. So, y’know how our parents do that 'divorce' joke?" It was a playful exchange, threats of divorce that never came close to fruition but were passed in jest over small things. "Kiwi mimics that phrase and tells Bill he wants a divorce pretty often."

Just yesterday, Dipper could recall Bill sauntering past the cage and getting twittered at, both of their feathers seemingly ruffled because from there, an "argument" sparked between the two that
ended in a birdy threat of divorce. "He informed Kiwi that he wants a divorce," then Dipper peered to Kiwi, rubbing his neck, "so I guess you better get your legal eagles on it."

"Oooh," Mabel said, as Peaches abandoned her finger to canyoneer down the furniture to the floor. "Get a lot of legal eagles, and be ready to steal more of Bill’s money so he can’t use it on his lawyers."

"Did you get that?" he asked Kiwi. "Solid legal advice from expert attorney Mabel Pines. Make sure you take the apartment since you and Peaches seem to like it." Although Kiwi had nestled in for scratches and cuddles, Peaches was on the move, ducking under the glass coffee table to continue her examination of their surroundings. It was less space than they were accustomed to having, but it was a temporary arrangement until their parents were home again. To Mabel, he cocked his head and curiously inquired, "When we bring these guys back, do you want to stay there a while? Texting isn't the same as being there in person, and I know they miss us. Just—well, you know how this semester was."

"Totally cray-cray. I can’t believe it started with Bill upset over silly string."

"Yeah, what a way to kick off our first year of college," Dipper said, a laugh trailing after. "I guess it wasn't so bad, grading for him and finding out he's not a complete entitled asshole—just mostly." This hadn't been where he'd imagined them at the end of the semester, sitting in Bill Cipher's—his boyfriend's—apartment with their birds and joking about the unexpectedness of this turn in their lives. "He still doesn't know it was you, by the way. I never said anything."

Gratitude kindled Mabel's reply, "Thanks for that. He would’ve fined both of us. You for not stopping me, and me for doing it."

Amused, he said, "Yeah, I was a co-conspirator and enabled you to commit this atrocious crime."

Reclining onto the sofa, his mind drifted to seeing their parents soon. They'd inevitably ask how his physics studies were coming along, under the belief he tolerated it. Enjoyed it, even. But the reality was, he hadn't scraped up the courage to peek at his final course grades in case they reflected his lack of interest.

"Hey Mabel." When Dipper looked to her, she was inelegantly posed over the armchair as she monitored Peaches, a humorous sight. "How are things with your theater major? Did you ever mention that you weren't doing the nursing program?"

"They’re going great," she said proudly. "And I haven’t yet, I wanted to do it over dinner. Eventually."

Inspiration dawning on him, he suggested, "You could invite them to the spring play that the Drama Club's putting on? They might be more open to the idea if they can see you doing it." And being good at it. Mabel's on-stage presence demanded attention, she was captivating.

"Hm, that’s not bad, Dip-dop. I think Dad would like it."

"I figured they'd both like it," he said, "since they always enjoyed your high school performances." Whenever either of them invited their parents to something, they would show unless circumstances prevented it. Comparing his family to Bill's, it was disheartening that Dipper couldn't remember Bill's father at any of his events and doubted his mother would've been invited from how Bill spoke of her.

Dipper flashed to reality when he noticed Mabel wasn't in the armchair anymore but crawling
across the carpeted flooring, ducking under the coffee table presumably in search of Peaches but resurfacing to say, “Hope so. I think I’m going to do that, invite them.”

"Have you guys been doing auditions? Or do those start after break?"

“After break, when we decide on a production. Hey, have you seen where Peaches went?"

He wasn't sure since she'd been absent from his line of sight for a while now. It hadn't been too long, so it was unlikely that she'd already found mischief to dig herself into, but she was an astonishingly fast and determined bird. "Do you need help looking for her? Because I…” he trailed off, motioning to the sleepy Kiwi on his shirt.

Mabel shook her head, rolling up her sleeves comically high before she was searching along the floor, checking behind the couch. “I can’t wait for the auditions to begin, I’ve been trying hard when I practice by using all the tips they recommend and— aha!” Triumphantly, she stood with Peaches perched on her hand. “I got her, don’t worry.”

The birds' calm attitudes seemed to imply they were content here and not too shaken by their new environment, even though Peaches was determined to navigate every nook and cranny while Kiwi snoozed on him. "I'm glad we bird-proofed this place. Bill would've freaked out coming home to chewed plastic and cardboard."

“How's Bill doing these days? He's lived with them, like, a whole thirty-six hours.”

"He glares from across the room unless Kiwi annoys him with the 'divorce' stuff, then he has a one-sided argument with him,” Dipper said. "But it'll be good to relocate them soon, so he doesn't keep pouting about it and then I can live with you guys again.” Once the birds were taken care of, Dipper would also be packing his items and leaving for Stan and Ford's place. "If it's not too crowded, I mean." Or would be, if Bill decided he had to move in with them again too.

Mabel beamed at him, a laugh stifled into the sleeve of her oversized sweater. “I’d love to see those two go back and forth with the ‘divorce’ stuff, I can’t believe they picked that up.” She paused, murmuring stern instructions to Peaches about running off before she set her back on the floor with a loving pat on her head. “Are you planning on living with Bill once break is over?"

The question stunned Dipper, the unexpectedness causing him to falter and eventually sputter out, "I don't know. I didn't— haven't thought about it since the dorms should be open after break, and I'm not sure why I wouldn't live there with you."

“Well.. I wondered if this place would be easier for you. The bathroom in the dorm’s a mile away, and Bill picks you up in the morning anyway. Besides, we could keep the birds here."

Although the points she listed were valid, he was surprised by her depth of thought on the hypothetical and inwardly evaluated why she might've been considering that. "Wait, do you want me to live with him?" he half-joked, unsure. "Also, I don't know if he'd want to keep the birds, so… that one might not work out."

Mabel shook her head, frowning. “I don’t, but I thought you would. It seemed convenient for you, but I'd be happy if you stayed with me.”

Relief pooled in him. "Oh," he breathed, clasping his arm sheepishly. "good, I know it sounds stupid, but I was worried you were trying to get rid of me, or something. I wasn't planning on staying here after break." It'd been unthinkable and still was, the idea of suddenly not being together after a lifetime of inseparability. "I'd really miss you, Mabel."
“I’d really miss you too, Dipper. I’d never get rid of you.”

Feeling light with alleviation from anxiety, his hand brushed through his hair. “Good. That’s… good. We’ll go back to living in the dorms after break.” What Mabel had said about the restroom was true, the walk to the only gender-neutral one was unbearably long, but he'd take the trek over living under separate roofs.

The relief didn't last as a nagging thought prodded him, something Mabel needed to know about. Because he wasn't sure how to bring this up, Dipper determined he'd treat it like pulling off a bandage and blurted, "So, uh… I might need surgery." With anybody else, he might've mentally facepalmed at how abruptly he'd spoken, but Mabel never minded his shaky social skills.

“Again?” she asked. “Did your therapist talk to you about this?”

Heart feeling heavy, Dipper explained, "At my last appointment. It's a possibility that he thinks we should be looking into.” His tone suggested how he felt about it, a view he supposed Mabel sympathized with after seeing the lack of success brought by the last attempts at surgical correction.

Mabel nodded, slumping into the armchair thoughtfully. “I don’t know what that guy expects if the other times didn’t work…”

"I know," he agreed, comforted, not by the topic but Mabel's immediate understanding of it. She'd been there for him during the other surgeries, she'd helped with recovery, she knew precisely how much of a hindrance they'd been and for so little gain. "But he thinks it's getting worse and will continue unless another surgery is done, so it's not supposed to 'cure' it." It was a bandaid solution.

“Will anything help you in the long term?” she pondered and tapped her chin, staring at him intensely. "They better not hurt you.

"He's talked about therapy, surgery, then more therapy." It was a never-ending cycle, and the hope of living without the ache of constant pain was fleeting. "I'll ask at my next appointment, but I'm guessing he'll do that thing where he scratches his neck and goes into the, 'well… we're not sure yet' spiel."

“Annoying.” Mabel reached across the arm of her seat, patting his leg. "Do we need to hire a new physical therapist?"

"No, I'm kind of used to it. I've been hearing that for years now." It was difficult to believe they were reaching the actual point of its three-year-anniversary rather than rounding up, a day that only produced misery. "Thanks, though. I haven't decided if I'll take his advice."

Mabel tilted her head to a side. “It's up to you, but if your therapist thinks it'll help prevent future damage, it might not be the worst idea.”

Logically, she was right. That was the responsible option for future Dipper, but it wasn't factoring in the severe pain and recovery period, the possibility of no change at all. "I'll get more information," he promised, a defeated sigh rolling from him, "since I doubt he'll change his mind by the next appointment. I just… I'm sick of the invasive surgeries that don't help and leave me to deal with the aftermath."

“I know.” Mabel offered a weak smile. “I wish there was something more permanent, since it's cruel to make you go through all this.”

Past conversations indicated that Mabel had been against his idea of a permanent solution, but he
didn't blame her. It wasn't an ideal choice, hardly a choice at all — none of this was his 'choice', rather it was a set of circumstances that he'd been thrust into. It'd left him bitter.

"Me too," he finally replied, darker memories receding to the corners he kept them compartmentalized within. "It's... how it is, I guess." The admission sugarcoated it. Truthfully, he wasn't accepting of his situation, not nearly as at peace with the thought of this being the remainder of his life as he'd like others to believe.

Eager to move on because it was stirring discomfort, he asked, "Hey, where did Peaches go?" Once again, she was missing.

Mabel swiveled, eyes narrowing with confusion. "I'll find her before she goes somewhere she shouldn't be." Dipper agreed, trying to subtly disturb Kiwi from his sleep so he could look for the missing cockatiel who was a serial chewer and trouble-making expert. Mabel climbed off the armchair, beginning to scan the room. "I hope she hasn't gotten under anything."

Gently nudging Kiwi awake, he managed to persuade him onto his finger, a better position that permitted Dipper to join the search as he stood from the sofa. "Maybe the kitchen?" It seemed she wasn't in this room, but he lifted his eyes to where it branched into the main and guest bedrooms, a flash of movement there. "Or the hallway.." Quick strides forward brought her into view. "Found her by the grate." She was busy cocking her head, fluffing up, and nibbling at the metal.

Mabel's padded footsteps were behind him, colorful socks swishing over carpet, and she knelt down to collect Peaches from the floor. "Good thing she can't get into that vent."

Humming, he said, "Yeah. She's more of an explorer than I am."

His phone vibrated with a text from Bill, promptly read to report, "Bill's done with his shift and says he'll be back soon, after an errand."

Peaches' whistle brought his attention to where the cockatiel was dodging Mabel's offer of a finger-perch, hopping over to the grate instead. "Oh, Peaches, don’t do that," Mabel chided. Peaches was working on removing the plastic covers of the screws with her beak, an attempted jail break if Dipper ever saw one. "So Bill's coming? Is he going to mind the cockatiels?"

"I... figured we might want to get them back into their cage before that," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "It's not that I think he'd mind, but... uh, okay, he'd probably mind. At least they don't seem that hostile toward him anymore." Kiwi repeating the intonation of wanting a divorce was far from hissing, a menacing display to ward Bill off.

Mabel eventually coaxed Peaches to her finger to bring her into the living room. "Is Kiwi ready to go back in?"

Dipper shrugged lightly so as not to disturb him. "I don't think he'd mind, he doesn't seem that interested in looking around. Plus, we could always have them out later too."

"If we do, keep an eye on Peaches. She is adamant on unscrewing that grate."

Once they had the birds in the cage and were piled on the sofa, indulging themselves in amusing videos, it was only a couple minutes before they heard the telltale noise of the main doors slamming down the hall, followed by someone jiggling the door lock. Dipper and Mabel exchanged a glance, unmoving, until there was a frustrated groan.

"I'll go let him in," Dipper said, checking the time as he got up. "It took him longer than I thought."
The door swinging open, Bill entered with Marigold trotting at his side, a guest Dipper was surprised by, but… maybe not that surprised either. “Hey, Pine Tree, Shooting Star.” The moment he unclipped Marigold, she made a beeline to sniff the table.

Bill was similarly interested. “What happened to my table?”

"I didn't know Marigold was coming," he commented, ignoring the question to observe her poking along the coffee table, and Dipper wondered if she could smell the birds. It was amazing how she'd missed them, but that likely wouldn't last now that they'd spotted her and were sounding the alarm. As expected, Marigold’s ears perked, and she approached the bird cage to peer up at them while her tail wagged excitedly. Over the noise, he said, "And uh, your table? What's wrong with it?"

“It has bird prints on it.”

Walking over amid the cacophony, he blinked as he realized there were tiny bird prints on it. "I'll dust tomorrow." If not for the accrued dust, the bird prints wouldn't have existed. "But yeah, Kiwi and Peaches were out. We," he motioned to himself and Mabel, who was showering Marigold in pats, "thought they've had enough time to acclimate and let them roam.”

Bill scowled, muttering. “I swear, if they shit—”

"Dude, relax. They do that in their cage. So… about Marigold. She's not going to hurt them or anything, right?” he inquired, peering to her as she sat, tail waving, in front of the cockatiels' cage. They'd quieted but were still nervous of her.

“The worse thing she’ll do is lick them. She’s not aggressive, Pine Tree.”

"I just… don't want her to scare or chase them.” That would lead to panicked cockatiels and feathers flying.

"They lived with Meownaise," Mabel piped in with a helpful description denoting him as her cat, "but he ignored them when they were out."

“She won’t bother them,” Bill said. “Maybe she’ll watch them for a bit, but she’ll lose interest.”

E lecting to observe the interaction first, Dipper swapped the subject by asking, "How was work?"

“Work was fine. I sold a car to an old couple who comes in every two months or so according to my co-workers. It's like they can't handle keeping the same car.”

Balking at the consumerism and costliness of that lifestyle, Dipper jokingly said, "Wow, I'm surprised you didn't know them if they have tons of expendable income to throw at cars." It was an odd line of work that Bill had selected to pursue for fun, nothing but his own desire to be busy and rake in extra cash. "These co-workers of yours, are they as morally-bankrupt as you?" he teased, a jab at the profession and Bill's prowess.

Bill frowned at him. “I'm not morally-bankrupt, I'm morally-wealthy!”

"You're right. When I see someone passing off a barely-functioning car at the price of one that's brand new, I stop and think to myself, 'man, that guy must do a lot for charity in his spare time, what a hero.'"

“Hey, these cars are top of the line quality. You can’t get anything better.” Bill turned away from him in a huff. “You don’t know anything about our vehicles.” Dipper cracked a grin at the usage of our vehicles. Bill was truly assimilating into his new position and had found his people, a better fit
"Hey Mabel," he started, twisting to see her sitting near the birds and speaking to them in hushed
tones, "how are they doing?"

"I think they're okay," she said as she stepped away. "Scared, but they've calmed." The birds were
back to their own business, enjoying the safety of the wire separating them and Marigold. As Bill
promised, Marigold had lost interest but would peer over any time they made a hoot or a whistle.

Recognition glittering in her eyes, Mabel perked up. "Hey, Dipper. Maybe while we're at home,
we can see about visiting that one place."

That… one place. Way to be vague about that, Mabel, he thought to himself and was pondering
what she could be referring to, why she would phrase it like that. "The place," he repeated
quizzically, cogwheels of his mind grinding, chewing the inside of his lip. Because Mabel didn't
offer any further details, he assumed she was deliberately trying to skirt the topic. Perhaps because
they were around Bill—

When mentally listing places Bill wouldn't like or approve of, it occurred to him. Downey.
Tentatively, he asked, "You mean the one place where we'd do that thing we used to do more
often? With those other people that wanted to do it with us?"

"That's the one," she confirmed. "Does he know?"

Bill was thoroughly perplexed, an expression of utter confusion that Dipper wasn't certain he'd seen
on him before. "What the fuck are you two talking about?"

Glossing over the question, he gave the faintest shake of his head. "We haven't… I didn't yet." He
swallowed and swished his hands together nervously, unsure of how that conversation would
unfold when he had an inkling Bill would be against it, more so if he knew Robbie would be there.
It was a chance to test if he was serious about being more friendly toward him.

"What are you talking about?" Bill repeated, louder. "Pine Tree, stop being secretive. I want to
know."

"Uh, hold on." Intending to prevent an outburst from Bill, he guided him to the sofa and
encouraged him to sit, then wriggled in. It was a cozy arrangement as he draped his legs over Bill's
lap, hovering close. "We… were thinking about doing something over break, and maybe you want
to come with…?" A vague statement, but he guessed it was a start.

Bill cocked his head, resting his hand on his stomach. Dipper briefly debated if he would feel his
quickening heart rate.

"We were thinking of…" he struggled for words that wouldn't instantly ring warning bells, "of
going to this one historic site? Y'know, to look around. See history."

"Historic site?" Bill prompted. "There aren't many places here for sightseeing."

"Yeah… I wasn't thinking it'd be here, it's sort of close. Over in Downey," and after a second of
gauging Bill's reaction, he continued, "there's a place that used to care for, uh, homeless, sick,
mentally ill people, among others…"

"No."

"But—"
“And you’re not going, either.”

Maintaining the facade as long as he could, he asked, "What's wrong with going to Downey to… examine history? Mabel and I thought it'd be fun."

Bill saw through him, unamused. “I know about the hospital, Pine Tree. Robbie’s been wanting to check it out for months.”

"Okay, but—" he exhaled, it was a lost effort. "...I didn't know you knew about that." In hindsight, he shouldn't have pitched the plan when Mabel was definitely better at acting between the two of them. Of course Robbie would wreck this, and he wasn't even here! Dipper didn't dwell on it, weaving a new plan into existence: ego-stroking. "Right, but… it'd be safe," he assured, leaning in and mustering his best doe-eyes, "because you'd be there."

“How, exactly, would me being there make things safe? The building is falling apart.” Rationality wasn't a component in stroking Bill's ego, so he was at a loss of where to go from here. He'd been banking on Bill overlooking that in favor of the flattery. “Oh-ho, yes. I did my research. The ceiling has holes in it and have you seen all the boards on the floor? Think of the nails, cutie. That’s a health hazard. You don’t want to get tetanus.”

"What, were you planning on going barefoot?" he asked with a frown. "Just… wear shoes. That'll pretty much take care of the nail thing, and as for the ceiling, you're so tall that it probably won't matter for you." That was a lame joke, told by his frown lifting, but it wasn't actually a point of concern for Dipper since the likelihood of the building literally falling apart while they were inside was slim.

“Nails can go through shoes, Pine Tree. And into your foot, and bang, you need to go to the hospital.” Bill slimmed his gaze, withdrawing his hand from Dipper’s body. “You won’t be grinning when a piece of ceiling falls on your head.”

"Yeah, so don't wear... like, flip-flops. Wear your normal shoes, and watch where you're going." Urban exploration wasn't wading mindlessly through the darkness, it required being alert and in-tune with the surroundings if the area was even potentially a hazard. "Look, if the ceiling is unsafe, we won't go inside."

“And what about the floors?” Bill countered. “They’re probably rotting. You’ll fall right through. And you're waltzing into the lair of the Satanists? Look, everyone! We got some human sacrifices who wandered in.”

"You mean the cult rumors? I… think we'll be okay. Maybe let's not go on the roof, though." Bill didn't seem impressed with that, and Dipper's half-grin turned sheepish under the scrutiny. "I'm not expecting an answer now, okay? You have time to think about it." It wasn't that Dipper believed he didn't have an answer already, it was that he knew the answer and thought there was a possibility he'd change his mind if given space to weigh the risks.

Before Bill could say anything, Mabel piped in excitedly, "Hey, what Bill said about the Satanists and cults made me remember there's this special on tonight. A bunch of hikers go into the woods and investigate super spooky happenings because of these crazy rituals! Then, one goes missing and it becomes a mystery thriller! You guys wanna watch?"

Dipper was oblivious to Bill's skepticism, wholly enamored by the basis of the television program and nodding enthusiastically. His agreement seemed to be enough because Mabel switched on the television, surfing through the channels. "Buckle up, mystery nerds and grumpy bumblebees."
Bill folded his arms, but Dipper saw through the act and suppressed a laugh. Relaxed by the dissipating tension in the air, he nuzzled closer to Bill, glad he was lightening up a little. The annoyance was more for show, as indicated by the twitch of his lips—a trace of a smile—and the reciprocative nuzzle.

The evening sun splashed over the classic red convertible and the men working on it with oil-stained shirts and sweaty foreheads, a serene sight to behold from the steps of the apartment complex. It was reminiscent of the day at the beach, but thankfully without the threat of being stranded for hours since Stan had simply wanted to get the engine running smoothly again. That'd been a cuss-filled call to Bill that Dipper had the joy of overhearing, and they'd both driven over to assist in the body work. Except… Dipper was more of an onlooker than a helper, but he preferred thinking of his role as the supervisor.

“You know, Stan,” Bill began, uprooting Dipper from his thoughts. “We wouldn’t have to do this so often if you bought a new vehicle. Trade this in and I can hook you up.”

“Whoa, ya ain’t touchin’ my car, Bill. She’s mine, and I’m not tradin’ her for some fancy overpriced piece of trash.”

Dipper found himself smiling at Stan's stubbornness, and recognized a new car would put an end to spectating as Bill worked on it during fair-weathered evenings — a definite drawback. "I'm pretty sure this car is not only Stan's hobby, but his adopted child basically.”

“It’s more than a child!” Stan said. “It’s everythin’, kid— look, my car and I go way back, and ya ain’t takin’ her from me.”

Bill raised his hands, palms out. “Easy, it was a suggestion. This thing breaks down every other week.”

"Yeah, isn't that why you guys are under the hood?" Dipper asked, the question directed at either.

“Why else would I want him to replace it?” Bill questioned, lowering his arms. Despite its breakdowns, Stan's adoration for his car seemed unwavering and from what Dipper had heard from Ford, Stan had been in love with the car from the moment he'd seen it almost a decade ago. To Stan, he asked through a laugh, "What are you two doing for your ten-year anniversary?"

“We’re goin’ on a date,” Stan said, patting the hood with a proud puff of his chest. “And I’m gonna propose.”

Leaning on his hands, he felt his back nudge the concrete step and rested there, reclined and content as he indulged himself in the view of Bill hunched over the hood with a rag in hand as he stared at the engine. His dichromatic eyes were vivid, one hand on his hip and the other clasping the side of the vehicle. The stance cast a shadow that stretched almost to Dipper's toes, and he marveled at how tall he was, how it felt to have that much person wrapped around him whenever they cuddled. It was Stan's grunt that reminded him he hadn't replied, and Dipper hummed, adding, "Oh, that's… good." He couldn't even recall what Stan had said.

“I thought ya'd have more of an issue with me marryin’ her.”

"This car—that does not have a gender—is way too old for you, but hey, if it makes you happy." Maybe it would save him from future embarrassing incidents involving real women too, unless he was going to shout to the world that he'd married his car. Then probably not.
“She’s not old,” Stan objected, whirling to look at Dipper. “Kid, she’s as young and spry as she ever was, and that’s a fact.”

Bill rolled his eyes, lightly kicking the front tire. “She’s so old and rusted she can’t hold herself together anymore. Cut your losses and let her go, Stan.” Despite what Stan claimed, Dipper was inclined to take Bill's side on this when it was almost to the point where Stan would be relying on duct tape soon to hold 'her' together.

To Bill, he said, "Even if he does get a new vehicle, he wouldn't be getting one from you so you can quit the commission-chasing. Stan's a fan of those back alley deals where it's fifty-fifty on getting a car at a decent price or getting stabbed. Unless… that's how the dealership operates?"

Defensively, Bill crossed his arms. “How dare you, Pine Tree. My dealership is classy, and if Stan wants bang for his buck, he’ll go to me.”

“I ain’t payin’ some Scammership,” Stan stated determinedly. “I know a guy that can get me one cheap if I need a new gal.”

Dipper tilted his head, straightening his back to see into the hood that Bill was leaned over attentively. Failing to notice any difference from when they'd started, he asked, "Have you guys made progress?" Uninterested in cars, he couldn't remember what they said they were specifically trying to do, just that it had something to do with the engine… or transmission, or whatever other piece was buried in there.

Stan reached into his car through the window, turning it on with an aura of accomplishment. “Sure did. Works like a charm, too.” Every time the roar of the engine filled the air, it was like a deity had arrived before their very eyes in how celebrated it was.

“For another two hours.” Bill shook his head, and Dipper snorted. “I don’t know why you don’t get a new one. It’d be more time efficient than fighting with this.”

Although Stan was protesting what Bill had said, Dipper cut in, "If it didn't have so many issues, I don't know what you guys would bond over. Beer? Fist fighting?" Working on a car running at sub-optimal levels was the bread and butter of their relationship, a way they could hang out and trade light-hearted insults.

“We could do both,” Stan said, a grumble. “Get in some good ol’ fights while being drunk as fuck.”

"That sounds like one of your worst ideas, actually," he said, "and also, I didn't mean combining those." Really, they were a volatile pairing and would land Stan and Bill in jail overnight if they were especially rowdy. Dipper winced. "Yeah, let's… not do that. Working on the car is fine."

“What, ya don’t think we can handle some booze and fightin’?”

"I seriously know you can't handle it."

Before he could elaborate, a window stories above them was opening to reveal Ford's head poking out, distant ringing resounding from the apartment. "Dipper! Your timer is going off."

Rising from the concrete step when he connected that the food was nearly ready, he said to Stan and Bill, "Why don't you come in pretty soon? I'm guessing dinner will be served in a couple minutes."

Stan made a beeline for the door, disappearing inside without a word despite Dipper cautioning
that it wouldn't be done yet. It had no effect, Stan was gone. Bill shook his head as he watched him go, pursing his lips. "I'm going to surprise him." Dipper's eyebrows raised, Bill rubbed his hands devilishly. "With a new car."

"What you mean is, you're going to 'surprise' him with monthly payments of two thousand dollars for like, five years." That was an exaggeration, but it made his point. "Us poor people can't afford new cars, unless you're gifting it to him." Even then, it was a gamble since Stan was oddly attached to his car and wouldn't take kindly to technology.

Bill flashed him a toothy grin, a hand swiping over the small of his back. "Please. If you saved up, you wouldn't need to worry about the cost. You'd be totally down for getting it and paying back ten grand a month for five years."

"Saving kind of requires an income," he said, "and if you're not saying that generally, I think it's necessary to point out that I don't have one of those, but I do have a rich boyfriend, so..." Lips twitching up in a smile, he glanced over his shoulder to Bill and felt a warmth in the pit of his stomach, not caused by the aroma of dinner that wafted from the open window. He was still enchanted by Bill's physique, truly shameless. "You look good when you work on cars," he said offhandedly, then coughed the thought away. "Anyway, can I interest you in some fine cuisine?"

"Anything you make is sublime," Bill informed him while they entered the building. "Simply out of this world." The compliment was well-received, taking the amount of butterflies erupting within him as any indication, noting the reference to Bill's other love: galaxies, astrophysics, constellations, anything star- or space-related.

"Wonderful, Dipper," Ford complimented, setting his dishes to the side. With a sideways glance at Stan, he said, "Better than what Stanley tends to 'cook', or rather, claims he cooks but is microwaving frozen food."

Bill smirked, casually leaned in his chair like the cat who'd eaten the bird, lazily pleased with himself after finishing his meal. "It's not hard to make food superior to microwaved shit, Fordsy."

Ford shot Bill a look. "Your previous diet of alcohol and sadness is not backing your argument, Cipher." Dipper broke into a smile and nudged Bill, almost pressing into him affectionately before jolting to attention, aware that Stan and Ford didn't know about them.

"Hey," Stan complained, luckily unaware of what'd transpired. "My microwaved grub is delicious, an' anyone who says otherwise has no sense of taste!"

Chuckling good-naturedly, Dipper said, "Oh, come on. This is way better and healthier too. Even Marigold likes it more." The last bit was tacked on as Marigold's muzzle settled on his lap, her eyes pleading for leftovers. A heartbreaking sight, but Bill was strict on his policy: no leftovers for Marigold, minus the ones Bill sneaked her when he didn't think anyone saw.

Bill patted his knee for Marigold to come, and her toenails clicked on the linoleum, joining the sound of Stan's silverware scraping the last remnants of food from his plate. "She wouldn't go near anything Stan made. She's classy."

Stan grumbled. "None of ya are gettin' my food ever again. Ya don't appreciate the classics."

"Ah yes, the classics," he teased lightly. "Like... vegetable patty that doesn't resemble a patty, or something edible honestly. Or pizza wrap that contains no less than ninety-percent air, ten percent
factory leftovers. Can't forget our favorite: lasagna that tastes like it's made from the rubber of used tires."

"Put a sock in it, kid," said Stan gruffly, masking his delight in the banter. "My cuisine is fuckin’ appetizing."

Although the rational side of him was tempted to say it wasn't Stan's cuisine at all but belonged to the conglomerate that produced it, he refrained to instead measure, "So anyway, how was dinner?" Judging by the state of their dishes, nobody had serious complaints.

"Oddly nutritious for how flavorful it is and quite good, Dipper," Ford said, "but I would have preferred slightly less sodium. Stanley and I are supposed to be monitoring our intake."

"No I’m not," Stan objected. "I love salt, ya can’t take it away from me." The dubious glance that Ford spared him was enough to confirm Dipper's hypothesis that it wasn't Ford who needed to be monitoring his salt intake, but primarily Stan.

"I would offer to stay and cook for you guys so you don’t have to get fast food, but the birds can't be here," Dipper said, a touch pointedly. "Because someone rewards them for screeching. Wonder who, uh, that could be..."

Stan scoffed, fork meticulously scraping crumbs from the plate. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said defiantly. “I didn’t do any of that, and ya can’t prove it."

“We could always ask your landlord,” Bill offered, a challenging glint in his eye.

Laughing, he recalled how he'd walked in multiple times on Stan goading the birds, his chant of 'fight, fight, fight' directed at the TV and reinforcing the birds for doing it with him. They were a noisy crew, and as much as Kiwi and Peaches had loved the stimulation, the landlord hadn't been as pleased. "The birds always have a lot to say when they see you. They get super talkative."

“Look kid, ya can’t blame me for bondin’ with those little bastards. They’re good company!”

Apparently, the birds agreed with how they sped to Stan when they'd been living here. "You can visit them, just don't get them riled up because I don't want to get kicked out of Bill's apartment too." The topic reminded him that they'd need a bird-sitter in the near future. "Maybe you could stop by over the weekend? I don't know if you're working, but... if you're free, they'll need someone to check in on them since Bill and I are going to NorCal."

Stan and Ford waited with intrigue, though Bill didn’t look as elated, leaving the room with his plate. “I wish I could, kid, but I’m goin’ north too— got a construction job site up there.”

While Ford was hovering partially over the table to grab their plates, he said, "If you need someone to care for them, I should be available."

"Thanks, Ford," he replied, grateful. "I'll get you a spare key before we go, and you can stop in to make sure they're doing okay. So..." he turned back to Stan, "you're going north? How far north, because maybe we could carpool?" Stan's critical reaction prompted Dipper to explain, "For the environment."

“Bout an hour,” he answered. “How long are ya gonna take? I ain't gettin' stuck up there if I don’t have to.”

"Like, five or six hours. Joseph—he's Bill's cousin, I don't think you know him—wanted to get married near the bay area."
Dipper was swiftly corrected when Stan didn't bother hiding his reaction of disgust with his hand slamming onto the table, a repulsed eugh noise spat out and a curl of his lip. “Joseph, huh? That sonofabitch, I can’t believe I’m missin’ his fuckin’ wedding. I need to get that fucker somethin’ — a date with my fist.”

Exceedingly puzzled, he reared back. "You… know him?" And from the tone of Stan's voice, the clench of his fists, it implied they weren't on good terms.

‘Do I know him?’ Stan barked, a roar of anger embedded in it. "That piece of shit told me I was worthless for being a blank.” Once the shock diminished, Dipper swore his jaw had to be on the floor because he was gawking, a sudden surge of dislike for Joseph churning in his stomach after hearing he'd verbally shamed Stan for that. "I feel sorry for the broad who got stuck with ‘im.”

"It's his soulmate," he supplied, almost bitter. "He was nice to me at dinner, sort of weird.. like, hung up on this religion stuff, but I didn't know he did that.” Still stunned, discomfort was creeping into him, wondering if attending the wedding would be a mistake if that was how Joseph felt. He was convinced that constituted keeping as far away from him as possible. "I… knew he was into it, but I didn't know that he actually— so, he said you were worthless because of your blank mark? Dude. Bill!” When he didn't instantly appear, he tried again, "Bill!

“What?” Bill questioned as he peeked from the kitchen, hands buried in a towel to dry them. “Why are you calling me?”

"Is that what you were talking about? When you were saying all those things about Joseph?” Admittedly, Dipper hadn't believed him due to his habit of warping the truth in similar situations, such as his perception of Robbie and occasionally Wendy. He'd passed it off as that, dinner being the confirmation that he was religious to an extreme but not the monster he'd expected.

"You didn’t believe me, so I figured you’d find out for yourself.”

"I don't think your tendency to exaggerate things helped, man. I just didn't know…” he trailed off, squinting at nothing in particular, zoning out while he dazedly focused on the pattern of the shoddy wooden table and contemplating a way of politely declining the wedding invitation. But it seemed cruel to leave Bill to deal with it himself since his own parents weren't attending, his father deeming Bill the representative of their branch of the family tree. "If he's still like that, we should probably make ourselves scarce at any other events he's hosting, or at." Outwardly a… semi-decent guy, but Dipper couldn't bring himself to tolerate someone who'd degraded Stan.

"Why would he change?” Bill questioned. “He’s been like this for his entire life.”

That wasn't reassuring. "Jesus Christ, is everyone in your family—? I knew they were traditional, but..."

“I’m not.”

"Yeah, I know," Bill was pretty much the opposite, hating his soulmark and the customs it upheld, "I meant in your family, not you.”

“My parents don't care as long as I marry my soulmate and some kid is created from my dick.”

He made a complaintive squeak alongside Stan's revoluted noise, referencing the more not-safe-for-work aspects of that and the reminder of child-rearing expectations. "Can't we have that discussion later? Without Stan and Ford." Ford had appeared in the entryway but looked as if he was considering returning to the kitchen wordlessly.
“You wanted to know!” Bill objected. “Would it have been better if I Robbie-fyed it by saying ‘bloated meat—’?”

Well, he guessed he did want to know but still hadn't thought he'd receive his answer in graphic detail, not that it held a candle to the overwhelming weight of the soulmate problem that had yet to be addressed on his part, or acknowledged at all on Bill's. It left Dipper wishing he could estimate if he had the faintest of suspicions but couldn't build the boldness to ask, but the silence was choking. Ignoring it wouldn't last forever.

He had no idea which issue would be the one to break their relationship, but he didn't dare make even a peep that'd allude to his thoughts because Bill was aloof to the impending revelation that'd undoubtedly alter his perception of him. Forecasting his reaction was beyond imagination, uncertain of how he would possibly take the news; and miserably, Dipper determined that was an ongoing mystery that he didn't want to unravel.

Chapter End Notes

Ready your religious texts, formalwear, and tissues because next week is our good pal Joseph's wedding.

Also, thank you to everyone who continues to read this fic. We are so appreciate for the support <3
Hey guys, sorry for the wait!! We're both fine, we've just had some things come up (traveling and a family emergency) so it's been hard to work on editing this chapter.

This one is extra long, and it took us ages to finalize it for you guys! We hope you enjoy this, it's definitely been long awaited. <3

[I know we don't usually warn for things in this fic, but this chapter gets a little graphic with blood, gore, and trauma.]

"Bill said he's waiting with the vehicle." Dipper glanced from the phone screen to Mabel, then to his packed suitcase near the door of Bill's apartment. Clothes, amenities, chargers, a laptop, everything and more than he'd need for an overnight stay. "I'll be back late tonight or early on Sunday, alright?"

"Sounds good, Dipper. Call or text me if you need anything, okay?"

"I will," he said, grinning. "What, are you coming to NorCal to rescue me if something goes wrong?"

"Yeah." Dipper's amusement was leveled with her solemnness, lips pressed firm in a thin line. "I will be your Mabel in shining armor." The scary element was, she might actually do it, and it wouldn't take her six hours to arrive because she wasn't a six-foot-one chicken that was too scared of planes to board them.

"I'll call you tonight if I'm not back. And if you need anything, you can always call and text me too."

"Of course," Mabel said, the snag in her voice suggesting she was as worried as him. "Hey Dipper, don't have too much fun without me, okay?"

"Fun?" Dipper repeated, snorting. "Yeah, I don't think the wedding will be that fun. I'm pretty sure you'll be the one having fun with Ford and our cockatiels over the weekend. Without me."

Although he tried to faked a pout, he broke it after a moment and smiled, dragging her into a hug that she was happy to return, her enthusiasm in the tightness of her squeeze. "Look, keep me updated on how things go, if you can."

It worked wonders for reassurance, and her shoulders fell. "I will. You'd better, too. NorCal is a weird place and not always in the good way."

"I think I'll be okay. I have a guide who fits in with the locals, even if he does insist on calling it NorCali."

Goodbyes exchanged to both Mabel and the cockatiels, he walked from the door of the apartment with his suitcase in tow to find that Bill was standing impatiently near the trunk of his golden vehicle and all but confiscated the luggage from him to throw it inside. "What took you so long?" Traces of stress were in Bill's demand, a likely result of knowing they had a massive drive ahead of
them with a wedding they both wished to skip as a reward.

Dipper's expression flattened, unamused.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa~" Bill raised his hands up, palms outward. "Don’t be so hasty, sweetie. Relax, I didn’t mean it."

At Bill's backpedaling, he said teasingly, "Yeah, okay. I highly doubt that you've turned the other cheek and aren't a total jerk anymore, but I still tolerate you." For what their relationship had been and continued to be, it was a situationally-appropriate, modified version of the more popular phrase. Clasping his hands behind his back, he rolled forward onto the pads of his feet to reach Bill's jaw and press a kiss to it.

"Tolerate you too." Bill blew a kiss at him, Dipper did his best enamored impression. As he retreated, he noticed Bill's bags alongside his in the vehicle's trunk.

"So, are we ready to leave?"

"We are," he confirmed and slammed the trunk closed, heading for the driver's seat. "You coming?"

With a "yeah", he hopped into the passenger seat to recline, stretching out and narrowly missing Bill's nose with his arm. Once comfortable with his legs aching less and the radio adjusted, he commented, "I can't believe you're making me go to NorCal."

"Blame Joseph, not me." The car roared to life. "He wanted his dumb wedding there."

"A wedding that you have to attend to… what did you say, 'represent your side of the family' or something?" If that wasn't indicative of flaunting wealth and status, he didn't know what was. "Also, how formal is this going to be? Because I…" he motioned toward himself, specifically his plaid shirt and jeans.

"We'll get you something nice when we're there," Bill said, pulling the car into reverse. "You’ll learn to appreciate formal attire, Pine Tree."

Dipper wasn't sure he agreed, but he didn't say anything more.

"Hey Pine Tree, it’s your turn."

"What? What's my turn?" he asked, rubbing his eyes and sitting up in his seat to survey his new surroundings. Last he'd checked, it was a freeway on a desert. Same desert, no freeway, but a gas station with overly-luminescent lighting and neon signs advertising their specials.

"We’re getting gas." There was a frankness to his voice, a sign he didn’t want to argue. "I did it the first time, it’s your turn. Come on, cutie."

"You… wait, you want me to put gas in your car?" Dipper asked, skeptical. "It's your car, and you're a big boy of twenty-three years old."

Aside from a stubborn unwillingness, there was a glaring problem: he didn't know how. Kind of had an idea, in theory, but never put it into practice because there hadn't been any reason to learn without intentions of graduating from a learner's permit, so it wasn't worthwhile. "You're going to have to get out too if you're serious about making me do this. Show me how because you're talking to the guy with no license." When it didn't register, he clarified, "I haven't pumped gas once in my
“Are you fucking kidding me?” His pitch rose in disbelief.

Although he shook his head to confirm that, no, he wasn't kidding, he nevertheless joked, "Living in luxury without touching a day of work or duty isn't exclusive to you."

“I know how to pump gas," Bill replied, defensive. "Why don’t you? Your parents were that neglectful?” Dipper scoffed at the notion.

"I don’t drive, and I'm never going to drive because I basically can't," he explained, a tidbit Bill already knew but seemed to be forgetting. "That's why it hasn't really come up before."

“Unbelievable,” Bill muttered as he unbuckled and tossed the seatbelt off. “Can you at least get snacks from the station? I’ll give you money.”

"What do you want me to get?" It was a promotion from being in charge of refueling, so he'd seize the opportunity to walk under irritating fluorescent lights and make awkward small talk with the teenager taking the afternoon shift.

“Snacks. I don’t fucking care what.” Despite his words, his mouth had curved upward in a smile. “Oh, and see if you can find a stupid wedding gift while you’re at it. Don’t spend more than this on it, alright?” He handed him fifteen dollars. "The rest is for food and beverages.”

About to ask how much Bill thought he needed, he was given the answer in the form of a fifty dollar bill, which traveled in his clenched, sweaty palms into the building. The place was dingy, outdated, a little gross like most gas stations, but the selection was better than what he'd expected.

He stocked on sugary sweets, salty snacks, and eventually settled on a metal, multicolored butterfly statue with ‘GOLDEN STATE’ painted across in broad strokes. Ugly, but he wasn't sure if the donkey in a sombrero or the dancing, singing cactus would be any better. Maybe he'd swap the butterfly for the cactus, depending on how much Bill hated his cousin— he expected the answer was quite a lot, considering the wedding gift was coming from a middle-of-nowhere gas station in central California.

"Hey," he greeted as he returned to the vehicle, recently moved from the pump to the front parking. "Thanks for…” he trailed off with a cough and gestured to the new parking spot, grateful for Bill's attempts at making his life easier when he was understandably sore. "Also, I got some stuff.”

“What’d you get?” Bill asked, perking with interest. “Did you find a stupid gift for them?”

"This… uh, butterfly thing." Dipper retrieved the sculpture from the bag and frowned in thought, surveying it. "You shouldn't shop for wedding gifts at gas stations, man.”

Bill’s body shook with laughter. “They’ll love it. It symbolizes their lack of success compared to mine, both in their financials and intelligence.”

"Is this actually all you're going to give them? This doesn't say, 'I care about you and wish you the best in your marriage.' Honestly, it's more like, 'I couldn't be bothered to get you anything, so I gave my amazing boyfriend fifteen dollars to pick up the first knick-knack that looked decent.'"

“And it doesn’t even look decent,” Bill quipped matter-of-factly, shoving the gear shift. “Looks exactly like it should: shit, because that’s all their marriage is going to be.”

The gas station was soon in the rear view mirror with the vehicle heading toward the highway once
more, a rare Californian rain splattering the windshield and blurring the other headlights. Chilled by the sight, Dipper folded his arms in front of him, flannel held close to preserve warmth. After a beat of contemplating Bill's view of their marriage, he inquired, "Is it because they're soulmates?"

Disgust brewed on Bill's face. "Nothing good comes from soulmates being together. It's a bunch of horseshit spewed by the media because they want us to be brainless pawns. I'm not falling for it."

"Wow." He pivoted to Bill to watch him through the low beams of street lights, chewing his lip as he gauged his response, inwardly measured how it'd be taken. "For someone who doesn't want to be a slave of his soulmark, you kind of let it control your life."

"Nothing controls my life," he grumbled, and if weren't for driving, Dipper bet his arms would be folded. "Not even stupid Pine Trees who don't know what they're talking about."

Dipper hummed, restless. "I guess it doesn't control your life, but you put in a lot of effort to ignore it and hide it and stuff."

"I'm not talking about this." Bill's statement had a shrewdness to it, looking straight ahead at the road while his shoulders were bunched in an unnecessary clench.

Willing to move on and bypass the fight, Dipper replied, "Okay." Then yawned, sinking into the passenger seat as his eyes closed. Four hours in, two more to go before they'd arrive at the ceremony and have to stay for the reception.

Bill sourly tapped the steering wheel. "You don't know what you're talking about."

It wasn't that shocking to hear the regurgitation of the same conversation he'd dropped, and he knew it still had the potential to be volatile while Bill was stewing on it. There was no doubt he was, the little squint of his eyes, curl of his lip. Bitterness seeped from him. So, he ignored what Bill had said and asked, "Do you think it'll be raining when we get there? It's weird, seeing this sort of weather."

"Probably not," Bill muttered, though he hadn't brightened. "We're several hours away."

"Yeah, I hope so." Joseph had fallen from his graces, but Dipper wouldn't stoop to wishing him badly on his wedding day since it seemed... petty, something Bill would do. He'd reserve it for him. "If it doesn't, we could always say we couldn't make it because of inclement weather." Bill's confusion prompted him to gesture to the windshield and say, "Dude, it's— storming." The rain was short of a downpour, no thunder that he could hear but perhaps Bill's favorite radio station was tuning that out. "We're basically driving through a monsoon for California's standards."

"Cottonwood Tree, you need to be out in real bad weather. Like I said, this is nothing."

Dipper rolled his eyes but was smiling faintly. "It's not a drizzle. A drizzle is when you accidentally sneeze on yourself because that's the only time it 'rains' here. There's standing water in the road—that doesn't happen during a drizzle, man."

"Cottonwood Tree, you need to be out in real bad weather. Like I said, this is nothing."

"I get that you feel at home in like, total humidity and intermittent showers, but this is unusual." Despite the poor weather conditions, it was typical traffic, the roads packed to the brim with
speeding vehicles. Sliding his phone from the cupholder, he checked the time and could've groaned. "How much longer do we have again?"

"The Creators are raining on the Joseph Parade, it’s fine.” Dipper snorted as Bill glanced at the clock. “And about ninety-five minutes.” Dipper was tempted to revive the idea of citing weather as the reason to turn around.

Struggling to stretch out in the space below the seat, he said, "My legs are dying a slow, cramping death.” They throbbed from immobility, almost worse than walking since he was physically constrained by his environment and couldn't make himself comfortable.

Bill shook his head, scrunching his eyebrows incredulously. "And you think being in the car for another three hours would help with that, honey?"

"The alternative is seven and a half hours."

"You can live with that seven and a half hours, we’re not going back.” His voice had tensed.

"Back? Like going home?"

"Like going to… my apartment." The guardedness of the response hinted that Bill didn't share his perception of his apartment being their home. It didn't seem that Bill wished to discuss it, because he continued faster, “Besides, you can spit on Joseph when you see him.”

Well, that was oddly enlightening in regards to what Bill was plotting. "I'm not you. It wouldn't matter with the rain, but that's getting kind of off topic..." Dipper shook his head. "Anyway, I don't even know why he invited me. Did he have too many chairs to fill or something?” Or maybe he was Bill's plus-one, he couldn't recall.

“Oh, you know. Joseph doesn’t have enough guests for his sermon, or his preaching, or his Bible-thumping ways. Just wait, the vows will be quotes from a holy text.”

He cast him a sideways look. "Like yours would be any better. It would probably be straight out of your teacher's edition on physics."

Bill feigned offense. “No, I’d talk about how the force of gravity brings us together.”

That came with a subtle suggestion that Bill's hypothetical was for them. Dipper bit his lip, holding down a giddy laugh that died as fast as it came with a sharp reminder of their potential soulmate status slapping him in the face. Glancing away, he rubbed the back of his neck and said, "Yeah.. I mean, I'd be down for that."

“Don’t make this gayer than it already is, sugar," he teased, hand outstretched on the console in an invitation to intertwine them. Dipper jumped at the opportunity.

"We're boyfriends," he said, "I don't see how this isn't already pretty gay. I guess maybe we could pull over and suck each other off, but…"

“Well I don’t know about you, but I love getting roadhead.”

Dipper wrinkled his nose. "Uh, never… tried it. Did— wait, have you seriously done that before? I thought that was one of those bragging things, like.. having sex four times in one night. Nobody actually does it."

Bill maintained a straight face. “I’ve done both.”
If accurate, Bill was an exceedingly reckless driver if there was oral sex to be had, and his stamina was nothing inconsequential, but he laughed it off. "Hey, let me know the next time you and Stan talk about your sexual encounters. I'm curious to see who'll get to the point of claiming they've had a threesome on the moon first."

“Stan, obviously. He’s not the one getting laid.”

Cheekily, he said, "You're also not getting laid, taking it slow and all." Once that was out, a sprinkle of doubt began to filter through him, brows furrowing. "You… still want to do that, right?" he asked, fretting as fingers fiddled with a shirt button.

Bill's expression softened, tenderly squeezing his hand. “Of course I want to keep it slow, honey.”

"Okay, I mean… I know going from four times in one night to nothing must be hard on you." Although the statement was a partial joke, there was a portion of truth hiding in there and lingering on his insecurities. He never had been good with the jokes. "I don't want you to be, uh, unhappy in our relationship because there isn't much of a sexual component to it."

“Cutie, there’s more to happiness in our relationship than being sexual.” Bill winked at him. “I enjoy being with you.”

Temporarily, those fears were put to rest by the sincerity lacing his response, the lower tone calming him. "Yeah, I," he inhaled, then smiled, "...I enjoy being with you too."

The drive to the venue was uneventful until they pulled to the garden gate. He could see the gazebo in the distance, several rows of chairs before the arch. There was a crowd gathered and seated as they awaited the ceremony to begin, the murmuring song of violins weaving between the rose bushes.

Walking alongside Bill, he huffed from the exertion of his scramble from the car and attempts to keep pace, pressing down his freshly-purchased tuxedo. Dipper couldn't stand the thing, had disliked it from the start, but Bill insisted on the formal attire. Then, he promised they could burn it if he wanted to swap into his plaid shirt again. At least he'd kept his jeans. "I don't really know why I'm here," he said under his breath. "Also, do I have to wear the tux to the reception too, or…?"

“Sugar, keep that tux on and rock it. I don’t want to see it come off until we’re heading back, okay?” The tuxedo feeling like a straight jacket combined with his legs' aches, Dipper didn't know if he'd make it to the reception, much less to Bill's apartment later.

Sighing, he noticed they were much closer to the gazebo now. The scent of flowers and drizzle in the air was replaced by what he described as a clothes rack-esque scent as they closed in on the wedding party and guests. "Should… we uh," he looked over his shoulder at the parked cars, another one arriving, "take a seat or something? Seems like they might be getting ready to start soon."

Striding forward, Bill was halfway to the chairs. “Yup, come on, doll.” Bill selected a spot near the back, and not-so-subtly placed his hand where he could flip Joseph off despite Dipper's disapproval, but he was glad Joseph didn't notice. He was too busy talking with the wedding party, though they dispersed when the crowd quieted and the music played louder.

From there, the ceremony went exactly as he'd expected it to: sugary sweet with references to divine deities and the beloved Creators, the speeches staggeringly packed full of them. Although
Bill’s huffing and puffing beside him was unfavorable, he was tempted to join in.

Kicking a foot, Bill grumbled, “ Fucking stupid.”

"Dude, shh." They were exchanging rings and a kiss, and he was simply glad they hadn't disrupted anyone; Bill's little disturbance had slipped under the radar of ooh-ing and awing and sobs of joy, coos over the bride.

Bill’s response was more grumbling as Joseph and 'whatsherface' (according to Bill) finished their praising of the Creators and addressed each other, their vows about how fate brought them together. Dipper had tuned out the specifics but was drawn from his daze as violins wailed, signaling to stand as the bride and groom passed. Unlike the others, Bill didn’t move.

"What are you doing?" Dipper hissed, frantically motioning to the rest of the guests that were on their feet. "Stand." Like everyone else. They'd come so far, managed to get through the ceremony and vows with minimal interruption, and Bill was deciding to make a wreck of things now?

“Nah,” Bill said without budging an inch. “I’m tall enough to get away with this.”

Considering Dipper was staring down at him, he thought it was safe to claim, "You're not. Hurry, dude, they're walking over." As if urging him, he tugged his blazer, vision nervously flicking toward the aisle where the couple approached.

Bill didn’t try to stand, and Joseph paused beside them, his bride hanging on his arm. “You’re not standing?”

“My legs don’t want to cooperate after the six hour car ride.”

Unconvinced, Joseph's jaw set as he turned to him. “I see. Well, I’m glad you were able to rise to the Creators’ plans, Dipper. It’s nice to have you here. Are you joining us in the garden?”

Dipper followed Joseph's gesture to the flowers and benches, tables set for conversation as folks gave their congratulations. "Yeah, hopefully— and no problem, I'll just uh… see if I can get Bill up here." That was his pleading cue and a nudge, a little more pointed since his legs were positively on fire but he was managing this. Only a bit longer.

Bill groaned, finally rising. “The Creators must be cruel if they think forcing everyone to stand after that ride is a fantastic idea. You aren’t even legally married yet.”

“We will be legally married,” Joseph informed him, resuming the strut to the garden but calling, “But we needed to be approved under the eyes of the Creators. We can’t go against Them and the sanctity of marriage, Bill. You know this.” With a flash of a smile, he was gone, swallowed by the crowd that'd trailed after to wish their best.

"See, that… wasn't so bad," Dipper said once he was certain the noise of the people would drown him out. "The standing again sucks, but we have the reception to go and then we're done."

Bill sighed, shaking his head. “It’s not about the standing, Pine Tree. I wanted him to feel sorry about the longass car ride.”

"It didn't have to be a car ride. We could've taken a plane, y'know." He bit back a sigh as they filed into the garden after the other guests. "My legs are actually sore, dude." After that was uttered, he supposed he didn't have to share since it was evident in his gait, stilted by stiff muscles.

“A plane?” Bill tensed, straightening up as he peered down at Dipper with intense eyes, wilder than
normal with pupils the size of pinpricks. It was an expression of fear that he seldom saw on Bill, his confidence shelved. "Do you know how dangerous planes are? They're a floating metal tube in the sky that could come crashing to Earth at any given second because there was a tiny error made by the pilot. And there’s no reason it should be flying to begin with! It’s a tube that weighs a ton with hundreds of people inside and their luggage and emotional support animals. It’s a canister of doom."

"Whoa, hey," he said, holding up his arms as if to shield him from this mini-rant of plane hatred. "I had no idea you were that afraid of flying." Well, he'd sort of figured something was up after they'd road tripped the six hours to this location when Bill could easily fund a flight, a private one at that. "You're literally a physicist. I think you could figure out the science behind planes and realize it's not that dangerous."

"It’s a death trap, Pine Tree! It’s coming down one way or another, and I’m not risking it!"

"Driving is way riskier." There was an anecdote on the tip of his tongue, the reminder every time he took a step, but he exhaled and shook his head. "Never mind. Let's head over to the reception venue," he said after casting a glance at Joseph and Zoe circling their guests and accepting congratulations.

Bill scowled, displeased, but he took him by the arm and began into the gardens. “One day, a plane’s going to crash and you’ll regret—"

“Bill, are you and your colleague leaving already?” Joseph asked, hurrying from the others to scamper after them. Dipper had hesitated to gawk, head tilted at the word 'colleague' since… he and Bill weren't really colleagues, the term he was looking for was boyfriend. “You’re guests, and you should stay for the pre-reception. Enjoy the wonderful arrangement of food we have while you socialize.”

Hardly hearing that last part, Dipper was stuck on his previous thoughts. "Wait, hold on— uh, 'colleague'? Is that what you called me?” It wasn't accusatory but questioning, genuinely confused by the identifier. Bill hadn't outright stated they were dating, but he hadn't thought Joseph was under the impression they had a relationship more akin to Ford and Bill's than a romantic one.

“Why, yes. You're colleagues, aren’t you? What else would you be?”

Bill's smirk was unrestrained, and although Dipper wasn't convinced he liked where this was heading with that devilish gleam in Bill's eye, he wasn't keen on lying to avoid awkwardly correcting Joseph's interpretation of their relationship.

“We’re dating, dumbass,” said Bill, completely rendering Joseph silent, beyond bewildered.

“Are you soulmates?”

The resulting tension was terribly misplaced within a tranquil garden of flowers for miles, yet Dipper couldn't be more uneasy, palms clammy and dampening with sweat. His teeth tore at his lip. "Uh..." he hung on the word, then ducked to cough a quick, "maybe?" That was nice and indifferent, right? It was true: there was a possibility they were soulmates, but it wasn't confirmed.

“We’re not soulmates,” Bill bluntly informed Joseph. “And it’s not a sin to date him, but attending this damn wedding has definitely made me feel like I'm being punished for something.”

Muttering Bill's name, Dipper elbowed him in the side once he'd worked past the initial shock that Bill would actually say that; Joseph didn't seem to be the best person if he spread lies of inferiority
to those with blank markings, but such a blatant remark wasn’t helping either.

Joseph sputtered, face reddened with anger. “What does that mean, Bill? This is my wedding, and I don’t want your unfaithfulness to your soulmate ruining the ceremony’s purity—”

“You’re not even married!”

"Guys," Dipper stressed once he’d found his voice, breaking into their spat, "look— let's, uh, go. Sorry for the trouble, man." He grabbed Bill's hand, tugging him from the gardens since they were beginning to make a scene, and he really didn't want to see how this escalated between Bill and Joseph. Concerned guests were speculating the commotion, tense and wide-eyed.

“Go, and stay out!” Joseph yelled. “Consider yourself uninvited until you learn to respect our Creators!”

“Good riddance!” Bill called despite Dipper's attempts at hurrying him through the rows of flowers away from the others. “The Creators are saving me from a damn headache!”

"Bill." Increasing his step and pulling harder, Dipper hoped this yelling match wouldn't continue into the parking lot. Luckily, Bill quieted until he was in the driver's seat.

“You can’t be mad at me.”

"Just… drive," he said, ignoring the fragile request about being mad temporarily because he hadn't yet collected his thoughts on it, wanted to be as rational as possible. Surely, the six hour drive would be more than enough time to do that. Sorting through that while floating in the tides from the Bill-Joseph rift didn't make for ideal circumstances.

“You can’t be mad,” Bill repeated as he pulled the car onto the road. “We didn’t even have cheesecake this time.”

The mention of the cheesecake had him raising an eyebrow at Bill, but he didn't comment on that. Instead, he vocalized the fact he was caught in a whirlwind after that chain of events, flabbergasted but hardly surprised by how they unfolded. "...You got us kicked out of a wedding."

“Oh, you know this was going to happen.” A pause, and Bill tapped the steering wheel. “He had it coming!”

"I didn't know we were going to be removed, but I guess I did sort of estimate that you were going to be…” Trailing off, he couldn't determine how to finish that in a manner that wouldn't paint Bill's behavior as childish and immature, not that those weren't decent descriptors on their own. However, he had a point about Joseph and his intolerance for those that didn't align with his beliefs that Dipper took into account for his evaluation. The crudity didn't stop with Bill.

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

"I didn't say you did…?"

“I bet you’re thinking it,” Bill said. “I’m not the bad guy here, okay? Joseph’s a dick and he was asking for a fight.”

"I know," he said and gnawed the inside of his cheek, blankly staring out the window. "About him being a dick, I mean, not the part about starting a fight." Although Bill hadn't needed to cook up drama at the ceremony, Dipper couldn't truly fault him for feeling displaced and irritated even if it would've been better to simply leave without causing a scene. After a beat, he went on, "I don't…
really mind, to be honest. Joseph seemed nice at first, but then he said that stuff to me, I learned what he said to Stan— like, using his beliefs to justify being a prick to people, and… yeah. That ruined it.”

“None of this was on me,” he huffed. “I told you he was an ass, you should’ve believed me to begin with.”

"I think we've been over how I'd be more inclined to believe you if you didn't exaggerate about people who aren't total jackasses."

“I never exaggerate. Except when I do, but that’s not now, Pine Tree. He’s a piece of holy shit.”

"I know," he said, "but I still wish that we hadn't been removed because that's extreme. Definitely extreme, and—"

Bill’s phone began ringing, and Bill was abruptly passing it to him before he had a second to react. “I’m not answering, fuck that.”

Holding the screen closer, he saw a glimpse of the caller ID. "'Father'? Your dad's contact name is father?" Oddly formal, but he couldn't get hung up on that when he had a blaring phone in his possession. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

“Don't care, but wouldn't recommend answering. He probably has some choice words for me.”

"But we can't—" he stammered, jerking the phone like he couldn't choose what to do: either silencing or putting it to his ear, he was torn. As if Bill hadn't understood him the first time, he repeated with more strain, "Dude, it's your dad." And because he couldn't take it anymore, willingly ignoring the call, he answered.

The voice on the phone boomed before he had a chance to make a single sound. “William Abraham Cipher, what the hell do you think you're doing? I sent you to that wedding to improve our relationship with Joseph’s family, a diplomatic mission requiring nothing more than your presence, and you ruined everything—”

When he had recovered from the surprise of being bombarded with a furious lecture, Dipper squeaked, "Uh, this… isn't Bill."

“Oh.” There was a brief stop, then he continued, composed, “My apologies, who is this?” It was mind-boggling how his tone had switched from harsh and loud, to charismatic and eloquent. Bill's similar expertise was suddenly less mysterious.

"Dipper," he cleared his throat, "Dipper Pines? Sorry, I'm guessing you wanted to talk to Bill but he's…" stealing a look, Bill was more intent on the road than he'd ever seen in his life, relying on the naive principle that stated if he couldn't see him, he didn't exist. "...preoccupied."

“Dipper Pines..?" Mr. Cipher was questioning, and Dipper envisioned him scratching his chin, pipe in his free hand. “Are you related to Maxwell?"

Failing to connect the relevance, his forehead creased from perplexment, yet Dipper eventually nodded though he couldn't see. "Yeah, he's my dad. Anyway…" he continued, trying to dodge this conversation, "do you want me to ask Bill to call you back when he's available?"

“Interesting. Pass him—”

But he didn’t finish, as Bill snatched the phone and chucked it to the window.. only for it to bounce
off the glass onto his lap. “Fuck!” He scooped it up and ended the call, muting the ringtone. “He can bitch another day.” Grimacing, Dipper didn't know what to focus on: the phone call, how his middle name was Abraham, or the laughably-bad endeavor that was Bill trying to discard his phone out the window.

"Dude." Dipper surveyed Bill and noted that he didn't believe he'd ever been so flustered, fringing on paranoid as if this impending lecture would be the end of the world.

“What?” Bill tossed his phone into the cupholder, careless. “I told you to not answer, Pine Tree.”

That hadn't been an option that'd truly occurred to him, having a decent relationship with his parents — even when he or Mabel had been in trouble, they didn't feel threatened enough to dodge them. "I didn't want your dad to think we were screening his calls to ignore him," he replied. "Plus, he might've had something important to tell us. It'd be weird, not answering."

“He would’ve gotten over it,” Bill argued. “I knew he’d be pissed, that’s why I didn’t want to answer. And besides, now he knows you’re with me.”

Bristling, he asked, "What's wrong with that?" It was intended to be an accusation, a challenge, but instead he sounded… vulnerable, as if his presence was something to hide in shame over. "I told my parents about you, they know we're dating. What's wrong with your dad knowing I'm with you?"

“Political bullshit I was hoping to avoid.”

"That's— I guess I don't see how we have anything to do with it if it's between our parents. He might try that," because Dipper wasn't naive, he and Mabel were bargaining chips, "but that doesn't guarantee it'll work. Unless…"

“It’s him, if he gets desperate enough he’ll do anything.”

"But.. it's you and I," he pointed out, "not his choice to make." Granted, there were areas where he could still exert control and make it miserable for them, and Dipper was beginning to stress over how far he might take this, why he wouldn't relish in any attention their families would receive from their convergence. It hit him like a freight train: if he and Bill were soulmates and opted to go public, there wasn't anything he could do, not unless he wished to face backlash over his own hypocrisy for advocating for those traditional values.

Trying to be casual, he asked, "Doesn't he want you to be with your soulmate or something?"

“He does. It’s a requirement.”

"So we're already not conforming to his idea of what your romance should look like." That was assuming they weren't soulmates, something he wasn't positive on but perhaps could bend to his advantage to make the point. "And I'm child-free, so there's that. Wait, actually, we're both child-free if what you said about not wanting to raise kids is accurate."

“I don’t want them, Pine Tree. I’d rather take a gun to my head and end everything for good.”

"Jesus Christ," Dipper's voice cracked, "I don't see how you can think that but be under the impression this is our future, regardless of your dad's view on it. It's not his life."

“It is my fortune," that elicited a bark of a chortle, not to express doubt that he'd withhold it but because it didn't seem like he could employ monetary control over them, "and he’s not against terminating our relationship. I don’t think you understand the type of man he is.”
"Clearly," he said, shooting Bill daggers, "he's the type of man who doesn't care whether his son is happily in a relationship. So, conditional affection to get you to do what he wants? I think I know what kind of man he is. Besides, how do you know he won't like me? Maybe he'll... y'know, lighten up on the soulmate thing." Or they were soulmates and this wouldn't be a problem, minus the raising children component.

Bill shook his head. “I don’t think he’ll lighten up on anything. Maybe he’d tolerate you, but he wants to use you mostly.”

"So? In this hypothetical situation,” it was a reminder that it hadn't formed yet, nor did he know they were dating, "he isn't happy to begin with if he wants you to have this... 'lifescript' sort of life that he's made for you with the soulmate, the kids, the dog, the house in suburbia."

“He’d be happy if I followed the script. And didn’t ruin weddings.” Dipper could have concluded that from his fury over the phone, leaving no uncertainty over his feelings.

They sat in a mulling, jittery silence with Dipper wriggling and kicking at his seat, reviewing the contents of the lecture-riddled phone call that was meant for Bill but had reached him. "...I didn't know your first name was William," he said, emphasis on the fanciness of what he assumed to be Bill's name.

Bill broke into laughter. “Oh, Stars, no. It’s Bill– don’t let him fool you.”

Dryly, he pointed out, "He called you William Abraham Cipher and doesn't seem like a guy that'd throw in a little joke before ranting. Does your dad not know your name?"

“It’s not really a joke, Pine Tree. He wanted to name me William but my mother forced him to do a coin flip to decide who provided my first name and who got my middle name. She ended up with the honor of naming me Bill out of spite, as my father was deadset on William.”

"So... the Abraham part was his contribution."

“He’s awful at names.”

"Bill Abraham," he said, a mild chuckle rumbling from him, "that's... wow. No wonder you dress like you stepped from the early-to-mid nineteen hundreds." His name set him up to be historical, political. Even more so if he was named William — all he'd need was a white wig and false teeth and fifty more years under his belt, and he could plod right into the Hall of Presidents.

“I dress fashionably, like a badass.”

"Like a James Bond villain level of badass," he teased, though couldn't picture Bill playing the villain of anything after his displays of softheartedness... or the hero. It was a mind-bending thought, Bill saving anybody except himself when confronted with a dangerous situation that he hoped would never stretch from the limits of his imagination into reality.

The ride was fairly peaceful, though Bill didn’t quit talking about how Dipper didn’t have the right to be mad at him despite his reassurances that he wasn't upset about what’d happened. It wasn't angering, it was moderately irritating since they'd driven six hours for that... but he hardly blamed Bill when Joseph was the other party. And as much as he could snarkily comment about that running in the family, at least Bill's views weren't unbearable.

He didn’t know how long they’d been in the car, but staying awake was difficult with the blur of green and city lights that passed outside, the scenery blending together. The car was beginning to
slow, stopping, and the back passenger door swung open. It startled Dipper awake again, and he rubbed the sleep from his eyes only to notice they were somewhere else than he remembered. A completely different city.

“'Bout time ya got here,” Stan grumbled as he climbed in, and Dipper stared, puzzled. “Been waitin’ ages to get picked up.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Bill disregarded his complaint. “You called an hour ago, it’s not my fault you didn’t let me buy you a new car. I told you that trash was going to break down again.” From that, he could gather there'd been a phone call, vague memories rekindling, but he couldn't manage to remember anything beyond that.

"Wait, I thought we weren't going to pick up hitchhikers," he said to Bill through a playful mumble, sleepy. "But seriously, why's Stan here?" Dipper peered to the rear view mirror. "I know you had that job around here today, but… yeah, why are we picking you up?"

“My damn car broke down and I needed a lift. But she needs some beatin’, and she’ll be good as new.”

“The only beating she needs is what she gets in the junkyard.”

Another wave of confusion crossed him as vivid mental images of Bill in the evening light working on Stan's car flowed through his mind. "I thought you guys fixed it. Are you going to get it towed?"

“Can’t fix something that’s broken beyond repair,” Bill muttered. “Should tow it to the dump.”

“Nah,” Stan said. “I’ll have someone collect ‘er for free, no need to pay for those goddamn leeches.” Bill shook his head in disbelief, whereas Dipper was relieved that wouldn't be a Stan-scheme they were going to be roped into. Already, he could foresee Stan calling a 'favor' from a shady character met in his past.

“Hey, what’s this?”

"What?"

Stan raised the butterfly statue, setting it on the console between him and Bill. "Oh. That's…“ Curling his fingers around the metal, he winced as he brought it into the glow of passing street lights on the highway. "It was supposed to be a wedding gift, but…” He tapered off and looked to Bill, wondering if he'd do the honors of explaining the incident to Stan since Bill was the reason they'd essentially been booted. "Did you tell him?"

“Hm? Oh, no. We got kicked out of the wedding. Joseph didn’t appreciate my honesty.”

“He fuckin’ deserved it!” Stan collected the butterfly statue once he'd placed it back onto the console. “This is mine now, could bargain it for a good price.”

Dipper shrugged at Bill's nonchalance. "I don't know what Bill and I would do with it. I found it at a gas station because Bill couldn't be bothered to find a better gift." In hindsight, that seemed terribly long ago in spite of being this morning, though his take on the wedding and Joseph himself had gone steeply downhill. "You guys were right, he was the worst."

“I told ya,” Stan said, groaning. “He’s a bigot and it ain’t a loss that ya ruined his big day. Fuck that an’ his bullshit.”
"You mean the... whole, being unfair to you over something you can't control? Yeah." It left a bitter taste in his mouth, how Joseph calculated worth as a human being off of an inscription on somebody's arm. "I don't think his fiancee—um, wife—really cares that much, but he is... way overboard. I'm glad that most people who buy into belief systems like that aren't so overzealous about it."

Bill rolled his eyes. "They’re both way overboard, Pine Tree. She agreed to marry his stupid ass, she’s no better than he is by enabling it."

"Any broad who agrees to marry 'im is nuts," Stan agreed. "But she ain’t the only dumb one in Bill’s family, considerin’ Bill’s pap ain’t too different overall."

Steely, Bill said, "You haven’t met him."

"Yeah, well. I hear plenty."

"Speaking of Bill's dad and hearing plenty, I actually met him—sort of—today.” Their sole previous encounter was a passing, formal welcome speech at the university. “He called us during the drive to yell at Bill.” That'd transformed to Bill attempting to throw his phone out the window, failing, and a discussion of their overly antiquated expectations. "He's upset because Bill didn't do a great job of representing his side of the family, I guess.” A man concerned with appearances, not actually the event itself or Joseph's future happiness in his marriage; under different circumstances, Dipper may have been more disappointed in that observation, but he could understand the distance in this case.

The conversation moved on to less debated topics, Stan and Bill shooting playful and boasting jabs between them as they usually did, and it almost felt... normal. Nothing about driving the final hour home from a wedding they'd been kicked out of was truly normal, but being with Stan and Bill helped to gloss over that part. Once again, Dipper withdrew from the chatter as his eyelids grew heavy and was thankful Bill seemed aware of that, keeping his focus on Stan while allowing him to drift off.

Resting in small bursts, it was as if time skipped forward to bring them closer home with every time his eyes would tiredly blink open to catch a new road sign and the tail of a loud laugh or remark from Bill's end. He knew it wasn't intentional but habitual, the volume of his voice when he became excited.

His body was no better, residual aches lining his muscles that he couldn’t stretch in this enclosed space.

But then, it wasn't Bill or the pain that woke him. It was the sudden screech of a nearby tire, a terrible grinding noise, and the chaotic crash that followed. Wide-eyed with his heart in his throat from the piercing sound, Dipper startled awake and wondered for a moment if it'd been an astoundingly realistic auditory hallucination. However, the string of rushed, barked curses from Stan and Bill proposed otherwise.

The car lurched to a halt, Bill throwing the car into park with his hazards on. “Stay here, call 911.” The hyper focus in Bill’s instructions rattled him.

"What was that?" Dipper asked, near-squeaked, over Bill's demand, trying to scoot in his seat to see around Bill since the pandemonium was on the opposite side of the barrier. "What's going on?"

“There was a collision,” he said plainly. “Doesn’t look good.” Bill slid from the car, door slamming behind him, but Dipper swiftly went to do the same as he heard Stan's movement in the
backseat. He wasn’t going to be alone while they dealt with this, he was insistent to assist regardless of the flooding anxiety in his system that was telling him to not go another pace. This was too… familiar, this type of vehicular tragedy.

“Ah, shit. Kid, ya don’t want to look.”

Resolute, Dipper staggered after, the trio moving over the barrier to the car that was practically warped into the tree. It was a sight of impossible geometry, staring at the front end almost forming a circle around the tree trunk that sustained very little damage from what he could see through the smoke of the engine. In a trance, Dipper vaulted over the median easily, Bill's request to call emergency services forgotten until he approached and noticed there was already someone limping from the vehicle on the phone, talking in a watery tone that indicated shock and panic.

"I think she's..." he started but trailed off, too transfixed on the sight of the car. One of the backseat doors were open, and the front… he hardly recognized it as a car anymore with its metal pieces sticking out, the hood racked up into the shattered windshield.

“I told you to stay in the car.” Bill sounded annoyed, though he didn’t do anything to shoo him as he examined the front of the vehicle, if it could be called that. “What do you think, Stan? That engine isn’t looking good.”

“Smokin’. We can try to get the driver out, but I ain’t confident in that passenger— ya see the door? I sure as hell can’t.”

As Dipper was about to ask if he should be doing anything, or rather what he could do, the girl on the phone swiveled clumsily to them, voice unsteady.

“Where are we?”

Her attention was on him, and Dipper found her gaze unsettling in how it was reminiscent of someone on heavy medication. Since Bill and Stan were too engrossed to answer, he tried to help. "Um, we're on the interstate, about thirty minutes from LA."

“No, where are we?”

"Uh, I’d put us at about thirty minutes north..."

Thankfully, Bill saved him with more detailed information, “We’re past mile-marker seventy-one going northbound.” She stared for a second, seemingly satisfied with the answer and then repeated it into the phone, turning again and walking up and down the shoulder.

Eyes slitting in confusion, he pondered that by echoing to Bill, "Mile marker?" Unacquainted with formal directions, he shook his head because this wasn't the time, not when Stan was circling the hood like he was ready to pounce, likely examining the severity of the situation, and Dipper was wishing his analytical perception would relay what needed to be done aside from retrieving anyone that could be endangered by the wreck of the car.

“Do you know what I’m talking about?” Bill questioned as he passed. “They’re green, they have white numbers. ‘Mile Seventy.’”

"You can tell me about it when we're not, y'know, trying to…” He indicated the vehicle that hadn't stopped smoking, then succumbed to coughing from his sharp inhale.

Bill nodded and mumbled an inaudible agreement, joining Stan in inspecting the mangled parts. Stan had managed to force open the driver’s door, and together they worked to pull out the
hopefully unconscious driver. Dipper winced as he saw their efforts, and then cringed harder when
the screech of the friend followed — not the one who was a bloodied mess, but the other who'd
been apparently on the phone. She was now racing toward them, cries of 'is she okay?' and her
name resounding over the sound of the interstate and the exchange between Stan and Bill
on removing her safely.

"Whoa, hey, uh..." Dipper said, barricading her from interfering as she was abamant on getting too
close for them to work properly, "maybe.. we should wait somewhere else, Stan and Bill need
space, and we probably shouldn't be this close to the road."

Once she had understood after some prompting and started walking to the ditch, Stan and Bill
maneuvered the injured friend onto Bill’s outstretched blazer a few feet away. Dipper didn't know
if he wanted to look but his curiosity being a curse, peeked at their progress.

“What are we going to do about this?” Bill questioned, knelt near her gushing wounds. It’d soaked
through the blazer laid for her, a gory image when deep gashes lined her skin.

Seeing someone that sliced up was traumatizing. He had no idea the human body had that much
blood waiting to pour out of it at any given moment. Feeling queasy from the sight and coppery
scent in the air, he said, "Stop the bleeding." Like it was obvious, and he somehow sounded
immensely bolder than he felt.

“With what?”

Stan wasted no time. "Ya got that thing on your arm, don’tcha? It’s good enough."

A jolt went up Dipper's spine, his jaw going slack in stunned reverence as Stan essentially, outright
unabashedly told Bill to use his medical gauze that he held so dear to him. "That's... actually
genius," he said softly, noting how Bill was akin to a walking first aid kit. "That'd stop bleeding
better than clothes would."

Bill’s expression dropped, eyes darting as if one of them would promise he didn’t have to. "Oh.
No. No. Maybe there’s something in the car...? It might be bloodied but.."

"You think the average person has medical supplies in their car? No." A smart idea to have
bandages available, but he doubted it.. and even if it was in there somewhere, getting the driver's
deroor pried open had been a challenge. Looking to her, his stomach twisted as the blood pumped
more steadily from her wounds now that she'd been extracted, and he said, "Dude, you gotta do
something."

“Fuck me.” Bill begrudgingly unraveled the gauze from the blank arm and began wrapping it
around the girl’s more severe wounds, though the bandages weren’t as extensive as they’d hoped.
Meanwhile, Stan was ducking into the car, encircling it to create a plan of retrieval for the final
passenger.

Because that was too heart-wrenching to watch, Dipper swapped his focus to the blood seeping into
the fabric at an astounding pace and grimaced to Bill, desperately motioning toward his other arm.
It wouldn't be much, but keeping the blood loss minimal until an ambulance arrived could be life-
saving.

Amazingly, Bill’s expression darkened more, but he took the gauze that hid his soulmark and
weaved it to the seeping wounds. “Wow, you have a lot of blood in you,” Bill muttered to the
unconscious, but Dipper's mind was elsewhere as it somehow registered that the final piece of
gauze had been covering his soulmark, and it was... exposed.
Pulse racing, adrenaline soared in him as it occurred that... this was it. The world froze, everything dimming as his senses were blocking the rest and drowning out sounds except the rushing in his ears. Curiosity unrelenting and starved after countless delays, Dipper couldn't restrain himself from immediately pulling the mark into his view and gasped, wind robbed from him. His chest was tight, and his head was spinning, but he didn't notice because all that mattered was Bill's soulmark with blotches like ink splattered on paper, a few letters partially concealed by the permanent smear. With Bill moving around and twisting the gauze onto wounds, it was difficult to piece together the phrase broken by the swirling jets of ebony... not that he needed to, he already knew what it said underneath. Regardless, Dipper gaped, bewildered. He was completely, wholly absorbed in it. Disbelieving. It was in front of him literally in the flesh, months of strife banished in a single reveal. It was **Bill's soulmark**, and that didn't compute as reality despite staring right at it.

However, his fascination was shattered by a shriek, and he jumped as the more coherent of the three passengers appeared beside him. Distress and terror were etched onto her features as she gazed at her unconscious friend, bleeding as she was slumped carefully against the blazer in the ditch. Bill, still hovering over her, also seemed startled by the shrill verbalization of horror.

"Can I help you?" Bill questioned, straightening his posture to tower above her, Dipper couldn't think beyond the splattered marking that was once again in his sight. "She's lost blood, but she'll probably be fine until emergency services arrive. The bandages should stop the worst of it."

"Are you sure? How could you be sure?" she asked, frenzied. "There's so much blood.. oh my god. Madeline! **Madeline**!" She reached for her shoulder but was swatted by Bill.

"Pine Tree, take this one away before she makes things worse."

"But I—" his protest dwindled upon her next attempt to touch her friend, thwarted by Bill and not without a dismal stare in his direction as if daring him to say no. Dipper guessed ensuring she didn't interrupt their attempts at helping her two friends was the least he could do after disobeying Bill's request to stay in the car and call police, the latter seemingly unnecessary when she'd been on the phone with them upon their arrival. Seconds like hours, he wondered why they weren't here yet. "Okay," he relented and brought a hand up, then lowered it as he decided physical contact was perhaps a bad idea.

Fear on high, he coughed to grab her flitting attention, heart positively sinking at how broken she appeared. But he maintained his composure, "They're working on her, but distractions will hinder that. Let's head to the ditch where it'll be safe in case something happens." That something being their car's engine starting on fire since Stan mentioned a leak, and it could happen if factors aligned — it was why he was pushing to remove the last passenger. While they were a safe distance, Bill aided Stan on the other side of the vehicle, and he labeled the efforts as valiant but concerning when Bill had to keep checking on the unconscious one.

She was hysterically observing, mumbling nigh-nonsense, before she looked at her injured friend and let out a wrecked cry. "I can't believe this is happening to us."

"I'm really... I'm sorry," he said, expressing his condolences after wincing, urging her further into the ditch where her view would be obscured. He didn't know what the passenger looked like, but the fact that Stan and Bill had **started** with the one nearly hemorrhaging to death wasn't a good sign. "The ambulance will be here soon, and medical professionals will be able to do more for them than they will." It was peculiar how calm he sounded despite the flurry of panic that was revolving within. Functioning on autopilot, knowing what to do alongside feeling clueless.

And right now, his job was to ensure she stayed out of Bill and Stan's way as they waited for the ambulance, as well as keeping her from seeing the potential tragedy at the vehicle. Spotting a small
patch of grass, he said, "Maybe.. you should sit down. Just, try to breathe."

The girl sobbed in wet bursts, taking a seat on the ground with her face in her hands. “I can’t believe it. This only happens on TV.”

Dipper gazed sympathetically, joining her in the cool grass still dampened with rain, but he tried to give her space. "Car crashes?" he asked, swallowing. "I… yeah, I'm guessing this has all been sort of a shock. Are you..."

A sigh tarried on his tongue, but before he could go on, she spoke, “Amanda, I’m.. Amanda. We didn’t think texting would do this, this didn’t happen the other times.”

Insides churning at the revelation, he stared at the wreckage while that processed, the harrowing truth that it'd been... a wreck caused by distracted driving, not entirely accidental anymore since the prevention had been paying attention to the road. "Oh." His mouth was dry, throat tightened. He decided it would be best not to pass judgment on that when she was struggling, the lecture stifled. "I… was going to ask if you were okay. Physically."

"Do I l-look okay?" she stammered through bawling. She didn’t look too damaged on the outside, sporting scratches and drenched in mostly-dried blood. It was gruesome, but not as bad as the friend she’d identified as Madeline whose wounds were in Bill's gauze. “I feel like everything’s falling apart. They can’t get Rachel out, can they..? The tree’s on her side… god.”

"I know," he murmured, "but I meant if you had any injuries… like, internal ones—"

“I don’t know! I’m not a doctor.”

From that, Dipper would estimate that nothing felt wrong and paired with how she didn't seem too physically damaged, he'd take her word for it. "EMTs should be here soon," he promised, "and they'll look you and your friends over. So… Madeline, she was driving?"

“Yeah.” She wiped her face, eyeliner smeared with blood and tears. “She was texting our boyfriend, I think. Telling him we’d be at his place in about fifteen minutes. We were going to go to the movies, all of us. It would’ve been one big date.”

Dipper considered that for a couple moments, the silence deafening and screaming the truth: he really didn't know what he was doing, even if he'd gone through the motions of it. Mabel would've been so much better at this than he would, and he wished he could envision what she'd say, how she'd lighten the atmosphere. But he was afraid that if he did, it'd seem forced.

“And now my shirt’s ruined.” Her wails became louder, body quaking. “The blood ruined it. It looks so ugly now. What will I wear?” The grievance reminded him of something Mabel had said, or rather recounted to him after their own tragic vehicle collision: she claimed she'd told the emergency personnel about the state of her sweater, sobbing over how the stitched dog was ruined from the blood and later admitted it'd been from the shock. And he imagined it was the root of this discussion and particular gripe as well, not devastation over the clothing article but thoughts produced from an inconsolable mind.

Dipper didn't know how to handle it but was determined to do so, hoping he didn't make it worse. "Hey, it's okay. I don't think anyone's going to be thinking about your shirt, they'll want to make sure you and your friends are alright.." he said, aiming to strike a comforting tone. "Besides, you'll, uh… be able to go shopping with them to get new things after this." That was assuming they were going to pull through, and.. Dipper didn't want to make false promises, doubt seeded in him. They didn't know the state of the trapped one, and the injured one would perhaps stabilize with medical
intervention. That he hoped would be here, he hadn't a clue what was taking them.

Even though it'd been less than ten minutes.

“Don’t want to go shopping alone,” she sniffled. “What if Madeline’s dead? What if Rachel’s
dead? Oh, god, what if they’re both gone? Why is this real?”

Collecting his jumbled thoughts, he aimed for rationality. "We’re… not sure of that yet, like either
way. Madeline’s— when Bill checked her, she was with us." Kind of. "And Rachel," he said more
tentatively, thinking that was the name, "they don’t know. I think they’re trying to get the door
open." But she talked over him, “There’s so much blood everywhere. I can’t believe… it’s all over.”

It didn’t take long for Bill to approach, bloodied hands extended from his body as he was
detachedly cold in his greeting. “So what happened?” he demanded. "Cars aren’t inclined to barrel
into the side of trees.”

Because he didn’t think the cause was important right now, he ignored the question. "Is Rachel
okay?" he asked, semi-hushed with a fleeting glance toward Amanda. If she wasn’t, Dipper trusted
that Bill would be discreet rather than blurt ‘nope, blood and brain matter everywhere, she barely
has a face’ or something equally Bill-esque.

“Trapped. We’d need to cut through the car to get her, and we don’t have the tools to do that.”

Although directed at him, Bill was looking at Amanda. “What happened?” he repeated to her,
frustration creeping in. “The only one here that can tell us is you, unless your friend on the ground
suddenly wakes up and talks.” His unrelenting stonyness caused her to break down further, sobs
erupting as her face returned to her hands, shudders wracking her frame.

"Bill…” There was a warning to his name, trying to shut down his attempts to pressure her for
information since it was visibly deteriorating her mental health. "Unless it’s actually important to
you and Stan getting help, I don’t think we need to talk about that. The cops and EMTs should be
here in a minute, so… do you want to come sit by us?” He patted the spot beside him invitingly,
but the motion was slightly rigid — a caveat that if Bill opted to stay, he wasn’t allowed to
interrogate.

"The cops and EMTs are going to want to know too, Pine Tree. She may as well tell us now.”

"Yeah, I’m not sure they’re going to want that information from you."

“They should want it from me,” Bill said, clenching his bloodied fists. “We’re the ones doing shit
right. I can’t believe how shitty of a driver your fucking friend is.” That didn’t seem to comfort
Amanda, whose sobs transformed into anguished howls, more frequent.

Deflating with an exhale, he cast Bill a wary glance and murmured, "Can you not..?" If Bill wanted
to talk about this and rant until the end of time, they could do that on the way home instead of in
front of a traumatized friend.

Bill let out a displeased huff, beginning to walk back toward Stan. Although Dipper stayed seated
next to Amanda, there was barely anything more passed between them except soft, mournful cries
on her end. It seemed like it had been forever and then some, but only a couple minutes passed
until the emergency services arrived, their entrance marked by flashing lights and sirens.

After the preliminary check was underway and the ambulance was loaded, Dipper noticed an
officer standing near Stan and Bill; since Amanda had been convinced by an EMT to receive a ride
to the hospital, it'd left Dipper alone to observe as they examined the situation, firefighters were working on the passenger door, and he found himself dazedly walking over to the three.

"...and could you describe her condition upon your arrival at the scene, Mr…?" Tapping a notepad, the cop was torn between the two, and they responded with 'Pines' and 'Cipher' together, though Bill answered the prompt.

"Cuts and abrasions everywhere that were bleeding profusely when we removed her from the driver’s seat," Bill said. "I stopped the worst of the bleeding with MY BANDAGES. If she recovers, she owes me five dollars and ninety-nine cents."

"Right," he muttered and scribbled down a note, though Dipper doubted it was a written 'IOU' for Madeline regarding the usage of Bill's bandages. "And you said you witnessed this vehicle traveling at what you described as a 'normal speed' crash into this tree?"

"Correct. They seemed to be going the speed limit—"

Stan cut in, waving his hands in the officer’s face to get his attention. "But they was swervin’ around a bit before impact. Like when she was drivin’, she was all over the road—crossin’ the lines, hittin’ the rumble strips. It was crazy."

"You said they were swerving?" The cop confirmed with Stan, jolting down the note before nodding to Dipper. "Did you see anything?"

"I just heard the collision," he said, then cleared his throat, eyes sliding to where the EMTs were closing the doors on the ambulance in preparation for the drive to the hospital. "But… Amanda—she was the one in the backseat, she told me that the driver was texting before the crash. I don't know if that contributed, but yeah."

Bill bristled, his voice becoming a snarl. "She was texting while she drove? Are you fucking kidding me? She should be dead, not her fucking passenger!"

The officer was unimpressed with his tirade but didn't react, stating, "I'll need your contact information in case we have followup questions during the investigation, and then you are encouraged to go. It's dangerous to be loitering on the roadside at night, folks."

"It’s dangerous to be texting and driving! No wonder they were swerving, she was probably fucking around on her phone. Stars damn these kids, they don’t deserve to have fucking licenses. Where’s that girl? Amanda? I need to have a word with her for condoning her driver’s behavior —!"

The cop pointedly stared at Bill. "...I suggest clearing out. Emergency personnel still have work to do, and while we appreciate your help as good samaritans, there is nothing more for you here. Now, if you'll move along, the coroner's office needs to be alerted." A shudder passed through Dipper, gripping his arms as he almost curled in on himself, hunching over slightly. Devastation surrounded him in the pieces and scraps on the roadway, the pool of blood that'd collected on the grass, and the ambulance's siren speeding off into the distance.

It was making him dizzy to think he was standing within ten feet of a corpse imprisoned against a tree.

Stan tugged Bill away from the officer, shoving him over the median and to their vehicle while Dipper wandered after like a lost ghost. He didn't want to look back. Bill was livid, undeniably furious. 
“Maybe I should drive,” Stan said. “Don’t want an anger-fueled accident.”

“You’re not touching my keys,” Bill said, snappish, getting into the driver’s seat. They were ushered into their typical arrangement: Dipper in the passenger seat (it left him more uneasy than ever) and Stan in the backseat. Sensing his discomfort, Bill said, “We’ll be fine. I don’t drive distractedly.”

As it turned out, there wasn’t much to distract him since the roadways remained empty, a couple cars passing by sporadically. There was no conversation to influence his focus either when the vehicle was engulfed in total silence. Nobody said a syllable or made a sound, entangled in their thoughts that marked the disturbing aftermath of trauma.

Dipper couldn't bring himself to look at his phone, not that it was going off. He couldn't stomach it and stared out the window instead at the dry landscape of California that seemingly never changed despite the recent rainfall.

The vehicle slowed outside Stan’s apartment, and Stan departed from the backseat without a word.

Bill continued driving, finger beginning to drum on the steering wheel. The rhythm drew Dipper's attention to it, and he saw Bill's sleeve had been pulled down for the drive, though he hadn't felt inclined to peek at his soulmark anymore. He could barely acknowledge the satisfaction that he knew should've came with the reveal, but it was... hollow. Dipper hated that he'd discovered it like this and couldn't scrape the desire to scream it from the rooftops: they were soulmates.

Yet the declaration he'd once thought would be jubilant was met with numbness.

"So," he began quietly, feeling the need to end the terrible stillness with something, anything. Reviewing the scene and how he'd departed to divert Amanda, he realized he didn't know what'd occurred after that. His voice wavered as he asked, "What happened?"

Bill's fingers tightened around the wheel. The tapping stopped. His jaw clenched, then relaxed. When he began, it was a haunting recollection:

“There was blood everywhere. All over the road, the hood and bumper of the car. Her body was mangled, almost beyond recognition– soaked in blood, a deep red that clashed with her pale skin. The area was swarming with men in dark suits, yellow road vests decorating their bodies so they didn’t join her. Flashing lights, police sirens, the works. The red and blue reflected off of the pavement and in the puddle that surrounded her.

"The driver was a middle-aged woman. She had been distracted. Her children in the backseat had stolen her attention from the road, and the impact was made at forty miles an hour. Her body was thrown, bouncing off the pavement and coming to rest several feet away. The road burn had ripped her skin, but it was nothing in comparison to how the car gutted her. The force of the hood against her side had torn her open, her innards spilling out. Pronounced dead at the scene. The driver got a slap on the wrist because she was a parent.

"I wasn’t supposed to be there. I received a call saying there’d been an accident, that she was involved. I was there within minutes. I can still smell her blood and hear the cops telling me that I didn't want to see her. I didn’t want to see her. I had to, though. She wouldn’t be there if I had taken her home. I chose being on time for work over making sure she got home safe, but I guess it made no difference since I quit the next day.

“Stop looking at me like that, Pine Tree. You know this doesn’t have a happy ending.
“They kept trying to find all of her. Her shoes had been blown clean off, and they were looking for one of them. They never found it.”

Every word Bill had said sunk deeper into his being that he felt the weight of grief crushing him, and it hadn't been difficult to discern this wasn't the same accident they'd seen tonight. Bill's mind and his subsequent retelling of events were miles from that, but Dipper hadn't dared interrupt even if it didn't answer his question. From how Bill described it and the raw emotion that hadn't been smoothed over from the tides of time, it seemed to be one of the first—if not the first—attempt at verbalizing his own traumatic event. It was eerie how both of their lives had been split into 'before' and 'after' by analogous situations.

Dipper wasn't sure what miracle allowed him to find his voice after that, but it'd been so chillingly rattling that all he could say was, "...We're at the physics building?" It was a puzzled squeak, small enough that it may as well not have existed, but he couldn't even begin to consider more than the fact the car was stopped in front of the doors.

Bill beckoned for him to get out, and he left the vehicle behind to enter the building, relying on his keys to get them inside given it was after hours on break; therefore, it was lit by the floodlights that were perpetually on, and there wasn't a soul in sight. They were the life within these walls.

They walked onward until they were at the grad office. Bill approached his desk, unlocking and opening the bottom drawer and pulling out a shoe.

A single woman's shoe, coated in dried dirt with a visible red-brown stain, its black velvet coating worn and ripped.

"...Oh."

Drawn closer to it, he examined the curve of the shoe and its petite shape, feeling nauseous after the reality hit him: he was looking at a deceased woman's shoe, and Bill had kept it all this time—No, not just any woman's shoe.

Paige's shoe.

The realization was an electrifying tremor down to his core, and he was left unsettled by the gruesome events that'd built to this, the offhanded comments from Joseph, Bill's graphic story and aversion to his desk being cleaned in stunning clarity, along with other tiny details that were beginning to add up. He didn't know if he was about to break down and cry or expel the contents of his stomach.

"I thought of her as my soulmate."

Dipper sought Bill's free hand in the low light of the grad office and gripped it tightly, hoping his squeezing could convey what he couldn't manage to say since he felt unbelievably choked. Nothing he could conjure seemed significant enough to eliminate the momentous silence that grounded them.

“We were going to be together for the rest of our lives. Maybe it wasn’t love, but we cared about each other, and it worked. All of our parents approved.”

Although he debated staying listless while it seemed Bill was discovering a unique catharsis in reliving it, Dipper's curiosity and desire to suture a timeline had him inquiring gently, "When..?"

“About seven years, my sophomore year.”
Dipper hummed lightly, the note quivering alongside the buzzing of the hallway floodlight.

Bill tilted the shoe in his hand, turning it in deft fingers. “Sometimes it feels like she’s still with me, but I know she’s gone. Nothing could bring her back.”

When he replied, it hardly occurred to him that he was the one talking. "It's sweet that you honor her memory." His thoughts drifted to something he'd heard years ago during his own tragedy and coping with the aftermath, learning one's first death was physical, inevitable — but being forgotten was the second, something Paige would never experience from how extensively Bill still cared for her and cherished how she'd lived.

Bill returned the shoe to the drawer, locking it. “It’s like an ongoing nightmare. Those girls today... I don’t know why they did that to me, what they did. It’s horrible.”

Dipper blinked, and despite his best efforts, he couldn't pinpoint what Bill was referring to. "What? ...Why? I mean, I know it was—is horrible, but I don't think they were trying to do anything to you.” As gut-wrenching as it'd been and putting aside the blood and gore that tormented his memory, his pity felt wrong when placed on him, Stan, or Bill. There was at least one life that'd been stolen, and permanent scars inflicted on the others.

“They were being fucking stupid,” Bill said, straightening his posture as he turned back to him. “And they ruined my day, too. Had that driver, Madison—”

"Madeline."

“—had she not been playing on her phone, her friend would be alive, she’d be conscious, and her other friend wouldn’t be traumatized. There’s blood on my handkerchief, Pine Tree.”

"I'm sorry for your loss." It was a partial question, the sentiment better served for the victims of the crash, a tally he didn't think they actually qualified for.

“I feel gross, think I need a shower.” Bill was trembling, his hands curtly wiped across his vest as he kept his tearful gaze downcast. "Let’s go home.”

"Yeah, let's…" he concurred with a pitiful sigh, shaken, "let's just go home."
Dipper hurried to the oven as the timer resounded, scrambling to configure the controls and settings to get it to stop beeping, especially before Stan went into his rant on how Bill had fancy appliances that 'us hard working folks could only dream of owning.'

Who that was referencing, he wasn't actually sure.

After the food was retrieved and mitts were slung aside, he separated portions for each spot at the table, and leftovers for when Stan inevitably wanted another serving, or if the dish happened to survive until the end of the weekend when Bill would be home. "Food's done, guys," he announced, Stan and Mabel entertaining themselves with Bill's collection of video games as Ford watched in calculating curiosity. "Table's set and everything."

Stan was the first to abandon the game and bolt, settling in to maul the food while Ford took a seat next to him but didn't dive in like a starving raccoon. ‘Fuckin’ great, kid,” he complimented, raising his head to inadvertently show off the food on his chin. “How do ya do it?”

"This recipe was Mabel's idea,” he said and looked to her gratefully, "and getting basically any groceries that I could want is kind of helpful too. It's been fun sending Bill to super tiny market stores that are half-hidden. He complains about being five seconds from getting mugged." Which wasn't true at all, but Bill dramatically claimed that patrons didn't stare at him 'in a good way.'

By the time Dipper peeked up again, Stan finished vacuuming his plate. “Fancy guy like ‘im is gonna get mugged someday.”

"Not at the markets,” Mabel said. “They’re quite nice, and the people are even nicer.”

Speculating, Ford said, "I suppose it would depend on the income level of the neighborhood…” though Dipper wasn't convinced he'd ever been to a market in California, miles from the type that'd find himself in the midst of a bustling crowd and array of stalls under a hot sun.

Mabel shook her head, though Stan nodded eagerly. “Mark my words, kid. He'll get mugged. He sticks out like a sore thumb.”

"Yeah, that's just Bill. It's not like he can control his height, but he could switch it up from those black and yellow suits literally everyday." Bill looked like a time traveler from the turn of the century in his apparel, a habit presumably connected to his traditional family and affinity for stylish, grand fashion. A prim and proper gentleman, Bill would reaffirm with that arrogant glint in his eye. Dipper didn't have to play out the theoretical to know with astonishing certitude.

"You ought to have seen him at our conference last week," Ford scoffed. "He covered his shirt in nametags with different identifiers for himself. I believe his reasoning was to be a walking demonstration of quantum superposition, though his take seemed more literary than scientific."

Stan cocked his head. “Sixer, you're gonna have to speak English in this household.”

"I am speaking English, Stanley, but I'll remind you that it's not even your household to decide what language—"

“I think he means Bill is nerdy,” Mabel chimed in, nudging Ford with her elbow then turning to him. “Wouldn't you agree, Dipper?”
Without hesitation, Dipper agreed by humming, consumed in a forkful of food. From the emptiness on Stan's plate and the explosion on his tastebuds, he could gather that it wasn't a bad attempt at Mabel's proposed recipe. He hoped she was enjoying it too.

Luckily, it seemed she was since she smacked her lips as she scraped the last food from her plate, giving Stan a run for his money in her rapid devouring. “That was fantastic, Dipper,” she told him. “I’m surprised Bill isn’t here to enjoy it too!”

"Oh, I thought... maybe I didn't tell you.” He couldn't recall if he'd detailed Bill's whereabouts this evening. "Bill's gone for the weekend at his estate with his parents. He said his dad called him home or something ...which might be related to the wedding kind of going awry." That, he knew he had told Mabel about because he distinctly recalled her surprise in learning about Joseph's antics, and Bill's fight that'd led to their removal was of equal interest to her.

However, he hadn't said a word about the crash they'd encountered on the way home, and he didn't know if he would. After that night, he'd been keeping to himself and couldn't summon the bravery to articulate a peep of it, not to Stan or Bill or anybody. None of them seemed to want to acknowledge it'd existed, a viable strategy as the three of them hadn't found each other in their presence since. Dipper busied himself, combating intrusive imagery and thoughts of the terrible experience that introduced fresh nightmares into his minimal rest. Shortness of breath and heart palpitations paled in comparison to the paralyzing replay that eviscerated him, and he could already sense the air was tightening, thinning around him.

Ignoring it was the sole method of coping because rumination was a plea to be strangled by his own trauma.

It startled Dipper when Stan coughed, hitting his chest a couple times as he cleared his throat. “I can't believe he went, that old man's gonna chew his ass out.”

"Have you met Mr. Cipher?” Ford asked, tilting his head to hitch an eyebrow at Stan. "I hadn't realized you two were acquainted."

“Nah.” Stan disregarded his question with a waving hand. “I’ve ‘eard plenty of stories to last me a lifetime, judging by what other people say about ’im."

"I've had the," Ford coughed into his elbow, "pleasure of crossing paths with him on a few occasions, though we didn't speak more than briefly. He seems... very professional, but that could be attributed to the circumstances that we met under."

Resting his face in his palm while he mindlessly chased the remaining food around his plate, Dipper supplied, "He yelled at me. Like, full on lecture over the phone because he thought I was Bill, then totally changed his tune once I told him that he had the wrong guy."

"It appears the tendency to go from one extreme to the other runs in the family." At that, Stan burst into laughter, pounding his fist on the table as the dishes clanked from the impact.

“Ya got that right, Sixer. Those fellas must’ve got somethin’ off up there, the way they go back and forth.”

"It's weird, I've heard that his mom has mental health issues. But I mean...” Bill did too if what he'd said about his tentative BPD diagnosis was accurate considering his medication had been tweaked to better suit him.

“Is his mom alive? I heard those rumors about his dad having her killed instead of getting divorced.
No one’s seen her in years.” Mabel lit up. “They should make a movie about her! Or a documentary! Ooh, a docu-series, like one of those dramatic investigations with interviews and security footage and everything! They can call it Finding Missing Cipher!"

As onboard as Bill would be provided the cameras didn't stray from him, Dipper waited a couple seconds to be certain she was finished with her Hollywood tangent to finally reply more seriously, "...I think she's alive? Bill was sort of evasive when I asked him what he thought of the rumors and conspiracy." From what he'd contributed, it implied she was alive but wasn't on the best terms with Bill evidenced by his not-so-flattering descriptions.

Brushing it off with a shake of his head, Dipper asked Stan, "Did you ever get your car back?" The question was concise and to the point, a little stiff honestly. He doubted either of them wanted to talk about it in more detail than what was necessary.

Stan shook his head as Mabel left for the kitchen, reappearing moments later with a second helping of food that she distributed partially to Stan but kept the rest for herself after a devilish rubbing of her palms. “I had Reggie tow ‘er for free,” that elicited a disapproving glance from Ford, "and I’ve fixed ‘er up. She’s runnin’ like a beauty.”

"Wonderful," Ford mumbled, sarcasm abound, "I was under the impression that Reggie had three more months to serve in prison."

“He got out early on good behavior!"

Mabel leaned over the table to high-five Stan, a jubilant exclamation spilling from her, "That's super cool! The world better step aside because our dude Reggie's shapin’ up. Now all he needs is to get that sleeve tattoo he was talking about! Did he decide on a turtleneck sleeve or that mini caricature of himself?"

Dipper didn't allow Stan to answer. "Good thing he's out because Stan's probably going to need another lift in like, a week."

Stan huffed in displeasure. “My girl will last longer than a week! Ya can’t handle how sturdy she is, kid.” Dropping to a grumble, he groused, "Youngsters an’ your aversion to the classics..."

"Is that why Reggie has to jump it half of the time?" he teased lightly, though it earned him a glare from Stan and a chortle from Mabel. "How did you guys meet anyway? Through Soos?"

Stan swallowed before he spoke, a greater decency than Dipper generally expected from him. “Yup, he went to a showin’ with his girlfriend, or fiancee or whatever, to support Soos during his act and we hit it off since he bummed a couple drinks off me.”

Ford circled the last food around his plate with his fork and observed, "You're leaving out the part where he and Soos came over and crashed on our sofa because you were intent on hosting an— what did you call it, 'afterparty?' But Ford let it go, smile cynical. "Jumping Stan's car every other week is the least he can do. That aside, would you like help cleaning up, Dipper?"

"I think Mabel and I can handle it. Oh, hey, maybe you want to try playing that cooking game with Stan while we’re cleaning? Since you were watching him and Mabel earlier."

“Hah! Are ya ready to get your ass beat, Sixer?”

Ford blinked. "It was a cooperative game. A very unrealistic one at that, but I'll give it my best attempt. My familiarity with games pertains mostly to fantasy RPGs and strategy."
As Dipper walked with Mabel to the kitchen with dishes in hand, he heard Stan say from the other room, “It’s a game, Sixer. It ain’t supposed to be realistic.”

"How long do you think it'll be until they're fighting?" he asked lowly to Mabel, joking but thankful their arguments were rarely scathing. Most felt like they were sparked for the sake of having something to bicker about, and that was how they liked it.

Mabel beamed as she set her plate down in the sink, and began to fill one side with hot water. Because she'd taken dish-duty, Dipper diverted his focus to scraping the leftovers into a container that'd likely be sent home with Stan once the night was over.

“I think they’ll be okay,” she said. “Stan might rage quit if Ford can’t get the lettuce on the counter, though.”

Amused, he said, "Kiwi and Peaches might learn some new words. We should let them out once we're done here, and— oh! I convinced Bill to get bananas for them." Indicating the bunch in the corner of the counter, he slid them closer and broke one off. "I mean, he doesn't know they're for the cockatiels but still. I'm letting him think it's for me because he does all these lame blowjob jokes by substituting 'banana.'" It was only made humorous by the fact that the bananas weren't for him, and he and Bill doing anything physical. Trying to strike a scratchier, loud tone, he impersonated, "You like that banana in your mouth, Pine Tree?"

It might've been a little too loud, as Stan and Ford's chatter took a sudden drop in volume, but Mabel's giggle overrode the silence. “You like its white, long shape down your throat, Pine Tree?”

"I see you're already acquainted with his banana innuendos."

“It’s a little hard not to be, especially when it’s so easy-peasy to come up with them.”

In the living room, there was the clamorous sound of a door closing, and to his absolute shock, Bill's voice rang through the apartment. “What’s for dinner? I’m so hungry, I’m going to die if I don’t eat soon.” He and Mabel shared a puzzled glance.

"Uh... did we somehow summon him with the banana thing?" he muttered to Mabel, craning his neck toward the kitchen entryway, but he couldn't see Bill from this angle. "I didn't think he was supposed to be home yet. He was spending the weekend with his parents...?" Raising his voice so Bill could hear, he called, "We're in the kitchen! You missed dinner, but we have leftovers." It was a statement and question, the end of it lifted to convey his confusion.

Bill entered the kitchen, a big grin on his face. “There’s my favorite Pine Tree! What’d you make now?” He walked over to the counter, sniffing the food Dipper had put in plastic containers in an inelegant albeit entertaining display.

"Y'know... dinner for four people, because I was under the assumption that the fifth wouldn't be home for two days? What are you doing here?"

“The ‘dinner’ my father planned was really a lecture-fest, so I bailed.”

Although he was tempted to ask about this 'lecture-fest' and if it had anything to do with Bill's interference in the wedding, Dipper didn't sense it was a good time when Bill appeared too distracted by the food and quite intent on helping himself to it. "I guess you didn't miss dinner entirely," he offered, taking a fork from the silverware and handing it over, "because I was about to feed the cockatiels, and Stan and Ford are playing Overcooked in the main room."

“Perfect,” Bill said as he collected his meal. “I’ll join them. How long are you going to take, Pine
"Tree?"

"Hm?" he hummed his inquiry. "You mean, feeding the cockatiels? I don't know, how ever long it takes them to eat the banana I guess, but I'll be in the same room as you guys if that's what you're worried about." Switching his attention to Mabel, he was about to ask if she wanted assistance with the dishes, but she must have noticed his gaze since she shook her head to indicate that she had it taken care of.

"Wait." Bill paused, zeroed in on the banana in his hand. "You didn’t want my banana? You’re feeding it to the birds?"

Dipper gave him a funny look but ushered him from the kitchen now that he had his food, shuffling out of Mabel's way. "First, why are we calling it.. 'your banana'? And second, yeah, they're for the birds."

"I feel betrayed."

"Because the banana is for the birds," he clarified skeptically, then broke into a faint smile. "Sorry, man. For what it's worth, you don't have to stop making the blowjob jokes."

Entering the living room, the chaotic demands exchanged between Stan and Ford took over, requests for more of some ingredient and to hurry up and why did it catch on fire again? “I told ya you’d get your ass handed to ya, Sixer,” Stan yelled. “The soup’s on fire!”

"How was I to know that you couldn't spare a single moment of onion-chopping to take it off of the burner, Stanley?" Ford retorted.

"You’re supposed to be the cook! I’m the cutter and the putter, Sixer!"

"Put-er, not putter. We're not golfing," he corrected, but Stan continued.

"I can’t do everythin’ by myself in this. Ya need to step up before I fire ya! Put those extra fingers to use!"

Once the game was halted so Ford could stare exasperatedly at Stan as it became obvious they'd have to restart the level, Dipper cleared his throat from behind them and received two near-identical owlish stares.

"Hey," he greeted. "I'm letting the 'tiels out so don't rile them up or anything. ...Stan."

"I don’t rile the birds up!" Stan objected, but in a louder voice, yelled: “If you're happy an’ ya know it clap your hands!” And did a deliberate hand-clap that sent Kiwi into repeated whistles of the first few lines of the song.

"Yeah, anyway," he moved on, unlatching their cage and offering them a hand to perch on. "They're going to have a banana. And also," he tipped his head toward where Bill had taken a seat on the sofa, "Bill's back early from visiting his parents."

"Is he?" Stan questioned, tense. His eyes didn't wander from the screen. “Well would ya look at that, guess it’s time for me to scram."

Dipper opened his mouth to ask but stopped before the words could form, the unsettling realization occurring to him that Stan and Bill were trapped in the awkward place of mutually-witnessing the gory aftermath of the accident, and having all three of them in the same room was planting the seeds of discomfort.
However, Ford was unaware. "Oh, please. I guarantee you won't go anywhere near the door until you've drank half of your collective weight in alcohol with him."

"Ya shouldn’t tempt me, Sixer. I’ll drain this apartment and the liquor store down the block."

"I think tonight is more of an alcohol-free evening," he said, an edge to the statement because he understood where this would lead: Stan and Bill being trashed to resolve the emotional strife. "Mabel prepared a dessert that we can eat once she's finished doing dishes, and you guys can have coffee with it. Whiskey and spice cake isn't a great combination."

Stan shook his head. "Kid, if ya think whiskey and spice cake don’t mix, you haven’t lived. That shit’s great, even if it is gonna be vegan or whatever."

Bill shifted, splaying on the sofa, but Dipper nudged one gangly leg aside to sit in the spot with his birds still resting upon his forearm. "Oh no," he mock whined to terminate the silence, "my legs have been moved. Better sue you for damaging this platinum package."

"Fine, fine," he muttered and used his free hand to reposition Bill's leg onto his lap, then encouraged the birds to perch there as he opened the banana. "Don't move." Soon, their pleading chirps quieted as they pecked at the fruit and took chunks from it while happily situated atop Bill's slacks.

Bill frowned at him. "Why would you do this to me. They're going to ruin my clothes, and then what will I wear?"

"Do you actually think I'd believe you're not hoping for an excuse to take your pants off?" he suggested with a laugh. "But I don't know how they'd ruin your clothes. They're trained to go in their cage."

"Maybe ya should stop complainin’ about ruined clothes and still wear ‘em.” Stan said, the usual tease stilted. "Don’t be a money tosser, Bill, it don’t look good on ya."

The faucet squeaked as water was turned off, and Mabel entered with a towel in hand. “What’d I miss?” Dipper was inclined to say that she'd missed Bill and Stan trading awkward chop-busters as they chipped at the overhanging sorrow of the last time they'd interacted.

Leaning over to pat the cushion of the armchair and invite her to it, he said, "The cockatiels are having dinner with Bill. It's a cute date between the birds and the bee." Peaches and Kiwi were munching on the banana and getting it down to the final pieces, and Bill was begrudgingly eating as he glared at them.

"Ooh, I wish I had my camera— a better one than my lame phone camera. We could’ve immortalized this moment."

Dipper grinned. "Another great addition to your Instasnapbook?” Or whatever those social media sites were, he wasn't exactly sure but had a feeling both Mabel and Bill would be up to speed on the latest online landscapes. With a playful nudge, he added, "It can join the pictures that you took of dinner.” Mabel might believe she was stealthy in maneuvering her phone and pretending to take a selfie, but he'd seen her readjust the aim onto the food.

Mabel donned a sheepish smile.

"Hey, don't worry about it. It's flattering." Plus, it'd been her recipe so she might as well capitalize on it and take credit where it was due.
"Oh," Dipper began again, gesturing toward Stan and Ford. Both were concentrated on the game. "And you missed them fighting about who started the soup on fire. Watching them play makes me feel better about our scores."

Mabel peered at the screen. “I thought we did pretty well for our first run.”

"We weren’t… the worst,” he agreed, shrugging, then looked down when he saw a flash of movement near the bottom of his vision. Kiwi was scuttling up Bill's leg to rest on his stomach, resuming his whistle of "If You're Happy and You Know It" and leaving Dipper to ponder retrieving him. Bill blew air at Kiwi’s head, causing him to shake out his feathers.

“Shoo, gold feathers. Shoo.”

"I thought the golden boys would get along." Dipper took Kiwi by offering a finger-perch. "I'm kind of surprised that you didn't bring Marigold. You must've been in a hurry."

“I love Marigold, but she'll be fine for the weekend. Until things cool off with Father, I wouldn’t want to go within a hundred feet of our estate.”

"Jesus, what happened?" Dipper grimaced, a lump in his throat as thoughts of the night reemerged. Worrying his lower lip for several seconds, he eventually said, "If it's about the wedding, that… I don't know, it seems so stupidly small in comparison." Relationships could be mended, putting aside if that was the right course of action with Joseph given his beliefs skewed his treatment of people. But people… couldn't be replaced, and the collision had shifted his perspective of the evening.

Bill sighed. “He’s pissy about the wedding, my insistence on evading his lectures, and a few other items. There’s no winning with him, tonight's ‘dinner’ along with the weekend visit were his attempts of ensnaring me in a long-winded rant. Tempted to block his number.”

"Did you silence your phone?" he asked, taking a gander at Bill's pocket where the outline of the device was, but he noted he hadn't heard it go off yet. "Did you tell him about..." he trailed off, swallowing and shifting uncomfortably. "He might go easier on you."

“Oh, no. Empathy isn't his strong suit. It’s back on sound again, but I haven’t talked to him about anything, since he won’t shut up about the wedding.” Bill reached for his phone, checking his notifications. Almost immediately, missed calls from 'Father' were listed. “Well, fuck. He’ll get over my lack of responses eventually, probably.”

"Yeah, I told Mabel that you got us kicked out." Upon gauging Bill's reaction, he clarified, "And no, I didn't tell her that you were the bad guy or anything."

“Look, it’s not my fault they were asking for it!” Bill killed the volume of his phone, likely as a precautionary measure. “I’m not the bad guy. I’m like a hero, cutie! I saved us from that shitty wedding.”

It was true they would’ve been miserable at the wedding, but that wasn't what Dipper had in mind when he thought of Bill's heroism that evening because being removed from a wedding was approximately the least of his kindness. “Yeah, you and Stan,” he said under his breath but exhaled, shaking his head to disperse the notion. Pure curiosity taking over, he inquired, "Did you ever mention that you got fired and switched jobs?"

Bill chuckled, sliding his phone back in his pocket. “We’re on a ‘need to know’ basis. He doesn’t need to know I swapped jobs, so he doesn’t.”
"How's that going, by the way?" Mabel piped in. "Dipper was saying how much you like it a while ago."

“Oh Stars, it’s going fantastic! I’ve sold at least twenty cars this pay period, and that’s fucking awesome. People are itching to waste money.”

With a snort, Dipper quipped, "I thought you'd understand that better than anyone."

“I don’t throw away my money,” Bill objected. “I’m very thoughtful with my finances, Pine Tree.”

"Is that why you never did get the paint job for your vehicle? Conserving funds?" he asked, poking fun. "Or is it because the employees laughed when there was no reason for getting one?" No vandalism to speak of.

Bill tensed, mouth sealing firmly in a frown. “I did get a paint job, actually.” After a dragging instant, the frown swapped to a wolfish grin, and he nudged his arm. “Nah, I’m fucking with you, of course I didn’t. That eight grand was worth your company.”

"Wow," he said dryly but struggled to contain his laughter, relieved that the car hadn't been damaged enough (or at all) to require fixing, "but fitting that the paint job was about as real as any other job that you might've gotten on my behalf."

“Ouch,” Bill said. “I guess it’ll be another fifty years before you even consider giving me a job, huh? That’s okay, Pine Tree. I can wait.” He winked at him, leaning over to leave a ghost of a kiss on his cheek as it reddened with an incoming blush.

“This conversation has gotten real lovey-dovey,” Stan complained. “It's killin’ my cookin’ mojo.”

"What? Did they say something?"

“They’re throat fuckin’ over there.”

Passing a few moments of careful evaluation, Ford reported back to Stan, "They.. appear to be decent."

“Sixer, that wasn’t uh.. lateral.”

"Literal?" came the correction alongside quizzical deadpan. Dipper recognized it as Ford's "instructor intonation."

Mabel shrugged. "Bill wishes it was, apparently."

Stan rolled his eyes, turning to them with disbelief. “Can you believe this guy? He don’t know what ‘lateral’ means. I’m a ‘Merican, I don’t need corrections.”

Ford reached over to squeeze his side, the gesture playful. "In that case, you are getting a bit lateral."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Stan demanded, struggling not to chuckle.

"Oh? I thought you were the expert on lateral?"

Stan rounded on him, fists clenched as he forgot the controller on the cushion. “Yeah, well– you’re the expert on being a nerd! How ya like that?” Seemingly tickled by the mild insult, Ford's eyes brightened, about to respond but Mabel interrupted the banter.
“Speaking of lateral!” she jumped in, Peaches flapping her wings from her perch on Mabel's shoulder. “I think it’s time for cake because I’m a firm believer that dessert fixes any conflict. Stan, help me grab some plates. We can both be more lateral once we're stuffed on delicious frosting! It’ll *laterally* be the best thing ever!”

Since Bill had generously gone supermarket-hopping after work, including shopping at 'mugging-probable' stores as he called them, Dipper took the time to tidy the apartment in anticipation of Bill's return. Throughout the winter break, it'd grown increasingly messier with Bill taking shifts at the car dealership and the apartment seeing more guests than usual. Specifically, its new feathered residents and the family that went along with them, but Dipper enjoyed hosting Stan and Ford.

As for Mabel, their living situation had barely changed despite moving into Bill's place. Whenever she wasn't scheduled at the diner, she was here to accompany him and the birds. It was shaping up to be a pleasant arrangement, and he didn't mind the maintenance cleaning, a leisurely activity when Bill didn't expect him to do it in the first place.

Dipper was in the process of wiping counter tops with a damp rag when a sudden buzz reverberated in the living room, and the fluttering of cockatiel wings suggested the sound had been equally startling to them. He hadn't been awaiting a call and felt himself breaking into a quick, cold sweat as he approached his phone to confirm it was indeed receiving a phone call from an unknown number.

Calls were rare, barring Stan's aversion to text. It meant something serious had happened, and he was already running mental lists to determine what it might be, if Bill had gotten into danger on the drive home. Or if it was his parents, or even Stan and Ford…

Or Mabel.

The resulting panic had him snatching the phone in shaky hands, and he answered it with a tentative, "Hello?"

“Mason Pines,” the crisp, firm voice of… Bill? rang through. “We’ve spoken before under less fortunate circumstances, but I’d like to formally introduce myself to you.” Dipper was too stunned to speak, analytical mind trying to process this since it sounded insanity familiar but… there was something off, sort of like a voice Bill would do when trying to impersonate a lawyer. But if it was Bill playing an odd joke on him, it wasn't adding up. It seemed uncharacteristic, and he wasn't sure Bill remembered his legal name was Mason. "Okay…”

“My name is William Cipher—”

It snapped into place, a flash of understanding overtaking Dipper and leaving him choking for breath because it certainly wasn't Bill, it was Bill's father. Had to be. The voice, the 'less fortunate circumstances', the formality. Everything. It was cool and controlled, precisely like he'd been after the initial lecture. “And I wanted to apologize for the phone call you previously answered. Had I known you weren’t William the Fifth, the outcome would've been vastly different.”

"Um," he blurted ungracefully, tripping over the words in his rush to get out multiple thoughts at once, "how… when— did you get this number? My number? I mean, it’s… sorry. It's nice to meet you.”

He could *hear* the smirk. Another trait seemingly passed from father to son. “I have my resources,
Mr. Pines.

"Okay," he said as that was among the few distracted noises he could muster, "also, 'Dipper' is fine." It was a semi-question, speculating whether he would retain the formality regardless, but he guessed it didn't matter and opted to address what Mr. Cipher claimed was the point of the call. "Look, about before—I don't mind, really. So... don't worry about it."

"Perfect," he stated. "Then allow me to invite you to my winter ball. It's white tie, of course. You're free to include anyone you'd like, provided you use good judgment. I would have extended this offer to you among the rest of the invitations, had my William informed me of your relationship sooner."

"Winter ball?" he echoed, on autopilot as he processed everything. "Thanks for the invitation, I think."

He wanted to ask about that part regarding Bill informing him of the relationship, but he couldn't gather the courage and held his tongue, a smoldering glance cast at the door that Bill would walk through any minute. That was a discussion for later. For now, he realized he should probably be unscrambling to conjure a more suitable and substantial reply.

"I appreciate it," he said, fighting to keep his voice even as he paced the expanse of the floor, anxiety dripping in his wake, "but it's just.. formal events, uh—as great as they are, I'm not sure how well I'd fit in. I wouldn't want to disrupt anything." It was the most polite method of declining that he could manage, his fingers crossed as he waited to hear if Mr. Cipher was taking the hint.

"You won't disturb a thing," he countered brutally, a sharpness to his tone that implied attendance was mandatory. "And we'd love to have you. The ball is in three days, and once again I must voice my deepest apologies for such short notice. If only my William had been communicative." There was a brief pause. "If you have questions or concerns, I'd be glad to answer them. Make sure you mention the ball to your parents as well. The Pines are honored guests."

"Right..." he said numbly, tacking on the single word he could think of, "thanks."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you," he continued. "Have a good evening, Mason." A click signaled it was over, but Dipper's daze carried him the next five minutes or so until Bill walked through the door.

Prior to that moment, he'd resumed clearing by going through the motions while his mind wandered, reflecting on this winter ball and what it'd mean for him, for Bill. Their relationship. Drowning his typical pain, a suppressing weight drifted across his chest, making his breathing shallow, and it didn't lift as Bill burst into the apartment with several bags of groceries and a chipper greeting of, "Hey cutie. I got the.. edible foreign shit."

Dipper whirled around with what he assumed was wide eyes and a hunger for details written over his face. "Thanks," he said, sincerely thankful but distracted, "just.. uh, put it in the kitchen, and I'll go through it in a minute." Unsure how to approach it, he kicked his foot at the carpet and cleared his throat, the whole song and dance of awkwardness. At last, he finally came up with the geniusly slick segue, "So, your dad called...?"

Bill faltered as he set the bags on the counter, Dipper trailing in to watch from afar. "What? How the fuck did he do that? Did you give him your number?"

"Yeah, Bill," he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "We had this marvelous meet-cute at a bar, and I gave him my number— no, I didn't give it to him, man. I don't know how he found it. I thought
you gave it to him, to be honest."

"Why would I give him your number?" Bill questioned. "Can I see your phone? I'm blocking him."

Shoving his phone into his pocket, he said, "No, you don't need to block him. That's..." Extreme, came to mind. "I wasn't expecting him to call me, or invite me to the winter ball thing."

Bill dropped his hand, departing from the counter to pace across the room, shoes clicking on the linoleum flooring of the kitchen. "What the fuck? Why did he do that? You're not going, right?"

"Well," he rocked back and forth on his heels, pupils darting to the corner of his vision, "I kind of felt like I didn't get a choice, and he invited me because apparently... he knows we're together? I had no idea you told him."

"It was spur of the moment," Bill explained. "He was bitching about me not being with my soulmate and I kind of lost it. 'You're twenty-three Bill, your soulmate is eighteen--' he swore his heart skipped a beat, even if it wasn't truly a clue to their status as soulmates anymore, not when that mystery was solved, "why the fuck aren't you with her, nag, nag, nag.'"

Although he may have otherwise chuckled at Bill's impression, he was caught in the midst of feeling pressure closing in from all sides, too many worries and too little time to voice them. The soulmate piece would have to wait, though a tightness grasped his throat as he envisioned that discussion.

He settled on something safer. "If he doesn't like our relationship so much, why did he bother inviting me to his adult prom?"

Bill spun to gawk at him like he was flabbergasted by the question. "He knows who you are. He wants to mend the ties between our families. Make you feel welcome, ease your parents' guards down, so he can get what he wants."

"Funding?" he inquired with a tip of his head, dismissing it as ridiculous because there was no guarantee his parents would attend, much less give in. "That's lame. I don't see why he can't just be happy for us, no matter who's soulmates with who. Besides, that's... seriously weird, that he's talking about how your soulmate is legal. Um," he stopped abruptly, averting his gaze, "I don't think you ever told me that you were— are the older soulmate." Not that he needed to specify anymore, but it was interesting nonetheless when Bill took measures to dodge it.

Bill cocked his head to one side, the mirror in his movements unnerving Dipper enough to straighten out with a cough. "Why does being the older soulmate matter? It doesn't affect us."

"I was surprised," he said, shrugging it off, trying to be casual. "Since you don't.. I know you don't like talking about it, or anyone referencing it."

"Yeah," Bill said, a guardedness to his demeanor. "I can't fucking believe I had to take the fucking gauze off because of that dumbass girl."

Although he hadn't cared for the talk of funding, he was wishing they could return to it because this had taken a nosedive into territory he doubted they were ready for. A heavy subject with a lot to say and nothing that felt adequate.

"I'm sorry. I imagine that was... difficult," he said, eyes anywhere but on Bill — the star clock was more fascinating than it ever had been before. A trembling dizziness settling over him, this was worse than when he was on the phone with Bill's father, and he tried to calm himself by remembering the flowing, intertwining lines of Bill's soulmark that resembled ink blotches. "But
you might have saved her life by slowing the bleeding until the paramedics arrived. Bill, I…"
Drawing in a deep breath, he chewed his lower lip, clenched his damp hands as if to hold onto a fleeting ounce of courage. "I—" He could do this.

Maybe.

One look at Bill, and his nerve crumbled at the perplexed expression, the apprehensive concern. "I thought it was brave and… uh, philanthropic of you, I guess."

“Pine Tree,” Bill had quieted. “I wish that girl had died. I’d feel a lot better about these roads if I knew that irresponsible driver wasn’t wandering the streets, free to get more people killed.”

"She said she was texting,” he mumbled, "so.. I don't think she'll be driving for a while."

“I’d still feel better if she was the one smashed by a tree.”

"Yeah, well…” A surge of bitterness gripped him, not directed at Bill or himself but the universe, the naive assumption that bad things only happened to bad people. "Karma's dead. We both have proof of that." They were the living proof of it. Jaw tightening because he didn't think he could be in this space anymore, he turned away and clasped his hands to his arms, walking with no destination but ending at the bird cage.

As he mindlessly peered at the cockatiels half-asleep inside, he couldn't help but think he was doing this wrong, the whole 'boyfriend' concept. The soulmate concept was a lost cause.

“Admiring the birds?” Bill guessed, following him. “Sugar, are you okay?”

"I'm," he started, forcing his shoulders to drop and systematically relaxing his body, inhaling and exhaling. Simply breathing, and then shifting to lean into Bill. "I'm okay. Sorry about that, it's just… you and I— we..." Their pasts intertwined in the most horrible of ways, experiencing major losses through freak accidents that weren't their fault but had altered the trajectory of their lives and outlook. Bill wrapped his arms around him, chin resting atop his head as he planted a small kiss against his hair. The motion was soothing.

“Easy there, Pine Tree. Relax.” Dipper pressed his face to Bill's collarbone and lingered in the loose embrace for several seconds, staying there to drink in this moment and use it to come down from the rehash of his own trauma.

"I'm okay,” he repeated, muffled by Bill's blazer, an unusual mental exhaustion replacing the influx of emotion. "Maybe we should relocate to the sofa or bedroom or something so we don't disturb the cockatiels." It was an easy excuse.

“Is there an issue with waking them up?”

"They need ten to twelve hours of rest, and they're starting to get sleepy."

Bill sighed, keeping close to him. “If you want to move, sure. Wherever you want, honey.”

"Come on," he urged, reluctantly pulling from the hug to grasp Bill's hand and lead him the few steps into his bedroom. Once they'd arrived, he near-collapsed onto the plush mattress and was content to lie there, merely existing with thoughts beginning to sort themselves out.

"About this winter ball, my options of attendance were limited, dude. He made it pretty clear I was expected to go. Is it going to be a problem?" After having time to process the proposition, he was less panicked and more curious, slightly nervous.
“Are you asking if going will be a problem, or not going?” Bill asked as he shuffled around the closet, doing who knew what.

"In the words of my brilliant boyfriend, yes."

“Alright then, fine. No if you stay, yes if you don’t.”

"You didn't seem that happy about it," he pointed out, "but I guess as long as you're there…?"
However, he couldn't picture Bill not attending his father's own annual ball.

“Well, I’ll be there. I don’t want to be. It’s boring, a ton of rich people—Father's friends and fellow businessmen—are there but all they do is talk. And it isn’t even about me.”

"I can't believe he called you William the Fifth. Fancy."

Finally, he felt the bed shift, the telltale sign that preceded arms wrapping around him and as he was melting into the touch, he realized there was something different. Wrong, even. Dipper went rigid, despite Bill nuzzling against his shoulder. As Bill was complaining about his father's tendency of misidentification, Dipper hardly registered any of that because he was hyperfocused on the arms surrounding him, and it hit him with an extraordinary flash of realization what was off about this scene: there was nothing on his arms. No long sleeves, no medical gauze.

Breathing shallow, he shuffled closer to Bill by flattening against him, the spooning position they were so accustomed to but renewed by this change. Dipper was careful as his fingertips landed over the skin of Bill's forearm to confirm that there was truly nothing there, and he wondered if Bill could feel the rate of his heart through his back, quickening as the pads of his fingers dragged across marked skin.

Dipper dared to steal a peek.

And it was as he remembered it, the trailing strokes that were dotted and slick like what a broken pen might make, over words that he recognized as his own, both written and verbal. Despite how it was partially covered by the black marking, it rendered him awestruck.

Bill defensively folded his arm, almost shielding the soulmark behind Dipper's thigh. “You seem distracted,” he said. “What’re you looking at, my raw muscle?”

"Yeah," replied Dipper when he'd found his voice again among the amazement, "I... it's distracting, your muscle. I guess it's like the first time I've really seen it, y'know?” He twisted his body to lie on his back, reclaiming Bill's arm to place over his stomach but spending more time in actually observing the features of muscle and soulmark that he hadn't seen before with the bandage over it.

Bill sighed against him, worn. “I’m not blind, I know this isn’t about my muscle.”

A wry smile painted his face, almost wounded because he knew this was his opportunity, and he wasn't taking it. "Are you saying I don't admire your muscles enough? I'm working on amending that." If being with Bill had taught him anything, it was redirecting the focus elsewhere, dodging unwanted topics. It wasn't that Dipper had a problem with soulmark talk beyond the avoidance of admitting they were soulmates, but he was concerned it'd scare Bill into ditched habits of hiding and denying.

Except he probably should've realized it wouldn't work on the master of that tactic.

“‘I’m mostly saying you’ve been ogling at my soulmark every chance you get.”
"Huh? I..." Dipper clasped his hand tighter unconsciously, keeping it close to him as if afraid Bill would retreat. "Honestly, I'm just sort of surprised it's not covered. Do you want—" he took a breath inward, forcing the voluntarily relinquishment as he released his grip, "—want to go do that?"

“What would the point be?” Bill complained. “Everyone’s already seen it, judged it with their.. stupid judgy eyes. I don’t know why I bother anymore.”

"I don't know," he echoed, a quiver in his voice, "but it's up to you. I think it looks pretty neat." His thumb swept the handwriting inscribed on his skin, fascinated, silently hoping Bill didn't hide it from the world again. "It's.. seriously stunning, especially with the constellation tattoo."

“It’s a bunch of ink blotches on letters you can't read, Pine Tree.” Bill repositioned his arm, outside the reach of Dipper’s fingers.

"What? I can read them fine," he protested, and... well, it wasn't exactly true, but he knew what it said and figured that was passable. "Look, I can pretend it doesn't exist or whatever would make you comfortable. I just thought it was attractive on you."

“Attractive?” Bill huffed, shaking his head. “Sugar, it’s word vomit, but permanently etched onto my arm.”

Mildly irked, he was about to expel an objection until… it dawned on him that would invite a question he wasn't prepared to answer. "That's kind of rude to your soulmate to call it 'word vomit', but it's… like a surge of ink, and it looks nice on your raw muscles. Manly."

“How is anything about this manly?”

"Well, uh, think about it. The handwriting isn't that feminine, and it's not like everyone else's. It's.. it has character, all that ink, like you're a mechanic or building something. Or a super prolific writer, like Hamilton was." Ending that ramble, he sought a more compelling conclusion but finished with, "The splattered parts are rugged, okay?"

Bill tapped his chin, contemplating. “I do like Hamilton.”

"Yeah, so…” he swallowed, "my point is, it's really fucking amazing like the rest of your tattoos." An oddly masturbatory compliment considering it was his handwriting and mark upon Bill, but he chose to overlook that.

Amazingly, Bill seemed to sense what he craved and moved to surround Dipper with himself, tucking him close in a manner that left him glowing with warmth and security. It was a feeling that had no equivalent, no replacement, and though they'd been together a month, it remained alien. Invigorating. “My stars look better, but not as good as you.” Flattered, he melted into Bill, their bodies conforming to one another in the most splendid of ways. Bill planted a kiss to his cheek, gently squeezing his side in a motion that encouraged him further into Bill's embrace, an irresistible coaxing into spicy honey that overwhelmed his senses. “Cuter than a button.”

"Handsome than a.." Dipper thought, eyebrows pinching together when he couldn't discern a suitable parallel, not as his thoughts were clouded by his entanglement with Bill, so he gave up willingly. "Um, you're handsome."

“Handsome?” Bill questioned, another peck placed upon his nose. “Yeah, well, you’re cuter than a kitten.”

He gave Bill's shoulder a light shove, falling into a pouty huff. "Dude, stop. I already can't think of
any equivalents here." Bill chortled, body shaking against him with the strength of his amusement.

Soon, they'd have to put away the groceries but for now, this was okay. Better than okay, possibly perfect in how they were flopped together in a haphazard pile that felt safe and comfortable, Bill's inscribed arm holding him protectively. He was afraid that same arm would push him away if he dared to utter a word about their matching marks, the secret that felt increasingly wrong to keep yet harder to confess.

Borrowed time was ticking.
“And here we have the renovated ballroom,” Bill said as he led Dipper to the last stop in their abridged tour of the first floor, having already viewed luxurious living spaces and a formal dining room, at least two kitchens (and a walk-in pantry!), a wing dedicated to guests… It was beyond his imagination's reach that there were two more floors of this, three if including the cellar. The design spun his head with winding corridors and fancy rugs lining the hardwood paneling, vast rooms and high ceilings intimidating him in their sheer size, art pieces like paintings and sculptures and fountains costing fortunes. To top it off, every item of furniture was presumably more expensive than his and Mabel's collective earnings, present and future. “This is the main ballroom, and if you attend another one of these—Stars, I hope you don’t have to—you’ll be seeing it again.” Dipper's fingers dragged over a marble end table in astonished silence, then broke from his daze to peek at the ballroom's entrance that was ornately decorated for the evening's affair. "My father dislikes using the other ballroom. It’s smaller and not as structurally trendy.”

Dipper gawked at Bill with wide, disbelieving eyes. "Wait, there's another one?"

“Why are you surprised, Pine Tree?” Bill chuckled, slender fingers primping his suit tailored for the occasion, the fabric clinging to his tall figure just right. What truly struck Dipper was the color swap: while his attire remained predominantly black, accents of yellow were altered to a tantalizingly rich royal blue that complemented the tone of the ball. Stolen peeks and "subtle" glances apparently weren't as discreet as he'd hoped because Bill's smirk had a knowing gleam to it, and his strides were exaggeratedly showoffish and effortless. "Father wants only the finest. You should see our home in Miami."

Yeah, he'd pass on that because unlike Mabel, he didn't feel at home in this ridiculously gigantic architecture. Dipper stuck close to Bill throughout the journey into its looming walls as if concerned they would swell him whole if he were to wander off, whereas Mabel was adventurous in her exploration. Her bravery extended to departing from the group completely when they'd entered the dining room, Mabel lured in by the assortment of fruit and sugary toppings.

The doors to the ballroom were pulled open to display the splendor inside, visible from the bottom of the grand staircase that branched off in separate directions as Dipper stood listlessly upon the central landing. Mouth agape, he was motionless save for dumbfounded blinks. The estate made him feel unbelievably puny in its enormousness.

Stepping inside, the surroundings elicited a sharp inhale, majestic golden chandeliers decorating the ceiling and illuminating the white room in a pale glow. Fitting, as it gave a distinctly 'wintery' style with its blueish drapes likely switched for the occasion. The furniture was placed to the sides of the glistening floor crafted for dancing, though guests used the area for idle chatter prior to the event's official beginning. Velvet chairs and pristine tables were arranged along the outer edge.

It was spacious, filled with people, and downright gorgeous.

Also, pretty damn intimidating.

“Earth to Pine Tree, are you still with me?”
"I'm… yeah," he said, flinching from the hand sweeping across his face to summon him to the present. "I guess I didn't expect it to be this big? Not the ballroom, I mean… everything. In a few hours, you'll have to escort me to the restroom because if I go alone, I'm pretty sure you'll never see me again." That drew an uproar of amusement from Bill, and he took Dipper's hand, squeezing it tightly.

"Don't worry about getting lost, cutie. There's no way I'm letting you out of my sight, okay?" Bottling his skepticism, he was flattered that Bill wasn't willing to sacrifice him to this beast of an estate. "Try to enjoy yourself, if you can." Bill's invitation and winning beam eased the edge off his discomfort. For someone who claimed to hate the event and had a myriad of issues with his father, the host, Bill was astoundingly competent at navigating this formal affair and gave off a relaxed, charismatic vibe. Either he was a better actor than Dipper had estimated, or he'd acclimated to this event like the social chameleon he was.

Peeking over his shoulder, he didn't see anything but the descending stairs that dropped into a magnificent foyer, another crystal chandelier hanging over the entrance. "I wish I knew where Mabel was," he admitted, yearning for the company of his best friend in this unfamiliar landscape. Somewhere in this mystery mansion, his parents were drifting and speaking with the other guests as well, but they were unable to offer that soothing aura like Mabel could. "I doubt the desserts have kept her occupied for this long."

Bill shrugged, disinterested. "Mingling, perhaps? She's a people person."

"Right..." he said, unconvinced, "I'm going to find her." It was easier said than done as he turned to venture off, remembering why he'd been concerned about breaking apart on his own to wander solo through the hallways. He was never seeing the light of day again.

Dipper's mental remapping of the estate's layout abruptly halted because Bill was suddenly in front of him, blocking his escape with two hands pressed to his shoulders that guided Dipper in the other direction. "Whoa there, sugar. Into the ballroom you go." He nudged him toward the crowd gathered. "Father's about to start his speech. You can find Mabel later, but she probably beat you here."

"It's already time?" he asked, alarmed by minutes slipping like seconds since their arrival. Dipper peeked at his watch tucked under an uncomfortably-constrained tux. "Jesus Christ, dude. It took twenty minutes to get through the main parts of the first floor?"

"What did you expect? I warned you this place was huge, Pine Tree. You should've listened to me." Dipper had no choice but to agree when it was the equivalent of being trapped in a never-ending maze that shifted every time he looked away.

All too soon, Bill's gentle pushes had landed his reluctant self fully inside the ballroom, submerging him in the crowd he'd avoided thus far. Guests that'd been standing in the hallways with wine glasses and refined, Cheshire Cat impressions were among those Dipper recognized. The small groups of suits in one of the sitting rooms had also collected here, though the giant framed portrait of father and son hanging above the fireplace still gave him the creeps. He didn't know how anyone could hold a normal conversation under their condescending gazes and matching smirks.

Studying rows of tables and chairs placed to the sides, Dipper asked, "Am… I supposed to sit somewhere specific?" With Bill's father hosting, assigned seating didn't seem inconceivable. "Maybe..." He didn't finish that thought, squinting into the clumps of people for signs of Mabel, who he intended to stay next to… provided he could spot her.
“As an honored guest, you’re joining me and Father at our table. He’s prepared extra seats in case you’ve invited guests.”

"Wait, does that mean my parents are going to be sitting with us too? And you know he can't hear you, right? You don't have to be super formal," he pointed out in response to Bill addressing him as 'father' but didn't linger on it, preoccupied with important matters like scanning for Mabel.

“If they’re here, they’ll definitely be seated with him.”

In the midst of his search and with distractions abound, he hadn't anticipated being unashamedly jumped by arms wrapping around him from behind to tug him into an excited hug. Although past experience betrayed who it was, confirmation came before he uttered a single syllable:

“Hey Dipper!” Mabel said, refreshingly cheerful. Dipper was glad she was in good spirits and spun to face her, basking in the radiant expression that somehow held more glee than usual. Parties were her element, not that Bill appeared to struggle either. Dipper was the only one who felt severely displaced, but he wasn't allowed to wallow because she prompted, “Where have you been? I’ve looked everywhere for you! Inside cupboards, in storage closets, under those fancy tables with the vases—”

"Bill finished the tour, and we ended up here. There's going to be some sort of… speech, or something?" Dipper sought confirmation from Bill in a questioning glance, then caved to humor as he recalled Mabel rushing the table of sweets. "Are there any desserts left?" If it survived a Mabel-mauling, Dipper would have to credit Mr. Cipher for his readiness.

Mabel appeared sheepish but detached from regrets. “Let’s say he’ll need to consider restocking. Those little desserts tasted like miniature bites of heaven, especially the cherry-topped vanilla explosions.”

Mild concern mixed into horror flickered on Bill. “Did you eat them all?”

“No!” she objected. “I’m not that crazy. I just had a couple. Like, a platter and a half.”

"Anyway," Dipper said, struggling to contain his laugh at Bill's naive dubiety, "it sounds like we have seats reserved next to Bill's dad because luck is too busy making sure I don't have an anxiety attack." It was a bit of an embellishment given he'd been holding himself together decently despite his discomfort. The overly-restricting suit had a hand in that, he theorized. There'd be no falling apart while every inch of him was getting thoroughly compressed to death by cloth.

Mabel bumped his side, the gesture partially playful and partially reassuring. “You're schmoozing up to the big shots, Dipper. A seat with the host? Impressive.”

Identifying that as a joke, it lightened his mood and enabled him to toss the quip, “Hey, he should feel honored to sit with the likes of us, Sir Dippingsauce and Lady Mabelton. We're very cultured, you know. Pretty much the epitome of high society.”

“Come on, we should take our seats.” Bill escorted them to the host table, marked as such by its inordinate decor in comparison and centered position at the front of the room before the crowd. Taking his seat, he beckoned for them to do the same, with Dipper flanking his left, followed by Mabel plopping beside him.

Once the lights dimmed and the ballroom hushed with the sense of an impending announcement, Mr. Cipher arose from his seat, using a spoon to tap the side of his wine glass to amass attention and lull loquacious voices into silence. He stood taut, regarded his guests with deceptively warm
eyes, and his glass lowered as he seemingly measured the crowd.

“Good evening,” he began loudly, booming and echoing about the room. Dipper didn't think he'd ever grow accustomed to its similarity to Bill's, but a hint deeper, crisply annunciated. “It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the annual winter celebration hosted by the Cipher family, to share splendid company and dance as you relax and feast upon our fine catering made possible by world class chefs. This occasion intends to inspire meaningful connections and pleasant conversation, which we could not achieve without you, our esteemed guests. I know you are all eager to carry on, and I will not demand any more of your time. Please, enjoy yourselves and have an excellent night!”

Ending the speech with flair, he motioned to the guests as if it was their cue to partake in the activities arranged for them, and this act of generosity stimulated a roar of clapping from the crowd. The approval of his guests inflated the man in the subtle raise of his chin, indulgent smirk, and the puff of his chest — the parallels were staggering. It was amazing to Dipper that he was basically looking at a mirror image of Bill in thirty years, though being forced into hosting these pompous grand events prompted a shudder of dread.

Dipper observed as the buzz of chatter and laughs revitalized, people moving from their seats to join others, trade tables, form circles, undoubtedly rub elbows. He didn't know what else this winter ball would be for but once again wondered if he belonged, considering he wasn't like the other guests. It was an alien landscape to him: foreign, cold, unforgiving.

Even his parents, well-versed politicians, did better in this environment and probably were having a decent time.

They didn't normally attend events of Mr. Cipher's but made an exception for two reasons, as Dipper understood it. First, he and Mabel would be here. It wasn't made explicit, but he had an inkling their trust in Bill's father was fractured by the guy's past shadiness, and they perceived value in availability. And secondly, Dipper would never, ever dare suggest it to them, but he speculated that peaceful nights at home during the holiday season were too harrowing to withstand after the accident. While others may prefer serene evenings to business travels, Dipper figured they couldn't endure the silence since it'd cross the line into disquieting loneliness.

"When I invited my guests to enjoy themselves," the one and only William Cipher interrupted Dipper's thoughts, startling him, "I was speaking to you as well, Mr. Pines."

Once his heart rate had gone back to normal, Dipper let out a calming exhale and tried to coax his quivering lips into a smile, but even his best attempt was riddled with apprehension. "It's fine if you want to call me Dipper, you know? I think I'd prefer that."

Mr. Cipher regarded him with a steel frigidity, enough to prove his hypothesis that 'Dipper' as a preferred name was not an option. “There is nothing professional about that nickname, Mason. Now, brighten up that attitude and embrace the joy this celebration should be bringing you. You’re surrounded by family.”

He supposed he'd suffer the formality of being referred to as 'Mr. Pines' or 'Mason' but nevertheless discovered cynical comedy in the comment about being surrounded by family. "I think I'll see how my parents are doing and check out the art that you have on display tonight. Thanks for inviting me to the Cipher's annual winter ball, Will." The look on Mr. Cipher's face screamed he’d remember that for years to come.

Already, he was walking away from the table but called over his shoulder, "An excellent welcome speech too, by the way!" As he slipped from his line of sight, a cheeky grin tentatively spread over
his features, a stifled albeit nervous laugh in pursuit while he was devoured by the crowd.

Thankfully, Dipper stumbled across his parents in the sea of snooty strangers, but he was disheartened by the flock enswarming them, the swarm preventing him from getting too close or instigating a moment of privacy. Not unexpected when their presence would be deemed an opportunity to conduct business matters and forge alliances, but it required him to wait until the commotion simmered before he could rest with them at one of the empty tables. It was a refreshing break, a winding down from the stress of being around unfamiliar, unfriendly people within a highly-pretentious social situation. The pressure of telling his parents that he hated physics was nothing in relation.

Not that he was going to do that. No need to potentially sabotage his bubble of safety and tranquility.

Instead, their talk emphasized less challenging topics like how things went while they were out of state on business and if the birds were faring well — they were taken aback upon learning their feathered companions had been forcibly evicted by Stan and Ford's apartment manager and taken in by Bill, so the discussion naturally evolved into how their relationship was going, and Dipper didn't have much to report beyond saying it was fine, because it was. Sort of. A soulmate-confession was bursting to spill, but he wasn't sure of the ethics of telling someone other than Bill first, yet he was torn. Torn since telling Bill could end their romance or cause emotional turmoil, but he was inclined to build a support system in case that was what happened.

He'd lost track of time and was content to spend the evening doing this alone. Forget socializing and schmoozing and ballroom dancing, enjoying the holiday with his family was better. And he had to admit, it was nice to be free of their house, removed from devastating memories.

“Dipper!” Mabel called over the murmur of the crowd as she neared the table they were seated at. No longer a rival to the general noise, she continued normally, “Hey guys, have you seen the buffet in the dining room? I've been eating like royalty tonight.”

"I haven't been hungry," he admitted, "since I'm pretty sure this tux is squeezing the life out of me slowly, but I did see it while Bill was showing me around." That'd been approximately the same point Mabel had branched off to terrorize the treats. Thinking about what she'd said, he laughed a little and asked, "Wait, are you saying my cooking isn't eating like royalty?"

"It might be closer if you dropped a quarter of a million on kitchen staff and banquet-style assortments," said his father, casting an entertained glance at where the king of the household stood before a cluster of his guests, sharing an anecdote alongside the mini-version of himself.

Mabel's eyes twinkled. “Dip-dop, you can’t argue that the food here isn’t tasty. And there’s so much of it. For free. For free, Dipper.”

Dryly, Dipper said, "I bet the guests don't notice. Money doesn't seem to have any worth to them." From how the festivities and estate itself came like second nature to these people, he had to assume they were the ideal crowd: upstanding, wealthy folk who maybe dabbled in illegal business if it suited their interests because their financials would act as a pass from jail. "But I'm happy you're having fun. You've always been better at parties than me, honestly."

“Oh, and have you seen the fashion? There could be more cute guys, but everything else is great. It's just, the people here are so bor-ring.” Mabel threw her hands in annoyance. "All they want to do is talk about their bank or their new island or their business or the stock market and it's all so bleh." His mother set a hand on Mabel’s shoulder comfortably.
"Yeah, I've been sort of hanging around here..." Dipper motioned to their parents, then shrugged. "I mean, Mom and Dad are fine and everything but it still says a lot about this ball when I'm having more fun talking to them than doing anything else." His mother shook her head at him, though it wasn't without a fleeting trace of fondness. "If we need to, we could always tell Bill and his dad that we're heading home. Not now," it was too early to excuse themselves without raising suspicion, "but... soon." There wasn't much to do aside from eating and conversing with the others. The dancing would start later, not that he was particularly thrilled.

“How soon?” Mabel questioned. “I hope it’s not before I attack the other end of the table, the food’s begging for me to eat it, and those rich schmucks can watch me. Hey, that'll give them something new to talk about!”

After a brief lift of his shoulders, he slumped in his chair to debate when it'd be appropriate to leave. The event had officially started at six, and it was nearing half past seven. "I don't know. I was hoping maybe we could get out before the dancing started, but I think that's around nine." Upon seeing Mabel's expression light up, Dipper added, "It's not the kind of dancing that you like. It's, uh," he nodded toward the floor, "ballroom dancing. So think slow dances to holiday music, not anything really cool."

"Are you two not dancing at all this evening?” his father asked, head tilting with curiosity. "I realize it's been quite some time since you've practiced, but you might enjoy it."

"I don't know…” Slow dancing wasn't sustainable with his chronic pain, but Dipper was undecided on if he'd bother because leaving was increasingly appealing with every hour. "Maybe, if it's important to Bill." Otherwise, no.

“Even if Bill doesn’t want to dance, we can dance! We can liven up the whole place with our rocking moves!”

Sympathetic, he rubbed the side of his neck. "Yeah, that's kind of the type of dancing I was saying would be frowned upon here, because how dare the lives of these society gentlemen have any excitement for once. They're allergic, you know."

“Who cares if it's frowned upon?” Mabel asked, leaning forward genuinely. “You don’t even want to be here, Dipper.”

"I still want to make a good impression,” he said, "not… on the strangers— I don't care about them, but I mean, Bill's family." That encompassing term made him scan the room, fathoming...

Bill's family consisted of Bill's father, from what he could see. Although he had no idea who he was looking for, it didn't appear his mother was present since she hadn't sat by them during the opening speech. Joseph and Zoe weren't present either.

Strange.

“Speaking of Bill’s family,” his mother started in a striking reflection of his thoughts, turning to his father. “I’m going to find Nancy. He probably ordered her to stay upstairs.”

“Ooh, who's Nancy?”

Dipper was grateful Mabel asked the question for him and shot her a cognizant glimpse. While eager to sate his curiosity, he had a sinking feeling that was seconds from validation linking what he knew about Bill's father and the vanishing of a certain somebody close to him.

“Bill’s mother,” his mother answered. “Her relationship with William is rocky at best, and he
instructs her to not be seen in public or socialize.”

"Why?" Dipper pressed bluntly without thinking of the potential ramifications that'd await the response, if one came at all. There was a sweeping discomfort over both of his parents, and he reciprocated a puzzled glance with Mabel. "Look, I know Bill's dad, uh.. has some problems and is pretty old school—that's their family's thing—but I don't see why he would keep her from the public and media." If that was true, she was a prisoner of her own home and marriage, a depressing notion when there could logically be no love in an arrangement like that.

She shook her head, pursing her lips. “Pardon my French, but he’s a controlling asshole who sees her as an object because of their ‘soulmarks’.”

"I... wait, what?" Dipper was lost. "I mean, I can totally see the controlling part. He's sort of a jerk like that, but... I thought— don't the Ciphers like soulmates? Bill has this whole paranoid complex deal where he hides his mark and says he's avoiding his, but his dad and I guess the rest of his family are actually really into it.”

"Well, yes," he said, quieter as he went on, "but... it's a bit of a unique case." Although Dipper expected elaboration, his father didn't continue and peeked to his wife hesitantly, as if hoping she would be able to dissect the inner workings of Mr. Cipher with an improved rate of success.

“Nancy and William have a complicated relationship,” she supplemented. “They've grown to despise one another. They refuse to divorce on the grounds it’d ‘ruin their image’.”

For how adamant the family was on finding and sticking with their soulmates, they sure seemed to be miserable in that self-inflicted punishment, Dipper noted to himself. "I get why he wouldn't see divorce as an option, with the press coverage they'd get from it."

Kind of an amusing thought, the media lapping up traditionalist Mr. Cipher getting divorced from his soulmate. It was why predictions were geared toward her enduring a more grisly fate to avoid mud on their reputation and subsequently being painted as hypocritical.

She nodded. “William doesn’t want that kind of attention on him.” Dipper scoffed at the suggestion of a Cipher turning down attention but understood what a media fiasco that particular set of events would yield. "He doesn't want anything that could jeopardize his curated image.”

It was mind-boggling, the lengths he'd go to protect his reputation and legacy. Just tonight, Dipper could recall their staff reminding guests that no press was authorized, nor was anyone to distribute photographs of the evening. The rules were surprisingly strict in his attempts to lockdown his stature, and the same survival instinct had been instilled in Bill to sustain those standards.

Dipper could almost hear the teasing remark to accompany his dubiousness regarding their practices: you wouldn't understand, you're new money.

"Yeah, so... that's why he keeps his wife—his soulmate—trapped at his estate? Good thinking, no PR nightmare waiting to happen there.”

She waved his sarcasm and Mabel's snort aside. “They should have divorced years ago. Soulmates or not, they would have never worked out. He’s too controlling, and she’s.. well, you know how Bill is.”

Dipper stiffened, surveying her for several moments. "Do... you know how Bill is?” he asked,
genuinely unsure what she was trying to say in her limited interaction with Bill, as far as Dipper knew. Bill evaded classic descriptions of personality, transcending them into a complicated mess of contradictions. He was oddly sweet and caring and charismatic to boot, a charmer and chaotic entertainer in every sense of it, but had violently transitioning moods and the most peculiar hangups. Better now that healthy outlets were being utilized, but detailing the various aspects of Bill Cipher was still impossible.

“I’ve heard from his mother,” she stated. “They’re quite similar. It drives his father mad.”

About to respond, he fell quiet when movement in the corner of his eye shifted his focus and he twisted in his seat to see Bill emerging from the crowd, gait confident and smirk wider than usual. An acknowledgement to his acting skills, it hardly looked like someone who didn't thrive in this atmosphere as he neared their table to swing in beside them. “Hey Pine Tree, and family!”

"Oh, hey," Dipper chimed into the chorus of his family's greetings, then gingerly offered him a seat at the table. "What are you doing here? I thought..." From what he'd seen of Bill over the past couple hours, he busied himself by socializing with the guests and shadowing his father.

“What, you thought I wouldn’t spend time with you?” Bill asked, accepting the seat to sling an arm over Dipper, briefly squeezing his shoulders before releasing. “Come on, sugar. I couldn’t miss this.”

"Miss what?” he asked, a chortle tumbling from his tongue. "Talking to me and Mabel and our parents?" Bill could do that almost whenever he wished, he didn't need to allot time for them. "We were having a... a riveting discussion on your dad's winter ball. Really picking apart and analyzing the thing."

Interested, Bill's fingers steepled, the glimmer of intrigue evident. “Is it about how fucking awful this is? The only people ‘enjoying themselves’ are the rich suckers who want to gloat.” Without missing a beat, his mother reached into her purse and pulled out a makeup mirror, sliding it across the table to Bill. Her eye contact with him was unwavering, though she was receiving cutting looks of stupefied disapproval.

“Oh, no thanks, I don’t wear makeup!” Dipper barked a laugh, but he wasn't sure if it was at the blatant lie or the complete disregard for her message. Bill flipped it open to admire himself, straightening the ends of his bowtie and his posture. "But I do look good."

"Rich suckers who want to gloat," he echoed thoughtfully, gazing at Bill tenderly. Rich, check. Gloating, check. Amazing how he was able to prove both in a matter of five seconds.

As his father placed his hand over hers, he told Bill, "Your father's winter ball is... enjoyable." Dipper observed that the lines were blurred between question and compliment, but when Bill opened his mouth to respond, Maxwell continued, "Please don't ask me about politics."

“I wasn’t going to!” Bill immediately objected. “Not really, anyway. I can’t believe you’re enjoying this.”

"I don't believe I am either," was his solemn reply. Bill cracked up with laughter.

“So you were lying about enjoying it? What a political power move on your part.”

His smile curved upwards, wry but mild, and it was a relief to Dipper to see his parents lighten up during the holidays after the accident. It was reminiscent of before. "I said it was enjoyable, not necessarily that I was enjoying it."
"Dad, this... you're seriously just proving his point."

“I can’t tell if Dad is lying or not,” Mabel conceded, commiserating. “It’s very back and forth.”

Good-naturedly, Bill rolled his eyes. “He’s trying to play the ‘lawyer’ card, but we all know he hates this ball.”

"Hey," Dipper said to Bill, "you haven't been quiet about your dislike of it either, and you're the son of the host. I thought you were having a good time for a while, since I saw you chatting with those guys earlier." 'Those guys' meaning the many older folks in suits that he didn't recognize or intend to know when they all had the same pretentious non-laugh and malleable morals.

“It’s called acting,” Bill said. “I don’t like attending, Pine Tree. It’s stupid and boring, a waste of my time.”

“You’re an actor?” his mother asked, quizzical, but Mabel was rapid in leaping to Bill’s defense.

“So what if he is?” she countered, belting a cheery chuckle that sounded too forced to be standard for Mabel. "Actors make good money! Much more than like, nurses, for example." Dipper winced as he realized she hadn't told their parents about her stealthy change in career path from nursing to theater major. Even if they weren't entitled to that information because they weren't paying tuition, it still felt wrong to keep it from them.

Bill wasn't done yet and interjected, “Also, I’m studying astrophysics, and I teach physics as a graduate student while I work toward my PhD. I'm not a professional actor, but I do Drama Club as a hobby.”

"Oh, that's quite a lot." And to his children, he said with a hint of humor, "This one has goals."

"He's a bartender-turned-car salesman. This guy, a car salesman. Shocking, huh?" Cheekily, Dipper flashed a beam and went on, "For someone so shy, he does pretty well."

“Shy? How am I shy? Didn’t you hear him? I have GOALS.”

"Hey, I have goals too," Dipper protested. "Trying to make it through this god awful party is number one."

“Pine Tree, how are you liking this so far?” Bill asked, hand gliding to capture Dipper’s. Dipper did him one better and tangled their fingers, hoisting his legs onto the patio sofa to lean into Bill's side and nestle his head on his shoulder to follow Bill's gaze to the stars above. It was nicer on the enclosed, outdoor patio than it was in the ballroom. The conversations were hushed, and the natural beauty of the ambience made it less uptight.

There was a small fireplace hissing and crackling to their left, another sofa and coffee table before it. Probably the coziest space in the estate that he was acquainted with, and he was relieved to be absorbed in its tranquility. Dipper wondered if his parents and Mabel were still here after he'd been made aware they’d be leaving whenever the option was open; it was a fair conjecture that his parents were tired from the socializing, and Mabel was merely bored, under no obligation to stay for the entire ball — most didn't, the crowd had been thinning from its initial size. Dipper wished he could be that fortunate, but he figured he was stuck here for as long as Bill was, lest he risk being rude.

"This?" he drawled. "Being out with you? Yeah, I like that. It's better than being inside." One hand engulfed by Bill's, the other holding an almost-full glass of champagne while they cuddled on the
fluffy cushions next to a fireplace, in a spot that gave them a wonderful view of the sky and moon and its stars. Not bad for the average party, but to call the Cipher's ball 'average' would be insulting.

“You, me, some fine champagne..” Bill kissed him on his cheek, and Dipper inwardly cursed himself for not tilting his head a moment too soon. “You look amazing, Pine Tree.”

Breathless and awed, Dipper was starry-eyed and his affection surged as he beamed lopsidedly, unrestrained, giddy, but fringing on disbelief. "I really don't," he argued, "but I appreciate it, man." Taking a compliment had never been his specialty, not when it was too tough to imagine himself as anything but a wreck of a human being. Much less one that looked amazing in the eyes of the dazzling Bill Cipher who exuded a magnetic energy.

Dipper set down his glass to tug at his collar, inclined to return the sentiment but grasping at any clue of what to say when he was tongue-tied in Bill's presence. Romance wouldn't be marked on his resume's list of skills. Finally, all he mumbled out was an earnest, "You're... incredible. Also, attractive." An awkward cough. "The... uh, blue and black suit switcharoo is kind of nice."

“Not as cute as you are, sweetheart,” Bill gushed seductively, sparing him a flirtatious wink while Dipper watched, pupils blown. “You look absolutely stunning in your tuxedo.” Snapped from his reverence, Dipper scoffed, squirming with renewed discomfort as he remembered what he was wearing, the tightness of the garment unbearable. "I'm glad you like mine, I was worried it would bruise the festive spirit of this winter's ball."

At first, it didn't click, then he noticed Bill was poking fun at his new color scheme and Dipper brushed his fingertips delicately down his vest under the guise of examination. However, the discomfort from his own attire hadn't faded. "I... I guess it's good that it's 'absolutely stunning.' But honestly? I feel like I'm wearing a corset and can't wait to take it off. Y'know, because.. it's uncomfortable." Yeah, probably should clarify that, but he wouldn't be heartbroken if—

“Oh, I’d love to see you take off that ‘corset’. Show me some of that leg, Pine Tree.” Bill blew a kiss at him.

Dipper flushed and bit his lip, a deterrent against embarrassing noises that'd be too high-pitched and an unnecessary stroke to Bill's massive ego. "I, uh..." he sputtered through a jittery laugh, elation soaring, "maybe later?"

Bill raised his eyebrows, a smirk coiling his mouth into something predatory. “Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

The sultry purr had Dipper's pulse hammering in his throat, and his breath hitched as he mindlessly gravitated closer. "I'm not good with tuxes," he said, volume low and soft, ignoring the quiver of his voice, "So.. you'll have to help me get it off." A shaking hand pulled uselessly at one of the tails before he lost interest, too entranced with Bill to care.

“Sugar, I’m going to tear it off.”

Jaw falling open, Dipper felt an internal shiver climb his spine and zap his mind, the fever of arousal springing to life within him. "Bill," he murmured, train of thought abandoned as their gazes met and another jolt wracked him. Despite the chase of desire on his heels, this wasn't the time or place, and his pressing lust for Bill's hands on him wouldn't change that.

Dipper silently begged for clarity, squeezing his eyes shut, blocking out everything that could potentially escalate this like the pleased reverberation that rumbled from Bill, his goddamn
enticing smirk, handsomely sharp features, spicy honey scent... Unreservedly entranced, it slipped under the radar that his fingers were toying with the ends of Bill's bowtie as if threatening to loosen it and hopefully the rest of his clothing too—

Bill expelled a shuddering breath, reaching to take Dipper’s hand in his. “Now, honey– if we’re going to do anything, we should go somewhere a little more.. private.”

"Do you want to?" he asked in a rush, the optimistic inquiry bleeding into itself as he tripped over it in what he couldn't discern as eagerness or anxiety or a combination. "I'm fine with it if you are."

“Yeah,” was Bill's breathless approval, but it hardly had a second to register when the patio doors flew open, alarming Dipper and abandoning his focus on Bill when he saw it was—of course—Bill's father. Desperate to appear as mundane as could be, he completely retracted himself from Bill to sit upright, posture tense and…

Dipper's eyebrows pinched, disconcerted.

His palm ghosted across the sleeve that concealed his soulmark, the skin underneath significantly warmer than usual — it stirred a memory of something he'd been told once. However, it was discarded, passed off as an effect of how that arm had been tucked underneath Bill. He hadn't an opportunity to contemplate further when William was sauntering in their direction.

“Mind if I take a seat, sons?”

Brimming with trepidation, Dipper wriggled to create room for him, though there'd been plenty to begin with. "Uh, sure. As in, we don't mind. Do we, Bill?" It was inelegant and artificial, and before he could say anything, Dipper went on, "So what are you doing out here? Did you come to get fresh air? A nice view of the stars?"

After he'd spoken, he determined that he should definitely leave the performing to Bill because he wasn't grasping this 'act natural' concept.

“What,” Mr. Cipher probed, “am I not allowed to partake in a discussion with my son and his...?” He cleared his throat, moving on. "You both have been missing the celebrations."

Bill's father deteriorated his typical facade because he was clammed up, bizarrely stationary. “No, this is alright, Father. We wanted a small break from the ball to recollect ourselves. We didn't expect someone to be looking for us, it’s only been a couple minutes.” That seemed like an understatement, they'd been cuddling on the sofa for more than 'a couple minutes', but Dipper nodded as if backing the story.

Mr. Cipher reacted with unmistakeable disinterest and didn’t acknowledge it as he said, “I came looking for you, William the Fifth, because you have a task to uphold. You're the pianist this evening, remember? Tradition beckons. Scoot along.” Bill's groan succinctly explained how he felt about this tradition.

“It’s time for that already? Fine.” Bill arose from the sofa. “I’ll see you in an hour, Pine Tree.”

Numbness and dread intermingled, rendering him incapable of managing more than a squeak of, "Okay."

Watching Bill retreat into the towering estate home, Dipper was acutely aware that William Cipher hadn't moved to follow him, and he sneaked a hasty peek at him to check.

Yep, still there.
"So," he started awkwardly, wringing his hands, "are you heading inside too?" It was a feeble attempt to convey that he'd rather stick with Bill and flee inside, perhaps see if Mabel and his parents were around, listen to his boyfriend play piano while steering clear of the ballroom dancing.

"No," said Mr. Cipher, "I'll be staying out here with you."

Oh. Great, that settled it. He apparently was staying here with the blue-eyed, slightly taller version of Bill, and he lowered himself back down onto the cushion to place his hands neatly in his lap, the beginnings of a frown pulling at his lips.

The distinct absence of the discussion Mr. Cipher had promised was taking this to new levels of social anxiety hell, yet he oozed contentedness, almost distant, while Dipper was scrambling for suitable topics. And here he thought the confrontation with an officer of the law would be the most sweat-worthy, high pressure interaction he'd have this year, but he seemed destined to top that. Shifting uncomfortably, Dipper imagined he had to be coming off as a squirmy, twitchy mess.

Movement brought Dipper to brave another look, and he saw Mr. Cipher inspecting his watch. "Let's not drag this on. Tell me, Mr. Pines." Mr. Cipher loomed over him, his hawk-like demeanor searching with hyper diligence. "Are you and my son soulmates?"

Unconsciously, Dipper's hand drifted toward where his soulmark was and clutched it in a trembling grasp, memories of seeing the ink-splattered soulmate of his boyfriend seeping to the forefront of his thoughts. "I... don't know," he said, careful with his phrasing. "Maybe? Bill hasn't told me when his mark appeared, or if he was born with it, so it'd be difficult to be certain."

Plainly, Mr. Cipher answered, "He was not born with it. His soulmark appeared on August 31st, and he was not quite five years old." The unemotional delivery of facts that'd been shrouded in mystery drove him to believe he should've gone to Mr. Cipher months ago. It would've saved many sleepless nights.

That was an additional tally in the 'I'm-Bill's-soulmate' column that'd developed at an exponential rate recently, rendering it ineffectual to operate as if there was a sliver of a chance they were not soulmates.

"He's never told me what it says," Dipper added, fidgeting. Not that he didn't know, he'd seen it himself under blemished, traumatic circumstances. "And... he keeps it covered."

"Unbelievable. He is still doing that?" Mr. Cipher demanded coldly and clenched his fists that he flattened again like it'd never happened at all. "I told him to stop. We can't pretend that girl is his soulmate anymore," Dipper interjected a bewildered noise, "and he needs to find a partner soon.

"What was that about the... pretending?" Dipper cocked his head, the cogwheels gradually turning and clicking into alignment as other bits of conversation surfaced: Joseph's reference to Paige, Bill's confession that he wished she'd been his soulmate.

"That first girl he was with, Paige-- he spent a while purporting she was his soulmate. Which was agreeable, temporarily. She was a prime choice."

He swallowed. "Sorry about that, like... what happened. I guess that's why he covers his soulmark then?" Or used to, combined with a general dislike of the design and concept that heightened as a result of familial pressure and the loss of the one who he beheld as right for him. The pedestal was a lot to measure up to.
"It was concealed for some time while the focus was on his loss, but following our move to California we have fallen out of the media spotlight as well as frequent contact with that girl's family. It is negligent and wasteful to keep it covered now."

In an effort to dodge a point blank 'are you soulmates', he offered, "I don't… think Bill likes the soulmate stuff. I stopped asking him about it a while ago, because..." he trailed off, shaking his head since there'd been a couple reasons for the decline in interest. It no longer felt pertinent to their relationship, plus it tended to spark fights that went unresolved, no satisfying conclusion attained.

There was also that little piece about his suspicions being verified beyond a doubt. Addressing that with Bill was the new challenge.

"He doesn’t, but that's irrelevant, as he has a duty to our family. He will not bring our name to ruins."

"Wow," Dipper said curtly, hollowed of pleasantry. "I feel honored that you think so highly of me and believe I can crash the good Cipher family name in one swoop, if I'm not Bill's soulmate."

Mr. Cipher laughed sardonically. “You’re not a threat to me, Mr. Pines. I’m more concerned about William the Fifth’s appearance, as he has unsuccessfully gone through several partners without finding his match."

"Bill said he plans on making this long-term," not that he was naive enough to think he didn't do that with the others, "so why not just tell people we're soulmates? Like you guys did with Paige."

“If you are not his soulmate," he hung on it a second too long to avoid arousing worry, "I would prefer he not forfeit his better years to you. That girl was a blank, and fabricating their marks as matches was mutually beneficial to both our families to maintain our status. My William is no longer sixteen years old– he is a grown man, his soulmate is of age, and he needs to be thinking of his future.”

He deflated as the rationality sunk in, why it worked then and wouldn't anymore. It wasn't the end of the world when he had a strong hunch they were soulmates, but he'd have taken advantage of it to evade a confession to Bill if it resulted in damaging their relationship.

"I see," he choked out, striving for a moderate, controlled tone that failed him as his reply wavered. "I'll talk to Bill about it, but… yeah."

After the ball, minimally. He wasn't anywhere close to equipped for that but strained to get Mr. Cipher's borderline ominous words to quit floating around, dragging him deeper into the ocean of insecurity over the future of his relationship, the tension zeroing in on him.

It was then that Dipper realized he'd stood up from the sofa in desperation to withdraw from this, and because he wasn't exactly keen on sitting down again, gave a brief departure to Bill's father. "Hey, thanks for the chat but I'm gonna..." He motioned vaguely toward the garden. That was as good as it was going to get.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” Bill’s father beckoned back toward the sofa, a chilling trickle of panic piercing him if he dared to take a step into the danger zone radius of Mr. Cipher's interrogation. “I was relishing in our discussion, Mr. Pines.”

"Uh, I'm thinking.. thank you, but no thank you."

“If you insist.” Although Mr. Cipher's mood was visibly dampened in the subtle changes of his
expression, Dipper opted to feign ignorance since it wasn't as overt and volatile as Bill when his preferred outcome eluded him. Or used to, those breakdowns had sort of ceased with the adjusted medication and therapy. Bill's father simply reclined into the sofa cushions gracefully, but he was still watching him in critical scrutiny, inspecting. Analyzing what he would do.

“I will see you later tonight, I suspect. Enjoy the party.”

Chapter End Notes

part 1 of 2

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